

Democracy Cannot Survive Overpopulation

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This article addresses increasing concerns about the decline of democracy at all levels of government. It is shown that overpopulation and technology are major causes of this decline. It would be unwise to try to stop the development of technology; therefore it is urgent that we move quickly to address the problems of overpopulation.

KEY WORDS: overpopulation; democracy.

INTRODUCTION

We sometimes read the angry statements of citizens who claim that democracy in the United States is being willfully destroyed by evil and sinister public servants. It is easy to share the frustration that these citizens feel, because our lives each year are becoming more regulated and more crowded, our individual freedoms are diminishing and, individually, we seem to be less and less able to affect the flow of the events that diminishes our freedoms.

In general, this loss of freedom is probably not the result of willful actions of our public servants. The two main causes of this diminution of our freedoms are technology and overpopulation.

TECHNOLOGY AND REGULATION

The technology that brings us many individual benefits also gives us amazing new ways to annoy each other. These technological "aids to an-

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noyance" range from cans of spray paint, to automobiles, to electronic megaphones, to high speed jet aircraft, to computers and their vulnerability to viruses. One person with a can of spray paint can vandalize buildings; an act that annoys a few people. One careless person driving a car at high speed on a freeway can trigger a chain-reaction collision that involves dozens of cars. Electronic megaphones allow one person to annoy hundreds of people, a high speed jet aircraft in supersonic flight over the crowded eastern seaboard of the U.S. can generate a sonic boom that affects millions of people, and one person at a computer can create computer viruses (such as the "love bug" virus of early May 2000) that do enormous damage to computing systems throughout the world.

Many new technologies carry with them the ability to be used to annoy others, and hence are the legitimate subject of proposals for regulation. Experience has shown the correctness of Vannevar Bush's characterization of science and technology as the "endless frontier" (Bush, 1960), so we can expect that we will see an endless progression of new regulations which become necessary to permit society to cope with the consequences of the introduction of new technologies that open up new avenues of annoyance. The rapidly expanding universe of electronic communications has spawned calls for regulations ranging from those designed to keep violence and pornography out of the reach of minors, to regulations that limit the activities of those who create and launch computer viruses. New technologies can probably be depended on to make new regulations necessary throughout the foreseeable future.

As a technology matures, some initial regulations become unnecessary. When they first appeared, vehicles powered by internal combustion engines frightened the horses that were pulling carriages and wagons, and so regulations were necessary to govern the interactions between motor cars and horses. Automobiles have now almost completely displaced horse-drawn vehicles, so the regulations of a century ago have been replaced with a larger body of regulations that cover the interactions of automobiles with each other, with cyclists, and with pedestrians.

OVERPOPULATION AND THE LOSS OF DEMOCRACY

Let's look at the loss of democracy that results from overpopulation. Here is a portion of an interview that the prominent journalist Bill Moyers conducted with the eminent scientist and science writer, Isaac Asimov (Moyers, 1989, p. 276):

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Bill Moyers: What happens to the idea of the dignity of the human species if this population growth continues at its present rate?

Isaac Asimov: It will be completely destroyed.
 I like to use what I call my bathroom metaphor:
 If two people live in an apartment, and there are two bathrooms,
 Then both have freedom of the bathroom.
 You can go to the bathroom anytime you want,
 Stay as long as you want, for whatever you need.
 And everyone believes in Freedom of the Bathroom;
 It should be right there in the Constitution.
 But if you have twenty people in the apartment and two bathrooms,
 Then no matter how much every person
 Believes in Freedom of the Bathroom, there's no such thing.
 You have to set up times for each person,
 You have to bang on the door, 'Aren't you through yet?'
 And so on.

Asimov continues with what could be one of the most profound observations of the 20th century:

In the same way, democracy cannot survive overpopulation;
 Human dignity cannot survive [overpopulation];
 Convenience and decency cannot survive [overpopulation];
 As you put more and more people into the world,
 The value of life not only declines, it disappears.
 It doesn't matter if someone dies,
 The more people there are, the less one individual matters.

TWO MECHANISMS

There are two mechanisms by which overpopulation dilutes and destroys democracy. The first is the direct dilution that occurs as a consequence of the population growth of a political subdivision such as a town. The second is the regional amplification of problems that results from population growth.

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EXAMPLES

Here are two examples of the first mechanism which illustrate the point that Asimov makes so eloquently, namely that democracy cannot survive overpopulation.

The Census of 1790 recorded the population of the U.S. as approximately 3.93 million. In early 2000 the population is estimated to be about 274 million. Article I of the Constitution of the United States (1790) describes the House of Representatives, and requires that "The number of Representatives shall not exceed one for every thirty thousand" (In 1790 there were considerably fewer than 30,000 persons per representative.) Because of population growth, in the year 2000 there are approximately 630,000 persons for each of the 435 members of the U.S. House of Representatives. In 210 years we have seen democracy at the national level diluted by a factor of approximately $630,000 / 30,000 = 21$.

From this example, one can set forth a general proposition:

If the size of a population grows while the size of its representative governing body remains constant, the annual rate of decline of democracy is at least equal to the annual rate of growth of the population.

In the year 2000, the population of the United States is growing at a rate of about 1% per year, but the number of members of the U.S. House of Representatives remains constant at 435. Thus one can say that, as we start the 21st century, the rate of loss of democracy at the national level in the United States is about 1% per year.

A similar loss also occurs at the local level. In 1950, the population of Boulder, Colorado, was approximately 20,000. In the year 2000 the population of Boulder is approaching 100,000. Throughout this period from 1950 to 2000, the size of the elected Boulder City Council has remained constant at 9 persons. So in 50 years, democracy in Boulder has been diluted by about a factor of five. This corresponds to an annual loss of democracy at the local level of approximately 3.2% per year averaged over the last 50 years. (Bartlett, 1993)

The second mechanism arises when problems generated by population growth expand beyond the political confines of a town or city and become regional problems. If air pollution became a problem in a small town, the town would have to deal with it, and each citizen of the town could participate in discussions about ways to solve the problem. But when the population of the region around the town grows to become a gigantic urban metropolis with, say, ten times the population of the town,

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then the voice of one citizen in the town in solving the regional problem is diluted by another factor of ten. With regional population growth, all manner of problems from pollution to transportation become regional problems, and this expansion of the problems greatly diminishes the voice of individual citizens in finding solutions to the problems.

CAN YOU SPEAK TO YOUR ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES?

The ideal democracy is perhaps the New England Town Meeting, where every citizen is expected to participate in the discussions, debates and decisions. As towns become larger, elected representatives carry out many of the functions of governance, and citizens can usually address the governing body. As the towns become cities, citizens who want to address the governing body must sign up in advance of the meeting and then confine their comments to a three-minute period whose end is signaled by a loud buzzer or a flashing light. For the largest domestic governing body, the U.S. Congress, citizens can testify before a committee if they are invited, and addressing the whole Congress is an honor reserved for a few dignitaries of the highest level. At the global level, a powerful governing organization such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), is so large and so remote that ordinary citizens have essentially no input, directly or through elected representatives. The actions of the WTO, which some found objectionable, and the complete absence of participatory democracy in the WTO, led to the "Battle of Seattle" in early December 1999.

POPULATION GROWTH AND REGULATIONS

The actions of local public bodies to establish zoning and land-use regulations such as urban growth boundaries, are driven by population growth, yet these actions, which are made necessary by population growth, are clear infringements of individual freedoms. People, angered by these losses of freedoms, advocate passage of "Takings Laws" in an attempt to stem the loss of freedoms, but unfortunately neither the takings laws nor their advocates make any recognition of the fact that it is population growth which triggers the actions that take away treasured freedoms. Ironically, the persons who complain most loudly about these losses of freedom are often those who advocate continued population growth for the self-serving reason that they profit personally from it. People's eagerness to profit from

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population growth is beautifully explained in Garrett Hardin's essay, "The Tragedy of the Commons" (Hardin, 1968).

OVERPOPULATION AND CAMPAIGN FINANCE REFORM

One of the reasons for the increased role of money in politics is the dilution of democracy which results from overpopulation. In today's enormous populations, many people feel that their individual voices no longer count in the determination of public policy. The perceived decline of democracy has allowed power to be shifted from the many to the powerful few who use their wealth to buy influence in the halls of our "democratic" government. This has led to a great increase in the role of dollars in democracy which has spawned increasing concern about the need for campaign finance reform. Politicians like to talk to people, but because of overpopulation, they can't talk to everyone. So they talk to a few, a self-selecting small group of wealthy and and hence influential people. Because of this dilution, the old statement, "One person, one vote," is now being replaced by "One dollar, one vote."

DESTRUCTION OF DEMOCRACY BY THE PRIVATE SECTOR

Powerful forces in the *private* sector in our communities use population growth as an excuse to find more effective ways to destroy our democracy. In an article, "Western Cities Grapple with Rapid Growth" (Parker, 1999), we read that "In Scenic Colorado Springs, Groups Battle Builders to Preserve Lifestyle." The story tells how the real estate developers are battling "community groups [that are] concerned about preserving the natural beauty of their surroundings." The second paragraph of the story in the *Wall Street Journal* quotes one of the Colorado Springs developers as follows:

"local officials have allowed community groups to hijack the development process. Neighborhood groups 'shouldn't be in control of what happens,' he says. 'You can't be an elected official and let people dictate the law of the land.'"

Wealthy influential developers are good at getting pretty much what they want from public officials, so when citizens organize to protect themselves from the rapid degradation of the environment that is the predictable

consequence of the continued development, it is said that the citizens are “hijacking” the development process. In Colorado Springs, the pressure for continued population growth is so intense that a local leader in the private sector is saying that we can no longer “let people dictate the law of the land.”

LIBERALS vs. CONSERVATIVES

The liberal philosophy of government suggests that the government, under the guidance of “experts,” should do more to control the flow of events, while the conservative philosophy suggests that government should step aside and do less. Although the person who made the statement would probably claim to be a conservative, the suggestion that we cannot “let people dictate the law of the land” presents a profoundly liberal point of view, both because of its advocacy of governance by an elite few, but also as an implied expression of the belief that population growth is no problem, that resources are so enormous that there is no need to reduce consumption or to conserve. In contrast, true conservatives (who are usually called “liberals”) worry about the effects of population growth, they practice conservation, and they advocate a reduction of our consumption of resources so that some resources are saved for our children and grandchildren.

It should not be surprising that the traditional political labels of “liberal” and “conservative” are reversed in a world where powerful people seem to be happy with continued population growth and the resulting overpopulation.

An exception to this reversal of labels is Fred C. Ikle, who is a bona fide political conservative, having served as an undersecretary in the Reagan administration. Ikle argues (Ikle, 1994) that “It is the unintended consequences that these conservatives ignore [when they argue for more population growth],” and he points out that more growth results in more government and more governmental regulations. Writing as a political conservative, Ikle summarizes his arguments with these words:

Population growth is the paramount, the most elemental anti-conservative force. It unleashes a flood of social change that will cascade onto every level of society. It creates irresistible pressures for farflung, and usually irreversible government interventions, allegedly to cope with all the social changes that rapid population growth has unleashed. It thus helps the radical left to garner political support for its social engineering schemes. It

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dilutes the reach of religious institutions that seek to preserve society's moral fiber. It empowers the unprincipled and the rootless to tear down vastly more civilizing tradition and riches of culture than they will ever create.

POPULATION GROWTH AND TECHNOLOGY

Two things are robbing us of our democratic freedoms; continued population growth and the advancement of technology. The advance of technology has redeeming features: it contributes to higher quality of life for those who are able to afford the latest technologies. In contrast, population growth has no redeeming features, yet, as our political leaders struggle to find solutions to the problems caused by population growth, almost without exception, they neglect to identify population growth as the cause of the problems; they prescribe aspirin for cancer. (Bartlett, 1998) Even more distressing is the fact that the watchdogs of the Free Press seem never to speak out about this neglect (Maher, 1997); (Nissani, 1999).

The lack of redeeming features in population growth is illustrated by the following challenge:

Can you think of any problem
On any scale, from microscopic to global,
Whose *long-term* solution is in any *demonstrable* way,
Aided, assisted, or advanced,
By having larger populations at the local, state, national, or global levels?
(Bartlett, 1997)

Even more important, population growth is not sustainable, (Bartlett, 1994) yet the sustainability gurus provide glib recipes for sustainability that address everything except overpopulation.

CONCLUSION

It is a shame that those who are most vocal about their loss of freedom almost invariably blame the loss on alleged conspiracies of persons in government. Our loss of freedoms are probably not the result of actions of evil people who are plotting the demise of democracy, but rather are due to negligent people in government (and it's nearly all of them) who willfully ignore the destructive consequences of overpopulation. When people are denied their rights to participate in the decisions that affect their lives, they

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are predictably unpredictable, and history is full of examples of violence that has been precipitated by those who feel they have been disenfranchised. Such are some of the costs of overpopulation.

Thus, several lines of evidence point to population growth as being a major causal factor in the decline of democracy in the United States, yet, as Garrett Hardin observes:

No one ever blames it on overpopulation. (Hardin, 1993)

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