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**Book review of:**

***Ecology and the Crisis of Overpopulation: Future Prospects for  
Global Sustainability*, by Anup Shah, Aldershot: Edward Elgar,  
1998, ISBN 1 85898 463 7**

William A. Jackson

Department of Economics and Related Studies,  
University of York, York YO10 5DD, UK

Email: [william.jackson@york.ac.uk](mailto:william.jackson@york.ac.uk)

Population growth has always provoked strong disagreements among economists and ecologists. Neo-Malthusians warn of an impending environmental crisis and proclaim the need for population policies, while cornucopians regard a rising population as beneficial and argue that population policies would impede economic growth and damage living standards. This book attempts to shed light on the debate about population growth by adopting an interdisciplinary approach that draws ideas from both economics and ecology.

The book, divided into four parts, begins with the key economic and ecological issues and then moves on to a normative discussion of policy. Part I, which deals with the ecological analysis of population growth, presents an essentially Malthusian picture: behaviour is motivated by survival, and human beings have multiplied so rapidly because they have been highly adaptable and manipulated the environment. Adaptive success has still left room for widespread poverty and inequality, however, along with worsening environmental problems.

Part II looks at the economic analysis of population growth and contrasts it with the ecological analysis. They differ through the role of choice in economic theory and the prospect that behaviour may result from motives other than mere survival and the urge to reproduce. Economic theories of fertility permit trade-offs between family size and other variables such as income, leisure and 'child quality'. The greater complexity of decision-making may underlie the fertility decline observed in the demographic transition, which led to the slowing down of population growth in the developed countries. Conflicting pressures in the Third World (where children may be seen as future producers) cast doubt on whether the same demographic transition will take place there.

Part III – the core of the book – examines the normative matters surrounding the definition of an optimum population and its attainment. Optimality is defined as social welfare maximisation on welfarist principles, allowing for negative externalities from overcrowding as the population grows. Such a framework, when combined with an economic model of fertility, can lead to a prisoners' dilemma whereby private decisions on family size go beyond the social optimum and yield overpopulation

Three possible remedies for overpopulation are considered: self-regulation, indirect intervention, and direct intervention. Self-regulation requires communal attitudes (upholding an acceptable family size) and penalties on those who deviate; it will be unstable if economic development fosters migration and weakens communal values. Indirect intervention entails policies to promote economic growth, improved living standards, and female labour force participation, so as to encourage people to have smaller families – a drawback is the increased threat to the environment as Third World countries undergo economic development. Direct intervention entails explicit government policies designed to reduce family size, including compulsory upper limits, taxes/subsidies related to family size, and tradeable birth licences – a drawback is the illiberal, authoritarian flavour of such measures.

Part IV offers some concluding commentary. This steers a course between the economic (optimistic) and ecological (pessimistic) views and gives a full summary of the preceding argument. Ultimately, the ecological side is seen as the more fundamental, so that economic growth on its own cannot solve the population problem and direct intervention is recommended. The conclusions are expressed in general terms, though, and no case is put forward for specific policies.

Appropriately enough, the book takes account of the intricacies of the subject and acknowledges that population growth may bring some economic benefits and positive externalities. The subtlety of economic-demographic interactions makes it virtually impossible to obtain watertight findings, either theoretically or empirically (hence the long-standing controversies). Timeless economic models of constrained optimisation are unconvincing when resource constraints and preferences are ill defined and likely to evolve during the lengthy periods considered. Theoretical derivations of an optimum population, such as the one in Chapter 7, may well have value for illustrative purposes but at best they can pick out only some aspects of the problem at the expense of others. Under the circumstances, it may be unwise to rely heavily on the concepts of population optimality and overpopulation.

The book should prove useful as a short and accessible introduction to the population growth debate: it brings together the economic and ecological strands and summarises clearly

the basic issues. There is no grand synthesis or resolution of the perennial disagreements, but that would be asking too much.