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The Population Control Temptation

by Douglas A. Sylva

Jeffrey Sachs says he has it all figured out, and Kofi Annan believes him. Sachs, a professor at Columbia University and the man selected by Annan to guide the revision of the United Nation's Millennium Development Goals, sincerely believes that he knows how to solve the world's problems.

But it turns out that Sachs is just like all who have come before him; it turns out that he has succumbed to that ultimate temptation, the one to which they all eventually succumb, all who look at the globe and think big thoughts, who consider themselves brilliant enough to defeat the eternal nouns: war, poverty, hunger, suffering.

What is this temptation? When they possess authority, and their brilliance can be tested against the insurmountable complexity of human nature and human society, against the perennial unwillingness of individual humans to act in the ways the experts deem "rational" and self-interested, their brilliance always come up lacking (the Soviet commissars never could figure out how much black bread to bake).

And so they cheat. Since they cannot untangle the knot, they start snipping off strands. Make the population smaller, they believe, and you will most certainly have fewer poor people, fewer hungry people; make sure there are fewer pregnant women, and there will be fewer maternal deaths, fewer infant deaths. In any grand scheme to save the people of the world from their problems, these experts end up seeking to eliminate the people, since they are the source of the problems.

And the corruption runs even deeper than this. Because the people are stubborn, because they continue to think of themselves as individuals who want and need families and children, once population reduction becomes the expert's goal, the authorities must either convince the people or coerce the people. And coercion is so much simpler.

On June 30th, a tiny propaganda piece ran in the Chinese People's Daily, the mouthpiece of the communist government, that would be barely distinguishable from all of the other propaganda, except for this quotation:

Professor Jeffrey D. Sachs of Columbia University, who is Special Advisor to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan on the Millennium Development Goals and Director of the UN Millennium Project, regards China as a successful paradigm for the global development strategy. . . Professor Sachs gave positive comments on China's Family Planning Policy, attributing China's remarkable achievements in development at least partly to its lower birth rate.

If this article is correct, Sachs has endorsed the One-Child Policy, the Chinese law that has stood since 1979 and that makes it illegal for most couples to have more than one child. In 1985, a Washington Post article described the policy in this way:

Any mother who becomes pregnant again without receiving official authorization after having one child is required to have an abortion, and the incidence of such operations is stunning – 53 million from 1979 to 1984, according to the Ministry of Public Health – a five-year abortion count approximately equal to the population of France.

In the 20 years since then, it is probable that the number of forced abortions has now come to rival the population of the United States. It is this abomination that Sachs credits for China's development.

Is Sachs interested in extending this policy, or policies like it, to other countries? The

People's Daily states that, "He disclosed that he aggressively promoted the [Chinese] experience on the family planning in his report [the Millennium Project]."

Sach's own report states that, "We thus strongly support programs that promote sexual and reproductive health and rights, including voluntary family planning. Critical to overall success in economic growth and poverty reduction, they can help countries meet the Goals, freeing them from the poverty trap and their dependence on aid." But in light of the People's Daily article, we could question whether he would mind very much if "voluntary" happened to slide into "involuntary."

Once "population" becomes a problem to be solved, rather than a blessing and source of human capital, anything becomes possible; why is it that so many who claim a god's-eye view end up with the beliefs of devils?