

Population and Poverty

Malignant bacteria, living in an animal or human host reproduce with great rapidity, either killing the host or finally dying themselves from the poisons created by the mechanism of their own metabolism — they are drowned in their own wastes.

Animal populations are limited by the available food within their reach and by their natural predators. Their numbers wax or wane according to the complexities of natural phenomena surrounding them — weather conditions, proximity of competing herds, natural disasters, or the encroachment of human communities. They are wholly unconscious of this process.

Human populations rise and decline as well, but for many centuries they have not done so blindly. Even the heartbreaking practice of infanticide, which can be traced throughout recorded history was a *thought-out* practice. It was never instinctual but always a calculated act — committed because known, slow starvation was the only alternative to a merciful sudden death.

Old legends and folktales testify to the frequency of infant exposure, and to the profound and persistent wish of the parents that the abandoned infant had not, in fact died, but might have been found by a childless couple, or even by a king, and so escaped the miserable poverty and early death that would have inevitably been his or her lot.

The legend of Romulus and Remus, reared by a she-wolf and later to become the founders of Rome; the biblical story of

the infant Moses discovered by Pharaoh's daughter floating among the bullrushes, and scores of fairy and folktales of babies found abandoned in forests or meadows and taken home by kindly people who yearned to have children—all these fantasies undoubtedly reflect a reality that existed for centuries.

Strong social forces have contributed to population increases. "Go forth and multiply," was the dictum of ancient Hebrew rulers, as well as of the Pilgrim fathers. To be the mother of twelve or fourteen children was to be an honored member of America's farming communities in the 19th century, as it is today in most of the agricultural areas of the world (for the majority of humanity are still farmers).

Individually owned farms need as many strong sons and daughters as they can breed, not only to be used as unpaid laborers but as insurance against the incapacities of old age, which finally overtake the farmer and his wife.

These necessities have produced a morality and a set of attitudes to prop them up, spreading out from the farms themselves to the villages and towns they influence.

Nations whose economies are rapidly expanding also need an expanding population. U.S. manufacturers in the 19th century, especially after the American Civil War, wanted more laborers than were then available. They encouraged immigration from foreign countries and for the first time in U.S. history passed anti-abortion laws.

Now, an American economy that is growing at a much slower pace, coupled with the invention of thousands of labor-saving devices, with automation and cybernation, has a surplus labor force, and cannot provide employment (even in "good" years) for at least 10 million of its people. The official attitude toward immigration, abortion and birth control has changed drastically.

The mother of a large family (if she's poor!) is no longer honored but pitied and advised to visit her nearest Planned Parenthood center.

In the year 1973 population growth in the U.S. was near zero, as it has been in Japan for nearly a decade. In both countries this decline in the birthrate is owing to cultural and social changes.