

Critical Approaches to the Population Question. An African Perspective

O. Nnoli

COMPETING VIEWS ON THE POPULATION QUESTION

The Marxist view on the population question differs from the non-Marxist view in terms of emphasis. By this is meant that although the Marxist view is very critical of the traditional emphasis on the control of the population, it is itself not opposed to population control as such. It is opposed to its conservative character. The latter is reflected in this quotation by Dudley Kirk, a strong advocate of population control:

"Given the favourable attitudes found in surveys, family planning may be easier to implement than major advances in education or economy which require large structural and institutional change in the society as a whole."¹

The practical political implication of such a view is that, by and large, over-population control measures become a substitute for the structural and institutional changes in the society which the protagonists of family planning themselves acknowledge to be imperative for social and economic progress. And as Mahmood Mamdani has aptly pointed out:-

"Optimism concerning the possibility of population control without a fundamental change in the underlying social reality is in fact a weapon of the political conservatives."²

However, although the difference between the two view-points is a matter of emphasis it is fundamental in character with scientific and methodological implications, in

addition to the political one. For example, the logical scientific and methodological consequence of the conservative political undertone of over-population policies as a substitute for fundamental, even revolutionary, social change is a conception of the population problem in isolation from the other aspects of social relations. Of course, there is the usual but never fulfilled intention to integrate the problem later into the totality of the social situation.

This is quite well illustrated by the attitude of the over-population theorists to the empirical facts concerning the population problem. Quite apart from the fetish of empiricism which has characterized traditional population studies there is the tendency to view empirical facts in complete isolation from the other social phenomena, thereby obscuring their origins in social existence. When an empirical fact is thus stripped of its relation to social reality, it becomes more an object for psychological rather than social analysis. Explanation is sought in the motivation of isolated individuals, independent of the individual's social existence. Consequently, an excessive emphasis is placed on obtaining the opinions of the individuals and gathering certain objective data such as birth rate, population distribution by age, and per capita income. Conversely, the analysis of the opinions and data themselves within their social context is ignored. In this methodological frame of mind, it is easy to accept the dissemination of contraceptive devices and the education of individuals about the importance of using them as crucial to an adequate population policy, rather than to seek to alter the social circumstances of the individuals, and thus to change the social basis of individual behaviour.

Clearly, therefore, the methodology of population studies tends to determine the conception of the population problematic and the results that flow from analysis. Herein lies the major and fundamental difference between the Marxist and non-Marxist views on the question. The Marxist method emphasizes the social origin of motivations, their concrete character and their roots in the social structure. Under the circumstances, a solution to the population problematic must come to grips first and foremost with the character of the

social reality of the population concerned. Consequently, an adequate solution to the population question must emphasize the salutary transformation of the social structure, and with it the social reality and social existence. Unfortunately, most of those concerned with the population question in Africa today have been those trained in, and equipped with, the non-Marxist methodology which has constrained them against approaching the question from the broader and more scientific point of view of the relevant social structure. All discussion is limited within the prevailing social structure which itself may be the major obstacle to the solution of the population question.

THE COMPATIBILITY OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC POLICIES

If the central aim of a population policy is to improve the quality of the population, then the underlying assumption that this quality can only be improved through ensuring a rate of increase in population commensurate with the rate of growth of the economy (population control or family planning) has no validity in empirical fact, and is untenable logically. Empirically this assumption, which mechanically equates the quality of the population with per capita income, is clearly embarrassed by the experience of the socialist countries. The labour enthusiasm, the upsurge in the people's creative powers which marked the early and subsequent stages of the Soviet Union's socioeconomic development are largely due to the considerable improvement in the conditions of the working people, which did not stop even during the economically disastrous periods of national economic reconstruction. They were a direct consequence of:-

- a) the fairness of the system of distribution according to work done, and
- b) the enormous increase in the funds for the development of the social forms of personal consumption such as state social insurance, free medical services, pensions, free education at all levels, the extensive and free system of mother and child welfare and full employment.

All these were done under economic conditions in which, given a capitalist form of society, they would not have been deemed feasible.

This progressive social policy was possible because the Soviet regime was not constrained by the sterile argument of non-Marxists that social progress runs counter to economic progress because an attempt to divert funds from the rich to these social services for the majority will reduce the potential accumulation fund. The experience of all the socialist countries explodes this myth. In fact, the bulk of the incomes of the propertied classes in the developing countries, especially of the trading, usurious, finance and banking bourgeoisie, land owners, feudal and semi-feudal elements is utilized for non-productive consumption, enabling the numerically large privileged upper classes to live in luxury at the level of ultra-modern Western standards. It is this pattern of life that sharply reduces the potential accumulation fund, and also creates a home market that is extremely unfavourable for economic growth.

As a result of the limited home market and the protected foreign market, a considerable part of the money resources finds no productive application and is, therefore, employed for land and other speculation, or is removed from circulation and hoarded. This is one of the deepest and most persistent contradictions in the capitalist way of development. Accumulation constantly comes into conflict with consumption (the mass market) which ultimately is the decisive condition for the productive use of accumulated capital.

Also, a progressive social policy is possible, provided that the living standard of all segments of the population and the real wages of the working people do not as a rule increase, for any considerable time, faster than the increase in production and the productivity of labour. Since the standard of living is a result of the volume of production, its growth rate and the level and growth rates of labour productivity, it must not run ahead of the expansion of production but must follow the latter, keeping a certain distance behind it. Only the observance of this condition can ensure the harmony between the economic and social aspects of development which turns social progress into a motive force for economic growth.

Therefore, improving the condition of the working people on the one hand and reducing the income of the propertied classes, especially the exploiting classes, on the other hand,

are not an obstacle to economic growth. On the contrary, they are among the indispensable prerequisites for stable economic growth in the developing countries. Progressive legislation in this sphere, which ensures the maximum removal of non-productive incomes for the purpose of national development and shifting the burden of this development on to the propertied wealthy classes, is in line with the principles of justice, and as such does not represent the expropriation of property in productive capital. Since the national effort for radically transforming the society and mobilizing national resources against underdevelopment entail immense sacrifices, the pattern of distributing these sacrifices become crucial. The granting of more and more privileges to those nearer the economic, political and military seats of power creates a very destabilizing potential for the national leadership; and is likely to immobilize the human resources of the vast majority of the population. The only meaningful alternative is an egalitarian-democratic policy which is capable of mobilizing the popular energies at an increasingly high level of social consciousness.

Thus, the experience of the Soviet Union and the other socialist countries demonstrates that the progressive re-organisation of the social, cultural, and vocational standards of the working people is among the principal prerequisites for economic growth. In fact, the Marxist approach to underdevelopment does not make mere arithmetic comparisons of per capita national income. The latter is important but not decisive evidence of the development of a given society. As early as 1857 Karl Marx spoke out against such simplified notions of progress.³ And that is why he and Engels never reduced the problem of the backwardness of the East to a mere comparison of the East and West in the sphere of material production. For them, the stagnation of the social pattern is the chief indicator of backwardness. Therefore, to eliminate backwardness, a people should improve the social conditions of its population, instead of limiting the latter; the equation is not between overpopulation and economic growth but between a stagnating social pattern and economic growth.

There are several ways open to the poor countries to improve the social condition of their working population. They include radical land reforms which release the tiller of the

soil from the oppression of the big land owners and merchants as well as usurious capital, the establishment and strengthening of a network of cooperatives capable of defending the interests of the ordinary producer from market anarchy and rapacious exploitation by traders, money lenders, and the monopolies, the implementation of progressive labour legislation, improvement of the systems of education, health services, and social security, and effective measures for increasing employment. In other words, the vital problems of the broad sections of the working people can only be solved through radical socio-economic changes up to and including social revolution, and the ousting of the exploiting classes from power.

An emphasis on social progress and the social aspects of development demands that special attention be paid to the socio-economic factors that hold back major improvements in the people's welfare. This is why non-Marxists often ignore the social variables of development. The need for social progress is a weighty argument in favour of the non-capitalist path. Capitalism by its very nature, and as demonstrated by its entire history, is organically incapable of ensuring an optimal, or even minimal, compatibility between the economic and social aims of development in the interest of the majority of the population, hence the emphasis on a programme to reduce the majority instead. In the interest of economic growth, social welfare services for the majority are postponed to the long-run, which never comes.

THE SOCIAL NATURE OF THE POPULATION QUESTION

Logically, the non-Marxist assumption that population control is the only short-run way of improving the quality of life of the population is untenable because the population question is a social and not a biological phenomenon. Its solution can, therefore, only be found through social rather than such biological measures as the control of fertility and the birth rate. It is important to underline this social character of the population question. This is to say that the question of population size and its implications are not concerned with the biological reproductive aspects of man's existence, or the mechanical relationship between man and his biological and physical environment, notably the often reiterated

relationship between man and the resources available in his environment. The population question is all these and more. It is essentially characterized by the tripartite relationship between man, other men and the biological and physical environments so characteristic of social phenomena.

The over-population theorists have focused only on the biological aspect of this relationship, concentrating on man in isolation, ignoring his relations with other men and, at best, merely pointing out that a relationship exists between man and his biological and physical environment. This is why these theorists, while recognising that the population question concerns the ability of the environment to provide the resources needed for the operation and development of the community as a social, cultural and economic system, nevertheless confine their analysis to such biological issues as the birth rate, death rate, the dissemination of contraceptives, the limitation of the number of children, the spacing of children, helping childless parents to bear children, and the improvement of the health of mothers and their children. Only marginally are they concerned with non-biological problems, and even then these are confined to such issues as the restriction of immigration, the ejection of immigrants, and rural-urban migration.

Most consistently and conspicuously ignored are those aspects of the population question concerning man's relationship with his fellow men. Consequently, over-population theorists do not concern themselves with the fact that agrarian relations are archaic, the peasantry is deprived of the land and has no economic stimulus to raise productivity on land, labour in general is of low productivity, a regime may be very oppressive, and that it is the poorest sections of the population, especially in the countryside, that often treat with great distrust and apprehension any suggestion to break up a system of social relations which for centuries has maintained their existence though, as a rule, at the lowest physical boundary. In order to change traditional ways the new system must, the very next day, offer a better solution to the very concrete problems of the lower working strata because any failures will affect very painfully the most impoverished elements of the traditional structure who have no stock of food and other material goods to

take care of the transition period until the socio-economic changes begin to bear fruit.

More important still is the tendency of the over-population theorists to concentrate on abstract quantitative indicators, to the neglect of their class content. For example, it is assumed that if the rate of increase in population is brought below the rate of increase of the per capita income, the quality of life of the population will improve. But is this really true? This question cannot be adequately answered without considering the class character of the society, particularly the pattern of distribution in the society. Mao-Tse Tung underlined the critical importance of the class content of social services and social policy which lie obscured by official figures and statistics when, in 1965, he vociferously attacked the Chinese Ministry of Health, calling it the "Ministry of Health of the City-Dweller". He argued that the protection of health "becomes jibberish if it leaves 350 million peasants aside."⁴ He pointed out that of the 500 million peasants, 350 million had no direct means of benefiting from the nation's medical services.

As a result of this kind of class analysis, Mao was able to order that medical and health work be moved out of the cities and centred in the rural areas. This decision was a revolutionary population policy of immense importance. It led to:

- a) a revolutionary transformation of the medical profession;
- b) a medical mass movement which gave birth among doctors, as well as among soldiers and workers, to the advocacy of a new health system for all;
- c) a decentralized health structure which involves the training of thousands of barefoot doctors, the creation of thousands of rural medical centres, health centres and small hospitals, and the requirement that medical specialists in the cities make rounds in the rural areas;
- d) the exaltation of the traditional methods of treatment, such as acupuncture and herbal medicine, which are followed and administered by millions of men, not just graduate doctors, but also barefoot doctors and soldiers.⁵

MARXISM, LABOUR AND THE POPULATION QUESTION

In order to fully comprehend the Marxist view of the population question, it is necessary to keep in close view this social character of the phenomenon, as well as its class content. Also, it is important to clearly define the objective of population policy. Earlier, we had indicated that this goal is the improvement of the quality of life of the population. Unfortunately, the over-population theorists have not clearly defined what they mean by the improvement of the quality of life of the population. All they suggest is that this improvement will occur if the rate of growth of per capita income keeps ahead of the rate of growth of population. But this is not enough. It leaves no clues as to the operational indicators of a good population policy. This methodological deficiency accounts in part for the theoretical confusion and ambiguities which have characterized family planning studies and practice.

The Marxist approach to the population question on the other hand has a clear definition of what constitutes a qualitative improvement of the population. And it is on the basis of this that a population policy can be formulated and assessed. Central to this definition is the Marxist conception of the place and role of labour in social life. Man extends and reproduces himself socially through labour. He improves himself economically, socially and culturally through the cooperative use of his labour with others in the transformation of his immediate physical and human environment.

Therefore, man improves himself qualitatively in a social sense when his labour conditions improve. Such an improvement varies directly with the elimination of all human and non-human impediments to the creative application of human labour. These impediments arise either from the hostility of the physical and biological environments, or from the hostility of the inter-human environment, the existing pattern of social, economic and cultural relations. Both exert their impact through their consequences for the alienation of labour. When labour is alienated it loses its self-liberating and self-extending qualities.

In general, there are two aspects to the alienation of labour. The one is psychological, the other material. At the psychological level labour has a liberating role because of the hurrah effect arising from the creative and disciplined realization of the mental picture of the end product of labour. At the material level adequate compensation for the creative efforts of labour provides a good measure of satisfaction and makes it possible for man to improve his labour power. Psychologically, therefore, labour alienation arises when the worker, in his place of work, is divorced from continuous contact with the mental picture of the end product of production, at all stages in the production process. This arises essentially as a result of the increasing division of labour in the production process arising from growth in production. It dampens the creativity of human labour and, therefore, adversely affects the quality of the human population.

A good population policy must, therefore, find a way of ameliorating, if not totally eliminating, this kind of alienation of labour. In socialist societies, such a population policy attempts to actively involve the worker in the organization of the production process, at the same time as he is the executor of one or more production functions in conjunction with others, uses the means of production and disposes of the products of labour again with others, is responsible for the work of the production collective and ultimately of the entire national economy. All these enable him to maintain mental contact with all aspects of the production process up to, and including, the end product and its distribution. This democratic participation at the production level, which is made possible by the elevation of workers to the status of proprietors and the feeling by the workers that they are co-proprietors of the socialist economy, stimulates them to great creativity and awakens their latent energy and desire to work to the utmost of their ability, increase productivity of labour, optimally exploit material resources and working time, and improve the production process.

Moreover, the worker, conscious of himself as a proprietor strives not only to improve his own labour input, he is also deeply concerned that his comrades work well. He actively

combats all manifestations of negligence, inefficiency and violations of discipline by those who do not yet have the necessary sense of responsibility. As a true proprietor the worker, along with other workers, carries out a search for unexploited ways to raise productivity to improve the results of common labour. In other words, he takes part in the management of production.

This situation contrasts sharply with that in capitalist enterprises. Here the worker's zeal stems from the desire not to lose his job, to earn more, from fear of punishment by management. In other words, there are here no motives of a higher order expressing the awareness of social interest. And, as many studies by Western sociologists have shown, given the monopoly control of industry, the hired worker's personal initiative runs up against the bureaucratic organisation of labour in which goals, forms and methods of activity are categorically and rigidly prescribed. The worker loses all sense of initiative and creativity because his personal work activities are in no way connected in any clear and meaningful manner with the general results of production. Work is for him only a source of wages not the extension of his social self, the meaning of social life.

In socialist countries, working people's active participation in the management of the economy is implemented through a variety of organisations. In the Soviet Union these include everyday activities of the Communist Party, trade unions, Komsomol (Youth) organisations, through scientific and technical societies, through organs of national control, autonomous units such as public bureaus, teams of the scientific organisation of labour (SOL), standing production conferences (SPC), worker meetings, and social inspection. The SPC are the most representative collective organs at enterprises and construction projects in the Soviet Union. Analyses of the issues which they deal with shows that they make decisions on a wide range of production and economic matters.⁶

In China the SPC is one of the major organs of red power. It is elected by all the workers and is in charge of the daily problems of the factory, including the administrative and social problems. It works with the revolutionary committee

which actually operates the factory. This committee is composed of revolutionary mass organisations and soldiers.⁷ Job rotation within and between enterprises also takes place.

Materially, labour alienation arises when the worker is denied an adequate material compensation for his contribution to the end product of production. It also results from the inability of the worker to contribute his maximum to production, due to poor health, ignorance, and in general, the hostility of the environment, which then have the effect of reducing his material reward from production based on the productivity of labour. Most of the problems in this sphere arise from the private ownership of the means of production and the consequent disproportion in the distribution of surplus values in favour of the owners of these means of production. The resultant exploitation of the working population causes funds which could be used in providing social, health, and other welfare services in the broad public interest to be diverted to the luxury consumption of the privileged minority propertied class. The exploited worker becomes alienated.

The system of material stimuli plays an important role in the improvement of the quality of a population. It determines the extent to which the individual is personally interested in attaining maximum economic efficiency. The distribution of material benefits makes the individual's level of material well-being directly dependent not only on his own labour but also on the labour of the entire collective. If this sort of link is correctly established, the worker will more actively concern himself with improving production than otherwise. For this, it is necessary that the worker's increased well-being be connected with the growing profitability of his enterprise and its subdivisions.

Thus, an adequate population policy must address itself to the re-organisation of the system of material incentive in favour of the broad majority of the working population in order to abolish the material alienation of labour. In socialist countries this is done in major part by the abolition of the private ownership of the means of production and with it the abolition of exploitation inherent in the capitalist system of production. In addition, a large part of the national surplus is devoted to socially useful consumption such as full

employment, health, education, social insurance, pensions, child and mother care, and the enjoyment of leisure which are provided free, or at minimal costs, and which help the worker to improve creative labour. Thus, for example, the socialist revolution in Russia made it possible for the broad masses of the country to obtain free education and to gain access to the riches of human culture. All types of education are free, and aggressively pursued by the state. From its inception, Soviet power started a campaign to eliminate illiteracy. This did not consist solely of extending primary and later secondary education to all children. The Soviet Union was the first country to provide education for millions of adults without their having to give up their jobs.

Also, the Soviet state has established an incentive for those who combine work and study. It provides stipends for an absolute majority of these students. Consequently, in 1972 there were 10.7 thousand evening schools for the urban and rural youth, attended by 4 million people who obtained complete secondary education without having to interrupt their work.⁸ In addition, there is a vast network of academic institutions which train and retain workers. In 1972 there were 5 476 secondary technical schools training skilled personnel for all branches of the national economy. Of these, 3 689 located in the cities train workers primarily for industry. They enrol 15-16-year olds who have completed eight grades in a general school. They acquire specialized technical knowledge and learn a trade. At present these schools graduate over 1.7 million workers for industry, construction, transportation and agriculture. Between 1941 and 1971, more than 25 million skilled workers were graduated.⁹ And the growing need for the worker to have a general education has resulted in a new type of school which in three years provides the worker with a profession and a complete secondary education. In 1972, there were 926 such schools, with an enrolment of 319 thousand.¹⁰

THE IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WELFARE WORK IN AFRICA

The implications of the above discussion for social work in Africa are clear. First and foremost is that the goal of social work must be conceived broadly as the improvement

of the quality of population, at least its vast majority, the workers and peasants who are quagmired in poverty, ignorance and disease. Second is that this improvement in the quality of life, as far as family planning and social welfare are concerned, is primarily a social phenomenon and must, therefore, be approached from a social rather than a biological perspective, if an adequate solution is to be found. Of course, social phenomena have some biological components. Therefore, such biological concerns in the area of population about the birth rate, fertility and death rate are relevant to the population question. But they are only marginally relevant, because a social phenomenon is dominated by interhuman relations which are only marginally affected by biological factors.

Furthermore, the social phenomenon associated with improving the quality of life is very closely related to the capacity of man to liberate himself from all forces which tend to constrain his social self-reproduction, self-extension and the maximum release of his creative energy. Such forces act essentially through the alienation of his labour. This labour alienation in turn has a psychological as well as a material dimension. It is, therefore, the task of social welfare work in Africa to identify those factors which cause such alienation and to determine ways and means of eliminating them, or at least ameliorating their adverse effects on the African population.

In this regard, alienation at the psychological level in Africa is the result of a complex international, national and factory division of labour which completely and thoroughly alienates the producer from the products of his work. The restricted international division of labour imposed and controlled from outside Africa makes it impossible for Africans to have any meaningful say in what they produce, how it is produced, and how what is produced is marketed and the proceeds distributed on a world scale. At the same time, it confines the African countries to uncreative and dependent menial tasks incapable of stimulating any significant growth in the creative energies of the African population. Similarly, the vast majority of the African people who live in the rural areas are alienated by the division of labour within their respective countries, which relegates them to peripheral, dependent and non-creative tasks.

More important still is the division of labour at the place of work. The immediacy and direct relevance of the activities in this sphere to the life of the worker is unmistakable. Activities at the work place are the most perceptible to him, explaining his greater desire to participate in shaping their nature and dynamics. The capitalist organisation of the work situation causes the worker to be totally divorced from the production process, and to be only mechanically and mundanely related to its end products. Under such conditions, labour ceases to be an instrument of self-liberation, social self-extension, and self-reproduction. It becomes instead a monstrosity which degrades man's humanity. The quality of the population diminishes.

The task of social welfare work in this respect, therefore, is to find ways and means of retrieving the humanity of the worker from the fetters imposed on it by this complex network of divisions of labour. It must suggest ways and means of ending the present unsalutary international division of labour, and replacing the unhealthy capitalist production relations, norms and system of work organisation with more humane and less alienating ones. In other words, social welfare work in Africa must be part and parcel of a general anti-imperialist struggle on the continent.

At the material level, the emphasis of social work in Africa must be shifted to restructuring the reward systems in the various African countries. This would involve a restructuring of property relations and the accompanying pattern of appropriation of the surplus from production in favour of the broad masses of the working people. These activities should be supplemented by an active advocacy of broad social welfare measures such as free primary, secondary, and higher education, free and easily available medical services, a highly beneficial social security system, the implementation of progressive labour legislations allowing the working people adequate leisure and the means to enjoy it, gratuitous pensions schemes, and, of course, a guarantee of employment until retirement age. Again, all these can only be effectively done within the context of the anti-imperialist campaigns.

However, if social work decides to limit itself to working within the existing system, or in the interim before the establishment of the new and more humane socio-economic order, the task of the social welfare workers must be to change the relevant social situations in a way permitted by the rules of the system. For example, emphasis may be placed on ensuring that the population is able to maximize whatever positive benefits accrue from the existing systems of health, education, pension, social security, and other social services which may be lost because of the apathy, ignorance, or poverty of the masses of the people. Thus, whether by revolution or reform social welfare work in Africa must chart a new and progressive course.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹Kirk, Dudley, quoted in Mahmood Mandani, The Myth of Population Control (N.Y: Monthly Review 1972), p. 17
- ²Ibid., p. 18
- ³Marx, Karl, A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (Moscow: Progress, 1971), p. 215
- ⁴Mao Tse Tung, quoted in Maria Anonietta Macciocchi, Daily Life in Revolutionary China (N.Y: Monthly Review, 1972), pp. 137-138
- ⁵Ibid.
- ⁶Lovchuk, M. T., The Cultural Life of the Soviet Worker : A Sociological Study (Moscow: Progress, 1975), pp. 53-56
- ⁷Macciocchi, Maria Anonietta, op. cit., pp. 137-138
- ⁸Lovchuk, M. T., op. cit., p. 48
- ⁹Ibid., pp. 52-53
- ¹⁰Ibid., p. 53