10-1-1997

Book Review: The Stork and the Plow: the Equity Answer to the Human Dilemma

Sally Lerner
University of Waterloo

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/belj
Part of the Environmental Law Commons, and the Law and Gender Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/belj/vol5/iss1/6

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Law Journals at Digital Commons @ University at Buffalo School of Law. It has been accepted for inclusion in Buffalo Environmental Law Journal by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ University at Buffalo School of Law. For more information, please contact lawscholar@buffalo.edu.
Book Review
of
THE STORK AND THE PLOW¹:
The Equity Answer to the Human Dilemma
as reviewed by
Sally Lerner²

² Dept. of Environment and Resource Studies, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada N2L 3G1.
Originally published in 1995, and re-issued in 1997 in a paperback edition, THE STORK AND THE PLOW aspires to be a wake up call to Americans and their political leaders. While the book’s thesis is straightforward—“human and agricultural fertility are on a collision course”—the Ehrlichs and Daily carefully detail the daunting complexities involved in changing human activities and designing effective, equitable programs to reverse global population growth and protect agricultural sufficiency. Their aim is to educate the lay public and U.S. decision makers about the existence and nature of the contemporary environmental *problematique*, and to suggest ways of addressing it. Increasing equity between genders, households, regions, and nations is seen as key to success in these endeavors.

Because THE STORK AND THE PLOW is meant to be a first reader for the general public, much of its subject matter will not be new to people who have followed environmental issues or studied the basics in the relevant literature. Even for the well-informed, however, it is useful to be reminded of such facts of life as the many-times-heavier environmental impact of a U.S. citizen, measured in terms of 1991 per-capita energy use, than of a Costa Rican (20 times) or a Bangladeshi (50 times). Similarly valuable is the book’s ongoing contention, with examples, that both the majority in “rich” countries and the very poor everywhere else, for quite different reasons, threaten global environmental sustainability—and thus that convergence toward a more equitable use of resources by all is an absolute necessity.

A major dilemma today and for the future is the desire of rapidly developing countries such as China and India to emulate the lifestyles of developed nations, particularly the U.S. The authors believe that the industrialized world has ignored for too long the environmental source and sink limits that make this a disturbing trend. Opportunities to reduce feverish consumption levels and to develop environmentally-benign technologies have been rejected or ignored. Our dependence on the automobile, for example, has locked us into both unsustainable energy use and sprawling
infrastructure that balks environmental re-design. Thus, when modernizing countries such as China seem bent on choosing the automobile option, cleaner technologies such as electric or fuel-cell mini-cars are still under construction. North America is more backward in this respect than the Europeans, and it may be that the latter will provide the models for the emerging giants. That the U.S. is taking closer note of this issue is suggested by a feature article on China’s polluting ways (“Our Real China Problem”) in the November 1997 Atlantic Monthly.

**Slowing the Stork**

After necessary and informative digressions into such topics as immigration, consumerism, clean technologies, externalities, and the social trap of future discounting, the authors move smartly to their first major topic, population growth and control—the trajectory of the first and the complexities of the second. A short history of human reproductive and population control by means of contraception, abortion, infanticide, marriage age, migration, and other means serves to introduce the topic. The role in demographic debates of the key notion of “demographic transition”—the progression from high birth and death rates, to falling death rates and high birth rates, and finally to low birth and death rates—is noted, in connection with a well-documented discussion of the propensity of many development enthusiasts during the 1950s and 1960s to see industrial development as the direct cause of such transitions. The authors contend that the period of post-WWII trial and error in attempting to aid developing countries supported the conclusion that “... improving basic health and nutritional conditions (which led to falling infant mortality rates and rising life expectancies), educating women, and granting them a measure of independence did have direct effects, sometimes dramatic ones.”

The book’s major point regarding population control is that because of the complex nature of the causal factors behind fertility trends in every sub-culture, there are no easy or simple answers.
These factors include cultural norms about the desirable number and
gender of children; the extent to which children are valued as
workers, sources of status, and guarantors of old age security;
alternatives for women, notably education, employment, and power
to limit pregnancies; and equity between men and women, including
the extent to which each is valued in the culture. The chapters on
"Slowing the Stork" and "Government in the Bedroom" provide
grounded analyses of a variety of successful family planning
approaches in developing countries around the globe. What should
be the role of "rich" nations such as the U.S. in population control?
First, to promote low fertility rates for themselves; each additional
U.S. consumer is a voracious drain on resources. Second, to
provide humane assistance to developing nations that want to limit
population growth.

Sustaining and Improving Food Sufficiency

Modern agriculture, pushed by the Green Revolution of the
1960s and 1970s in developing countries, has become heavily
dependent on fossil fuels to power its machines, cool and transport
its product, and serve as a feedstock for the production of pesticides
and fertilizers. Because "... small farmers produce about twice as
much per hectare as do large farmers, while using only one fourth
to one fifth the amount of purchased inputs per hectare," the
authors appear to advocate a return to equitable land distribution
that would maximize the number of "upper end"- size large family
farms. But again they warn that there are no simple answers, and

---

One arguable point is their suggestion that private rather than communal
ownership of resources may need to be promoted, to avoid "unsustainable
exploitation." They cite Hardin's oft-refuted tragedy-of-the-commons argument,
which assumes open access; the extensive literature on successful common
property regimes is not noted. See E. OSTROM, GOVERNING THE COMMONS
argue for primarily locally-developed solutions for agriculture and the beleaguered fisheries.

To ensure food sufficiency as world population peaks at 10-12 billion by 2050 (the most widely accepted projection), programs must be developed to stem loss of farmland, regenerate degraded lands, rationalize water use and deny users "perverse subsidies," effectively protect genetic diversity, spur movement away from massive agricultural chemical inputs, and protect the earth from increased UV-B radiation due to a damaged ozone layer. Policies that depress farm prices for political reasons, resist equitable distribution of land and resources, or engender trading practices that promote cash cropping for export and increase dependency on imported basic food among developing nations must be altered. The authors castigate the "structural adjustment" forced on the developing debtor nations by the IMF and the World Bank, noting its negative effects on food sufficiency in such formerly self-reliant countries as Costa Rica.

Biotechnology, often heralded as the next green revolution, is seen as having relatively limited potential for expanding food supplies. The greatest gains in long-term food security could be made, the authors believe, "through restoration of productivity to degraded lands" and the development of "alternative agriculture," including improvement of traditional crops and farming techniques. Introduction of integrated pest management ("IPM") is a suggested priority as is a cultural shift in diets that would divert grain from livestock to people. In the short term, post-harvest losses from pest depredation should be limited by providing better storage and transport facilities. This latter challenge seems one that could be effectively addressed with the help of developed-nation funding and know-how. Another important step that the developed countries should promote is "properly valuing the resources and ecosystem services essential to agriculture" by developing a set of indicators of economic and environmental sustainability. The authors conclude their coverage of the food dilemma by suggesting that immediate action is needed to remedy the global maldistribution of food,
establish an adequate system of food reserves in case of shortfalls, and boost production by all "sustainable means."

The final chapter of THE STORK AND THE PLOW addresses the need for fundamental ethical, social, economic, and political change if the challenges of population growth and agricultural insecurity are to be met. Recognizing the near impossibility of such a total transformation of human goals and activities, the authors still press for massive education efforts that would aim at reducing conflict within and between nations; increase international equity with respect to employment, environmental impacts, and food security; increase equity within nations. Achieving these goals is seen as fundamental to meeting the food and population objectives. In keeping with the book's purpose, personal change steps are also suggested: have no more than two children, preferably one; educate yourself on environmental issues; get involved in local and national environmental organizations; support NGOs that are working on equity issues; change your lifestyle to one that is more sustainable.

Taking a wide-angle-lens approach to contemporary problems, this ambitious and challenging book is an excellent introduction to the complexity and tightly-coupled nature of the environmental problematique facing humanity at the present time. The authors raise a multitude of seemingly unanswerable questions which they then proceed to address convincingly and with excellent documentation. The attentive reader will gain a sense that while there are no easy answers, neither is there any excuse for doing nothing. The hardest questions for the authors, as for everyone else, are about how to overcome the inequities that haunt the world—between men and women, rich and poor, landed and landless, powerful and powerless. This book places those hard questions at the center of the contemporary human dilemma and does not allow our attention to wander from them in the search for solutions to the fundamental problems around too many people on a finite planet.