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Reproductive Liberty and Overpopulation: Reply to Stanley Warner

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I would like to thank Stanley Warner for engaging in a serious debate about population and for avoiding the sort of rhetorical attack that I had feared. However, I disagree with his major claim, which is that 'reproductive rights' need not be compromised since alternative policies to limit the environmental impact of consumption are 'possible' (Warner 2004: 398–9).

Section one of my article (Kates 2004) briefly considers the evidence supporting four reasons why population *reduction* appears to be necessary:

... first, to stave off a Malthusian catastrophe already unfolding in poor countries; second, to prevent a similar scenario in developed countries; third, to prevent a serious risk of wholesale environmental collapse which would threaten the survival of humanity; and fourth, to allow the possibility of roughly equal, desirable, and ecologically sustainable living standards throughout the world. The evidence of a large and accelerating ecological deficit does not suggest that simply reducing consumption will be sufficient to provide a desirable and environmentally sustainable life for everyone at current, much less projected, population levels (Kates 2004: 56).

Warner asserts that these reasons are 'not fully argued' (Warner 2004: 394). I believe that these reasons do make the case for a prudential concern with population as well as consumption levels. However, in my first footnote I alerted readers to an expanded version of the paper which discusses this first point in much greater detail. It was impossible to include this material in the already lengthy *Environmental Values* article, but it is available at: www.ithaca.edu/hs/philrel/kates01.htm. In particular, the online version expands the discussion of potential food shortages, and the resource scarcity and ecological imbalances stemming from intensive agricultural production which relies on fossil fuels, irrigation, and deforestation to expand arable land. According to such experts as David Pimentel, agricultural production is already unsustainable, both in the U.S. and globally. Continuing expansion of agriculture to feed a growing population can be expected to contribute materially to ecosystem destruction,

and specifically to accelerate the 'mass extinction' of plant and animal species which ecologists have warned could very likely cause 'wholesale ecosystem collapse'. Perhaps, as the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) hopes, there will be 'a second, doubly green revolution in agricultural technology' in the twenty-first century (FAO 2002), but I find the economic optimists far less persuasive than those ecologists who call for a prudent policy to reduce population (along with consumption) to a sustainable level – in the U.S. perhaps to about 200 million and to about two billion globally (Kates 2004: 55). Of course there is no certainty about any of these sustainability estimates, but it is irrational to risk the consequences of a projected loss of one-quarter of all species on Earth within the next fifty years (RAND 2000), primarily because of agricultural deforestation (Pimentel et al. 1997: 10). It is also irrational to discount the survival threat posed by such looming events as the destruction or degradation of most of the remaining half of the Earth's original forest cover, water shortages, and the peak of global oil and natural gas production.¹

Is it possible for nine or ten (or twelve) billion people to live sustainably by reducing consumption and shifting technologies? No one knows the answer for sure. On one estimate (in 2002), sustainability would require the demand on ecosystems to be cut in half (Rees 2002: 41). But even if rich nations agreed to dramatic reductions in their living standards, the end of cheap fossil energy alone, coupled with limitations on arable farmland, which is now estimated to be about 0.23 hectares per capita globally (i.e. below the 0.5 hectares considered minimal for a nutritious plant and animal diet) (Pimentel and Wilson 2004: 22), would support my conclusion that 'prudence suggests a direct focus on eco-compatible population and consumption levels' (Kates 2004: 54).

Warner agrees that reproductive rights are not absolute and thus can be limited to preserve the ecosystem. However, he claims that I do not even attempt to weigh the loss of autonomy against the gains in environmental sustainability from coercive population control (Warner 2004: 396). He faults me for failing to show that compulsory limits are 'ethically justified simply because humans are loath to take the alternative route of curtailing their...appetites for more economic growth and consumption' (Warner 2004: 393). Of course if one agrees that there is a significant, near-term threat to human survival,² as well as to the possibility of a decent living standard for everyone on the planet, and if one believes sustainability requires population limits, it does seem obvious to me that population reduction should be our highest priority. Since Warner doesn't share that view, I assume he thinks we can afford to wait for other possible solutions.³

I agree with those who say the balance of evidence now places the burden of proof on those who claim population reduction is *not* a necessary element in sustainability (Smail 2004: 59).

I proposed what I called a neo-Hobbesian rationally self-interested global contract to deal with the 'tragedy of the commons', i.e. unlimited reproduction and consumption which poses a threat to every living thing on this planet.

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Warner suggests this would require nations, especially poor ones, to coercively prevent a generation of women from having any children (Warner 2004: 394–5). In fact, this contract does *not* mandate population reduction, nor does it require coercion. It only requires that each party (at this point, a nation), agrees to eliminate its ecological deficit ‘making its own trade-off between consumption and population size’ (Kates 2004: 71). If any nation could eliminate its deficit without population reduction they would have that option. However, based on Pimentel’s model of sustainable agriculture it seems very likely that most nations would be forced to reduce population to achieve sustainability as well as to permit decent living standards for all. Depending on the time frame for dealing with the environmental threat (an empirical question), it is certainly possible that some nations might decide to coercively prevent a generation (of women *and* men) from reproducing, for the same kinds of reasons (national security, survival, the general welfare) that are said to justify coercively sending some generations of young people to war.

Finally, Warner argues that my proposal isn’t feasible, because of the force of the Cairo consensus to support reproductive liberty and because there are policy alternatives to population reduction (Warner 2004: 393, 397, 398–9). I argued that the environmental risk is too great and too near-term to wait for women’s empowerment to take hold in all parts of the world, even if that would eventually lead to lower birth rates. I also cited the statements of U.N. demographers who believe that substituting the Cairo agenda for more targeted population programs has actually been harmful, partly explaining diminished international support for population programs. If overpopulation is no longer considered ‘a problem’, a very large per cent of the approximately one billion young people who may want modern contraceptives will not get them. And I pointed out that, at best, ‘empowerment’ of women may speed up demographic transition to a lower birth rate, whereas what is actually needed is population reduction. For example, an empowerment agenda does not address the problem of unsustainability in the U.S. A global contract would force *all* nations to consider population reduction as well as limits on consumption.

Whether or not the Cairo program remains the global consensus on population will depend on whether political elites are forced to reassess their policies in the light of what many scientists predict: an intensifying environmental crisis.

Warner claims that ‘since world population is in the final stage of levelling off’⁴ the focus should be on policies to limit consumption rather than on population (Warner 2004: 398). He makes three alternative policy proposals: 1) reduce the environmental damage from consumption; 2) limit total consumption (and the ‘mystique’ of unending economic growth); and 3) redistribute income within and across countries (Warner 2004: 399). Presumably he considers these policy options ‘feasible’, in contrast to my proposal, which he accuses of having ‘an abracadabra quality to it’ (Warner 2004: 398). I assume Warner’s policies to limit consumption and redistribute wealth (within and among nations) would

need to be coercive, at least if carried out on a scale sufficient to address current imbalances and restore sustainability.⁵ But, even if these proposals were adequate, what is the reason to think coercive limits on consumption and coercive redistribution of wealth would be any more acceptable to nations than my proposal of a trade-off between consumption and population?

My proposal is a global agreement requiring each nation to live within its ecological limits.⁶ Why would the U.S. and other rich nations agree to such limits? Warner quotes my statement that ‘the U.S. and other rich countries do not have the option of living in ‘gated communities’ on planet Earth’ (Kates 2004: 71), but he seems to have missed the point, which is that ‘everyone is harmed by damage to the ecosystem’ (Kates 2004: 71). We all exist in the same, rapidly deteriorating, ‘state of nature’, and this fact creates the equal insecurity that allows the *possibility* of a rational, self-interested agreement.⁷ As I stated in my conclusion, I don’t really know if our species is rational. But if it is, and if there is a serious risk to the planet, and to our survival, from unsustainable population and consumption, then that risk will become increasingly apparent. In that case, perhaps sometime between now and 2050 we will negotiate a global solution.

NOTES

¹ All of these issues are discussed in greater detail in the online article. For recent articles by Pimentel and others on population, food production, and sustainability see *World Watch* 2004.

² In fact, I would limit human population if it were *only* to prevent ‘species cleansing’ of the planet with no harm to humans, but I’ve made my argument entirely in terms of human self-interest.

³ Warner *et al* (1996) accept the virtual inevitability of population growth and the consequent destruction of other species, but I would argue that the issue is no longer merely one of a risk to *future* generations, so I’ve focused on rational self-interest rather than altruistic ‘ethical’ considerations as a basis for a new social contract.

⁴ Pimentel and Wilson (2004) challenge this assertion. Pimentel notes that ‘even if there was agreement to a limit of two children per couple tomorrow, the world population would continue to increase for about seventy years before leveling off.’ (Personal communication, 9–2004)

⁵ Warner’s proposals to save the environment by limits on consumption and global redistribution of wealth are similar to the so-called ‘Sustainability First’ scenario evidently favoured by the UN Environmental Program in its 2002 report (UNEP 2002), which I discussed in the online version of my article. In that report, the 2032 outcomes of demographic trends and environmental ‘challenges’ are projected under four possible scenarios: 1) Markets First (corporate-dominated global capitalist expansion); 2) Policy First (governments agree to meet specific environmental and social targets); 3) Security First (a world divided between rich and poor, with escalating conflicts caused by envi-

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ronmental and social-economic stresses); and 4) Sustainability First (reinvigorated NGOs promote global grass roots democracy, as affluent groups, especially in North America and Europe, rejecting the values of consumerism, competition, and individualism, and with the aid of unspecified 'breakthroughs' in biotechnology and nanotechnology, take altruistic actions to save the environment and create an 'equitable' global redistribution of wealth) (UNEP 2002: Ch.4). None of the models contemplates an agreement to reduce population, despite the fact that in every scenario population growth is cited as a significant, negative environmental factor. Thus, even the Sustainability First outcomes are far from ideal. While the UN seems to pin its hopes on voluntary altruism, I think it is prudent to appeal to 'rational self-interest'.

⁶ As Warner notes, this would entail an end to emigration, to exporting pollution, and to foreign direct investment, but *not*, as he asserts, an end to all foreign trade. See my footnote 28, which suggests possible implications of an ecological agreement for 'globalisation' and redistribution of wealth. Daly (2004) makes the distinction between globalisation and internationalisation, the latter but not the former being compatible with the trade theory developed by Adam Smith and Ricardo.

⁷ Of course it will take time for this reality to sink in. In my online article I discussed the apparent belief of the CIA that the U.S. and other rich nations can insulate themselves from the environmental and political crises it predicts for many developing countries, remaining secure behind their defences and continuing to benefit from 'globalisation' (CIA 2001).

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