

The Population Issue:

At the Crossroads of Complexity

1. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, humanity entered a period of exponential demographic growth. For the first time in its long history! In less than 200 years - throughout the period of industrialisation and its attendant effects on infant mortality and life expectancy - the global population has increased by a factor of six, from one billion, around 1800 to more than six billion by the end of the present decade. Even if the demographic transition¹ first seen in the West, but beginning albeit so far at a very different rate, in other regions of the world, is maintained and becomes a general trend, there will still be around 10 billion human beings on the planet by the middle of the next century, when the children being born today will be at the helm of the society that we have bequeathed them. Behind such figures lies a tragic reality. With the indifference of the prodigal son, human activity is exhausting non-renewable resources which have accumulated over many centuries. The materialist civilisation is expanding by cutting into the capital of future generations, whose living conditions may no longer be guaranteed.

2. This catastrophic scenario is bound up with the linear vision of development inherited from the scientific mentality which appeared at the end of the last century, and which gave birth to the myth of unlimited progress. Can we imagine a different future for the human species? How do we deal with the issues being raised within societies, which are becoming more complex and more interdependent every day? How can we make them more intelligible through interchanges and combinations which reflect their complexity? These are some of the questions that the analysis outlined below attempts to address.

3. It would seem that we should be looking for answers to the questions raised by population issues both at the narrow level of physical and cultural frontiers and at a global level. Since we are dealing with people - that is, with what humanises and is specifically human about "populations" - the problem is not confined to a study of their reproductive behaviour, their movements in time or their migrations in space. What is more fundamental is to study the way in which a given population adapts itself to the requirements of the social contract. In this respect, four requirements would appear to be essential in determining the type of society which respects the unspoken agreements which underpin the social contract¹: a convivial society; an active society; an equal society; a society which reconciles nature and culture.

4. First is the requirement for conviviality. This should be established between all the elements that make up society, individuals, families, groups, commitments, as well as between generations. Let us look at the two extremes of human life. At the end of the second millenium, we have to admit that humanity has not yet been able to organise itself in such a way as to ensure that "the children of man" are cared for and brought up in security, by awarding in particular premature severing of the essential bond between mother and child, by rectifying the lack, or inadequacy, of community provision able to complement the affective framework of the family, or to replace it in the case of abandoned or street children. On the other hand,

¹The demographic transition is defined as the transition from continual growth to a slowing of growth, seen in the change of direction of growth rate.



it is also incapable of providing elderly people with the assistance necessary to overcome their physical handicaps and allow them to make their own particular contribution, however modest or symbolic it may appear to be, to their immediate environment and to society in general.

5. In industrialised countries, the solutions that have been set up apart from their variable effectiveness, are far from satisfactory and do not provide essential guarantees to everybody. In developing and underdeveloped countries, the old traditions are gradually dying out due to the two-fold effect of the explosion caused by increasing organisation and the prevalence of "models" imported from the northern hemisphere.

6. However, in the course of human life, the presence of children with their talents, expectations, impatience, and naive lucidity, is a stimulus to be valued and which can revitalise the generation of those who are embarking on the last stage of their journey through life. Conversely, the presence of elderly people in the daily life of a family, as well as the organisation of a community, represents a source of wisdom and experience which is particularly valuable and enriching for children; it also provides a necessary contact to learn from within, about the thousand deaths which make up the web of life and which precede actual death.

7. Confronted, like all living organisms, with this dual movement on growth and decline, every human group must create the conditions necessary for childhood and old-age to co-exist in the most constructive way possible. The pyramid structure of most industrial societies favoured the existence of networks based on a sense of belonging or allegiance, in which conviviality was the natural form of expressing human relationships; this was all the more true given that the low average life expectancy prevented the erosion and deterioration of these relationships. Industrialised societies felt they could collectively fulfill the functions traditionally provided by the family; in fact, primary community structures and modes of behaviour were radically transformed due to the effect of phenomena such as parents working outside the home, the increase in number and length of journeys, the individualisation of leisure activities, cramped housing conditions, and suppression of private life. It has become clear today, in the light of the experience of the last fifty years, that these collective solutions cannot be considered either psychologically satisfactory or anthropologically correct.

8. The idea of a "convivial society", as proposed by the utopians at the time industrial society was reaching its peak, is for me full of meaning and rich in potential. It means that we stop referring to inter-generational responsibility in abstract terms. The terrifying increase in the number of street children, of children who are abused, abandoned, exploited, deprived of any future, and denied access to any form of institutionalised education is a matter that should concern every one of us. What changes are needed in social organisation and the functioning of institutions in order for an active solidarity to develop between human beings, and so that life, in all its manifestations, can freely flow and pass between generations.

9. A convivial society does not, however, mean a backward-looking society seeking to recapture some golden age that we know never existed. On the contrary it is a question of taking advantage of the new possibilities that the information and communications society, as it is developing now, offers to bring together the elderly and the young, adults and children, to lower the barriers created by the fragmentation of work and human activity brought about by the theories put forward by Taylor, and to extend close relationships which too often are restricted to the nuclear family or its substitutes.

10. Next is an active society, based on participation. The anthropological bankruptcy which stems from the absence of conviviality and solidarity is accompanied by another resulting from aggressiveness between generations, caused by competition for jobs, the supply of which is shrinking rapidly.

11. In the northern hemisphere, structural unemployment has developed which affects the young as well as older people, despite measures designed to give the former some opportunity to build a future for themselves. In the South, the deteriorating economic situation and reduced budgetary resources too often deprive the young of any prospect of gaining access to the job market. Everywhere, the gap is widening between those who have a job, in particular, a secure and satisfying job - and those who are excluded. If it continues to widen, there is no doubt that it will threaten the solidarity between generations and end up causing very real tragic conflicts.

12. The globalisation of the economy, by encouraging the relocation of production units in countries where labour is cheaper for the same performance and qualifications, led to and continues to feed the increase in unemployment seen in the older industrialised societies, and has put an end to any hope of resolving the situation in the near future. At the same time, it seems incapable of assimilating the younger generations in under-developed countries at an age when their inactivity will not fail to produce the psychological effects of social alienation, leading to marginalisation.

13. Is it not time for an alternative to the idea of the "market society" which has held sway throughout the whole process of industrialisation, based on the optimal combination of the two factors essential to production, capital and labour - the idea of an "active society", whose aim is based on satisfying the needs of all and each individual, not only in terms of products but also, and more importantly, in terms of services and immaterial benefits. The service industry in contemporary societies is constantly expanding and diversifying, leading to the creation of new jobs, whereas production of non-durable material goods has stabilised and creates less and less employment as a result of the two-fold effect of relocation of companies and the introduction of new technologies based on automation and miniaturisation. However, the service industry, even if fulfilling real needs, is not in itself a producer of added value. Building an active society necessarily implies rethinking the relationship between the active and inactive population by moving away from a strictly economic plane onto a sociological one, in terms of both the individual and the community.

14. Social cohesion would therefore depend on setting up structures which encourage diversity and choice of "non-market" activities, fulfilling the needs of the inactive population as well as the active members whenever they have recourse to others to carry out humble but essential tasks which are not generally dependent on the market.

15. In an active society, the relationship between the active and inactive population represents an essential pivot and point of balance, while at the same time being a way of involving young people in socially useful activities and of recognising the value of the non-market work carried out by women. A two-way solidarity would thus be established based on interdependence, everyone respecting the other's activities irrespective of their economic value. A balance would gradually be established between the active and non-active population, the effects of which would be internalised throughout all the stages of social reproduction.

16. Thirdly comes the requirement for equality. The social contract cannot ignore the importance of a balanced relationship between the sexes, which respects their separate identities and spheres of autonomy, and strives to ensure equality in the search for a partnership beneficial to both. Despite the progress made in this respect in the majority of modern societies, a balance between men and women is still far from being achieved. In fact, the public and visible nature of men's work is still accepted without question, while that of women too often remains private and invisible, not only as far as domestic tasks are concerned, but also in professional and social activities. The invisibility of women's work leads to major consequences at both the individual and the social level. It can be seen in all instruments of socialisation, and in particular the law, conceived and formulated mainly by and for men, and in which women find themselves submerged in a sexless definition of a human being, and which in effect sanctions the domination of the female by the male. How can we fail to mention also the various forms of violence to which women are subjected ? - a violence which is encouraged by the greater physical strength of men and which subjugates the fertility of women's bodies simply to the sexual appetite of men.

17. There is now an urgent need to establish a society of equality between men and women which recognises women in their cultural and sexual identity and as such guarantees their participation in all areas of political and social life. Such a society would have to grant the inalienable right of women to control the processes of fertilisation and gestation which occur within their bodies. Any form of coercion - of which rape is the ultimate tragic example - constitutes an attack on the freedom and fundamental rights of a human being. The same is true of all authoritarian policies - generally formulated by men - aimed at encouraging or controlling births, and of all forms of domination exercised over women. Of course, women's decisions are, and always will be, greatly influenced by different cultural and social factors, but in the end reproductive choices must be based exclusively on their own wishes. Once the primacy of this right has been recognised, it is important to emphasise the need for men to assume their full responsibility in the co-decision of the couple with regard to fertility. Establishing real equality between men and women, within a relationship in which each can express their otherness in relation to the other, seems an essential part of a new social contract.

18. Finally, we need to plan and organise a society which strives to reconcile nature and culture. To this end, the social contract should be complemented by a pact with nature which sanctifies this reconciliation. For the first time in the history of humanity, man has become aware of the limited nature of the resources from which he can draw, including those that, up until now, have seemed to renew themselves indefinitely through the simple action of the laws of nature. It would seem that nature has woken up and rebelled against the domination and exploitation to which she is subjected. As resources become scarcer, waste products from rapid urbanisation and intensive industrialisation accumulate, and their storage and disposal becomes more and more difficult, risky, and costly; this is particularly so in the case of the most toxic wastes which are a threat to human health and the natural environment. The production-consumption model which has been progressively established over more than a century has now come up against the problem of limits, while at the same time producing an increasingly alarming degree of pollution.



19. The contract with nature should therefore encourage a reasonable and controlled exploitation of the resource base which affects the development and survival of all living species, including man. The latter can no longer prey on nature. The technological processes that he employs should be subject to conditions which guarantee the stability of the ecosystem, so as to allow the production of new goods, not only by and for the present generations, but also for those who come after.

20. In the light of the various issues which have been outlined, how can we not be aware that to talk about the problems of population is to seek ways of establishing a balance between men and women, the young and the elderly, the active and the inactive population, people and things, human civilisation and nature, as well as between the demands of today and the prospects for the future ? It is also to recognise that the population issue, because of its multiple interaction with other sectoral issues, is, in a world marked by the stamp of interdependence, a factor which increases its complexity.

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