



## Social Anthropology and Population

Alan Macfarlane

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Through repeated failure and the wastage of incalculable amounts of money and resources it is becoming clear that the faith which has sustained so many development workers — that modern technology and organisational methods can solve all problems — is no longer justified. Even the hopes invested in the Green Revolution have been undermined by the realisation that it could not solve the old problems arising out of social and economic inequality. This is the very element in which anthropology, and no other discipline, has itself developed. Other professionals, like agricultural economists and geographers, are beginning to take an interest in this most fundamental level of economic life but it is not their natural environment and they are only encouraged to venture into it because anthropologists have declined to do so.

Over the last five years or so attitudes among development workers — agronomists, ecologists, range management and livestock specialists, soil conservation specialists, engineers, and even economists — have undergone a subtle change. There is evolving a more humble and sensitive attitude towards the power of money and technology and their capacity for changing the world. Bitter experience has shown that less energy may be required to move a small mountain than to overcome the inertia of a few thousand unmotivated people. With increasing frequency we read in project reports that the success of this or that technical proposal depends on an adequate solution to the 'sociological problems' associated with it. More development workers are now admitting that the 'sociological variables' are the pivot about which the technical innovations hinge. There are even a few who guardedly surmise that the core of a project feasibility study should be the sociological investigation, and that technical specialists should be brought in as and when required, slotting their contributions into the framework supplied by the rural sociologist. It is often the sociologist who, of all members of a development team, has the clearest grasp of the interrelations of its technical components and of the broad implications of the project as a whole. He combines this with his specialist's insight into the response of the local people and authorities to the project, which is often the factor most influential in determining success or failure. This perspective and the perceptions attainable from it make an anthropological training a good preparation for project management.

A number of recent projects have been designed with an exceptionally long duration. Most rural development projects have a five year maximum because that is the longest period most donor agencies will finance. It may be possible to execute the technical components of a project within two or three years, but projects of 7, 10 or even 15 years are now being mounted in order that social change may set the pace for technical change.

The World Bank, ODM and other

agencies have recently declared policies of aid for the poorest. The intentions are clear, but the actual means of identifying the poor and of designing projects specifically for their benefit are still vague. Nobody seems to know anything about the poor or how to reach them, except anthropologists who (with a few exceptions like Oscar Lewis) are remarkably reticent on the subject.

How far the growing need for a stronger anthropological contribution to the planning, implementation and evaluation of rural development projects will be met is uncertain. Anthropologists

have maintained a certain shyness and professional punctiliousness in the face of these demands, but some are now prepared to study 'the development process' as an extension of their academic interest in the field of social change. Whether the results of these studies will serve any practical end remains to be seen. The anthropological equivalent of the medical practitioner, the bridge builder or the farmer — who use the findings of research in their quest for better solutions to real problems — does not yet exist in any recognised form.  
*Paul Devitt*

## SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND POPULATION

Each day world population increases by over 200,000 persons. By the end of the century it will be increasing by half a million a day. We have the highest growth rate in human history (over 2% p.a.) from the highest base in absolute numbers (over 4 billion). Even in the unlikely event of world population reaching a level where it is merely replacing itself by the end of the century, there will be a world population of over eight billion in 2050. Even reaching replacement level by the end of the century would not prevent India from having a population of nearly one and a half billion, Nigeria about a hundred million, Brazil about 260 million, in each case a tripling of present population or more. More than ninety per cent of the increase will occur in the Third World. If the urban growth rates of the period 1950-70 continue into the future, everyone in the world will be living in cities of over one hundred thousand persons by the year 2023 and half the world's population in cities of over one million. This massive growth is occurring in the areas where anthropologists have traditionally worked and within the very part of the discipline where they have made their most successful contribution, namely the study of sex, marriage and kinship. Yet, with some notable exceptions, social anthropologists have managed to almost totally avoid any analysis of both the causes and consequences of the phenomenon and have, until this decade, contributed very little to our understanding of population dynamics.<sup>1</sup>

During the last five years, however, a number of anthropological studies of population have begun to explore the immensely complex issues (see list of references including the new Pergamon Press collection edited by Epstein and Jackson). They are chiefly notable for their negative conclusions, for they have shown that many of the assumptions and models of demographers and development planners are not tenable in the light of micro-studies of particular populations. They thus help to explain the almost total failure of family-planning campaigns throughout the world. They show that although the uncertainty arising from high infant mortality is one of the reasons given by informants for

their desire to have a large number of children, it does not follow that if infant mortality is substantially reduced, people will then immediately lower their fertility to match the reduction. This is just one of the ways in which the 'Demographic Transition Theory', which predicted that Third World countries would follow the pattern supposedly followed by the West, does not work. A number of studies now show that urbanization, rising incomes, more education, are none of them, in themselves, sufficient causes of decreased fertility. Perhaps the single most important finding in the recent studies is that most family planning is based on the fallacious assumption that because there appears to be a 'population problem' at the national level, and because surveys suggest that people are interested in the idea of contraception, all that is needed is the introduction of new technology. It can no longer be believed that people rationally pursuing the maximization of their economic well-being will attempt to control their fertility. The analogy with medicine and the eradication of disease is a false one. For a time this finding could be dismissed by arguing that, as with magic, some technical failure was responsible for the poor results: the contraceptives were not the right ones, the personnel were not trained enough. Now we know that people usually do not control their fertility because they do not want to do so. In a very important study in the Punjab, Mamdani showed that people were not poor because they had many children, they had children in order to escape from the 'poverty trap'. Their only hope appeared to be to produce more sons who would not only sustain them in their old age, but provide indispensable labour and, possibly, a cash income. This reinforced a point made earlier by Kingsley Davis that family planning, based on the premise that people should be given the means to enable them to choose the number of children they wanted, was bound to fail to control population, since throughout the world the achieved number of children was far below the desired number. For example, a report from a Nigerian village suggests that people desire *on average*

9.23 children, far more than they have (Epstein and Jackson: 74). Again and again the studies come back to the point that conditions in many parts of the world are such that a large part of the population 'find themselves in a vicious circle . . . where large numbers of children represent the only hope of making a break-through' (Epstein and Jackson: 176).

What is clear is that the introduction of new contraceptive technology is not enough, that, as Scarlett Epstein concludes, 'A radical re-structuring of social systems seems to be a necessary precondition of successful fertility control' (Epstein and Jackson: 221). This raises two major questions. The ethical one concerning the right to 're-structure social systems' and the question of what changes would have such an effect. Despite the increased volume of work, we still do not know why people desire children. The authors in the Epstein collection are rightly critical of naive economic cost/benefit analysis, but neither in their work, nor in the other works listed at the end of this article, is any general and plausible theory put forward which would explain the desire for children. The furthest that social anthropologists have gone so far is to suggest that the technology determines the desire. Thus Nag argues that human labour is the scarce factor in non-industrial societies and hence reproduction is valued (Marshall and Polgar: 3-23); Boserup (1970) and Goody argue that the desire for males in India is related to plough cultivation; Mamdani believes that it is the labour-intensive nature of Indian agriculture which encourages parents to have children and hence the introduction of tractors will lead to more interest in birth control (Mamdani: 76, 86, 103, 129). This is a start, but it leaves many riddles. Anthropologists will know that societies with the same technology and ecology often have totally different views on reproduction and Mary Douglas pointed out over ten years ago that the answer lies in the realm of prestige and ideology, rather than technology.

It would seem necessary to move from analyses which concentrate on the means of production — that is the amount of human labour needed to produce wealth — to the relations of production, particularly the degree to which children continue to contribute to a communal family fund. This is a switch from the Malthusian view that fertility is to be explained by the nature of resources ('Corn countries are more populous than pasture countries, and rice countries more populous than corn countries', Malthus: i, 314), or even the recent reversal of the equation by Boserup (1965) which sees technological change as a response to population growth. We might follow the lead suggested by Marx when he criticized that 'baboon' Malthus for his 'false and childish' conception of a simple relationship between only two variables, reproduction and the means of subsistence. In fact, Marx suggested, we need to look at the 'very complicated and varying relations' within a 'specific historic development' for 'in

different modes of social production there are different laws of the increase of population . . .' (Marx: 604-6). This is a theme which I will be pursuing elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> where I will argue that what anthropologists and economists who use the 'Chayanovian' definition of peasantry have described is a system with a special attitude to reproduction. The consequence of this argument is that the reduction of fertility means nothing less than the destruction of the whole social structure, including family relations, ideas of the self, ritual groupings, local boundaries, ideas of property. This is the cost of 'radical re-structuring'. This is what poses the tragic dilemma. On the one hand there is monstrous and disastrous growth of population, on the other it looks as if only a massive change which will destroy the vestiges of security and happiness in large areas of the world can possibly halt such a growth.

Alan Macfarlane

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. There is a survey of the social anthropological contribution to population studies up to 1976 in my *Resources and Population* (Cambridge, 1976), ch. 1. A recent example of the total neglect of the topic is in the otherwise thorough textbook by Norman Long, *An Introduction to the Sociology of Rural Development* (1977).
2. In the Malinowski Lecture on 'Modes of Reproduction' (February 1978), which will be published in a special issue of the *Journal of Development Studies* on the topic of population, edited by Geoffrey Hawthorn.

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# PROGRESS IN HUMAN BIOLOGY

Professor Weiner, who will deliver the 1978 Huxley Memorial Lecture, was world convener of the Human Adaptability Section, International Biological Programme, from 1964 to 1974.

During the decade 1964-1974 many thousands of biologists from more than fifty countries worked together in the International Biological Programme (IBP). These biologists were all interested in living communities, in the factors that govern the survival of plants, animal and human communities throughout the world.

By the mid-1960's ecology as a discipline encompassing plant and animal communities was well recognised. The study of human populations on a comparable scale and intensity lagged behind. Human ecology lacked both a body of field work and a theoretical framework, though in some sectors important advances had been registered. The IBP came just at a time when it could contribute significantly to the development of human population biology, a process which had begun after the Second World War with the superseding and transformation of the old-fashioned and static subject of physical anthropology by an ecologically and genetically based discipline. The IBP required that living human populations be investigated as functioning entities interacting with a large variety of habitats, and therefore to be understood in adaptive and selective terms.

The declaration of aims (*Guide to the Human Adaptability (HA) Section of IBP*, Handbook no. 1, 1966, Blackwells) laid stress *inter alia* on the comparative study of human populations inhabiting a very wide variety of habitats. The IBP/HA studies aimed at elucidating the interaction of nature and nurture on the physiological, morphological and developmental characters of human populations on a world scale. Emphasis was placed on the need to intensify the study of simple societies still living under difficult 'natural' conditions. Such groups would provide object lessons of the actual adaptability achievable by man when relying largely on his biological endowment. The widespread belief that IBP represented probably a last chance of making a concerted study of the still remaining communities of hunters and gatherers and simple agriculturalists proved to be justified even within the 10-year span of IBP.

Since the HA effort was concerned with community studies, many on simple and traditional societies, it was understood from the outset that the work should be based on a correct ethical attitude to the subjects of the investigations. The HA handbooks made this explicit. Moreover, the HA objectives