

ON THE MARCHING MORONS

by Larry Niven & Isaac Asimov art: George Barr

THE MARCHING MORONS PROBLEM

by Larry Niven

Isaac Asimov is a man with a mission. For many years he has been trying to persuade humanity (or the subset of humanity that reads or hears Isaac Asimov's words) to impose birth control on itself. He is not alone in his crusade. The proponents of Zero Population Growth (ZPG) are numerous, and vocal, and eloquent.

But I distrust their solutions.

Consider ZPG activity as an evolutionary pressure. Evolution depends on those members of a species who are able to survive and breed. In most cases, evolutionary pressures act to improve a species in relation to its environment. Wolves pull down the slowest and the cripples, and the elderly. (But hunters kill the best-looking stags.) When humans moved north from Africa, those with the darkest skins died because they couldn't make enough vitamin D. The pale-skinned survived best. (But men interbreed dogs or horses to fit whimsical standards, until the breed is ruined.)

Will it follow that the best will die, but the best will survive? Mr. Niven submitted his point of view, Dr. Asimov replied, and so on. We

improve a herd, calves in a herd, (But hunters kill groups of ricas, when they the cold, those

Traditionally, mankind is not good at improving a species. For us, the arguments used by ZPG proponents select for:

- 1) People who don't listen, or don't read...
- 2) People too stupid to understand Dr. Asimov's arguments.



3) People who understand, but don't give a damn.

4) People too stupid, clumsy, hurried, eager, or careless to use contraceptives correctly. (Remember the woman who couldn't understand how she got pregnant? She took her birth control pills regularly. Except on Sundays, of course.)

5) Those too cowardly to face an abortion or tubal ligation or vasectomy, or those who get lost on the way to the clinic, or forget their appointments.

6) Those who disagree with Isaac's arguments for one reason or another. Their reasoning may follow my own arguments; or they may have read *The Marching Morons*, a classic short story by C. M. Korubluth, whose premise went like this:

For several generations dating from now, reasoning people postpone having children, or have too few, for a variety of reasons. Children are expensive. (They used to help out with the farm work, or pick pockets for their parents/guardians.) You can't travel as much when you have children. Some apartment houses bar children. It is unkind to bring children into a world that has problems yet unsolved. World population increases by tens of thousands daily. All good, sound motives...

People who don't understand any of this continue to have children at the usual rate.

In five or ten generations, the average human being is as smart as a smart dog. The remaining intelligent ones are frantically busy keeping the world going. Too busy to have children themselves...

The solution, as per *The Marching Morons*, was unpleasant and expensive. Never mind. Getting back to basics—

Except in case 6), the ZPG proponents are breeding their audience for stupidity or lack of altruism. Let us call that approach Choice B for carving ourselves a future. Choice A is *don't do anything*. Dr. Asimov is eager to tell you the results of *that*. War, famine, pestilence, or crowding to the point of universal madness.

Choice C is, "We have done our best to solve the problem of unwanted children. We may have to consider restricting *wanted* children."

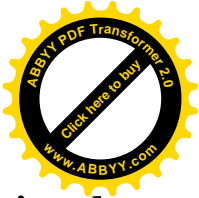
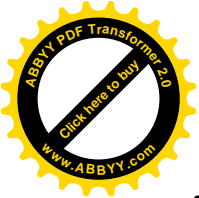
Consider the do-it-to-him contraception, in two scenarios.

In the first, the State offers citizens a license to breed. The license or 'birthright' has to be earned... by extraordinary health or intelligence, by service to humanity, by paying a fee, by bribery, by the winning of a lottery, as on Earth in my own Known Space series, or in any of scores of other projections to be found in science fiction. The laws would have to be hellishly restrictive for this to work.

But a halfway measure might be enough. Try this: on reaching puberty, every female citizen gets a shot. It immunizes her against sperm. To get pregnant she must take another—temporary—shot... must *do* something, with full knowledge of the consequences, rather than *forget* to do something. Notice that the women make all the decisions in this case; a would-be-father has nothing going for him save persuasion.

(This possibility is brand new - information, which I learned straight from the researcher, Jack Cohen! I suggested that he could be in line for the first obscene Nobel Prize. Remember, you read it here first!)

Perhaps we would prefer to restrict populations not our own. According to General Patton, "The trick is to make some other poor bastard die for *his* country—" except that nobody actually dies when we drop contraceptive bombs



into Iranian water sources. A war in which no living being gets killed or injured sounds good in principle. Trouble is, Such a war could escalate. Nuclear weapons *do* exist, and a people who have been robbed of their fertility may be less fearful of radiation.

So let's look at Choice D.

Make the whole world rich. Go heavy on the space effort. Orbiting solar power collectors, mines on the moon and asteroids, polluting factories moved into orbit so the Earth can become one gigantic park. . . like that. That future has been mapped out for us for decades now. (Everyone I know knew *exactly* where they wanted *Skylab* to hit. It was supposed to land on the man who blocked the funding that would have kept it up: Senator Proxmire.) Of course it all has to happen fairly soon—say, over a thirty-year period. Otherwise the world population will expand to absorb the new wealth.

Nations *have* become suddenly rich in the past, and the result is predictable. The population jumps, for one generation. Then it stabilizes. Sometimes it even goes down. It's dropping in France; it will drop here, after our population becomes age-heavy—a peak that is still a few decades away.

Choice D is worth a try. It's worth every effort we can put into it. Even if it doesn't work, it'll be a *lot* more fun than the Population Wars. -

MY MISSION—STATED CORRECTLY

by Isaac Asimov

Now, now, Larry: in your very first paragraph you throw a curve ball. You say about me, "For many years he has been trying to persuade humanity (or the subset of humanity that reads or hears Isaac Asimov's words) to impose birth control on itself."

Inserting that parenthetical phrase, Larry, is uncommonly like a kick aimed at the groin. I have always made it quite plain that limiting the birth rate is for *everyone*, and not just for the subset of humanity that reads or hears me.

Here, for instance, is what I said in my article "Stop!" in the October 1970 issue of *F & SF*: "If the population increase must be halted, let everyone agree to and voluntarily practice the limitation of children. Everyone might simply agree to have no more than two children."

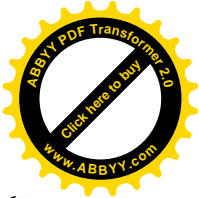
Do you notice I say "everyone"?

I mean exactly what I say. Everyone. I don't want any exceptions. I don't want special dispensations for college graduates, or for nice suburban types, or for my friends and relations. Nor do I want to impose special restrictions on people who are different from myself and who don't share my physical appearance and culture.

And if that is done, and if the birthrate is dropped for everyone, then this whole bit about the Marching Morons does not apply. It is a red herring designed to frighten the xenophobes.

Ah (I can hear Larry say), Asimov may feel that everyone should limit the birthrate, but Asimov only speaks to and writes for the few highly intelligent and rational individuals who listen to him,, read him, and understand his arguments. *They* are the ones who -will have fewer children, while all the fools will breed like rabbits and the Marching Morons will overwhelm us even if Asimov doesn't intend them to.

Suppose that's so. And suppose that (in accordance with Sturgeon's Law)



the human race divides into five percent intelligent and 95 percent fools. (I suspect that people who worry about the Marching Morons and who are very proud of their own superior intelligence would be willing to agree with this figure and would be likely to feel that if anything, I am overestimating the percentage of the intelligent.)

In that case, if the 95 percent who are fools breed like rabbits, they will destroy civilization in a generation or so, not so much because they are fools but through all the ills that will beset us through an impossible overpopulation, regardless of the IQ of those making up the crowds.

What the remaining five percent will do will then be entirely irrelevant. If the five percent who are intelligent stop breeding altogether and intelligence diminishes rapidly, civilization will not be destroyed any sooner. If the five percent decide to stem the tide and to provide plenty of intelligence by having fifteen terribly bright children each, then, insofar as this will contribute still further to overpopulation, the breakdown of civilization welcome even sooner. It makes no sense therefore to worry about the ill effects of selective birth control and about the intelligent people being outbred by the fools. That is like worrying about a cold in the nose when there is an atom bomb about to explode in the vicinity.

Larry realizes this; and he doesn't suggest, for instance, that intelligent people engage in a baby-race with the fools. Instead he talks about the various scenarios that might serve to limit population for everyone. He doesn't think that trying to limit population on purpose will help. It will have to be done *automatically*, even while people are not particularly trying to do it, and his recipe is to "make the whole world rich."

That is very nice, if it could be done; but it can't. Nations have become rich in the past, but always at the expense of other nations who became the poorer for it. The current example of the process are the oil-producing nations. They are becoming rich—but at the cost of threatened bankruptcy for almost everyone else.

We have never tried making *everyone* rich, and we don't know if we can. My own feeling is that we can't possibly unless we limit population *first*. Trying to make the whole world rich while giving the whole world carte blanche to breed will be like trying to catch a racehorse by mounting a turtle.

Mind you, I'm not against making the whole world rich. I'm as keen on it as Larry is. *But*, I think that while we're trying to make the whole world rich, we should *also* try to persuade them to lower the birthrate.

It is with that in mind that I am talking and writing about the problem and urging everyone to limit children. I intend to continue to do so day in and day out.

Fortunately, I'm not the only one who's doing this. There are many other people who are also spreading the message.

It is true that I (and others like myself) reach only a very small fraction of the world's population, but if I am reaching the intelligent, it is they who are likely to be the opinion-makers and the fashion-mongers.

One reason for high birthrates, after all, is the social pressure in *favor* of it. Think about all the people who think it is wonderful to have children and that it is a tragedy to be childless. Think about all the sermons and TV programs and greeting cards and movies and common clichés that all unite in getting across the idea of how wonderful it is to have babies and be a mother and how miserable it is to be deprived of it. Every person who participates in this pro-



natalist propaganda does more harm than ten times his weight in Marching Morons.

Suppose we release that social pressure and begin to praise small families. Suppose we liberate women and draw them into every phase of running the world on an equal basis with men. Suppose we convince the governments of the world that a high birthrate means *their* destruction.

In that case, the birthrate might drop because it would be fashionable to have few children and people will do anything if it is fashionable. And the birthrate will drop because women will have other things to do than have babies. And the birthrate will also drop because governments will, out of self-protection, so arrange their tax structures as to put the power of the pocketbook behind lowered birthrates.

Is this-an idle dream?

It is not! It is working!

Birthrates are dropping everywhere and small families are coming more and more into style; It is doing so not only in western Europe and in the United States and Canada, it is doing so in the Soviet Union and in China. It is doing so in much of the Third World, and I hear reports that in the last few-years the birthrate has dropped substantially in Mexico, of all places.

In fact, the overall rate of world population increase has dropped, I am told, from 2 percent in 1970 (when I wrote my article "Stop!") to 1.6 percent in 1980. Not enough, goodness knows, but the change is in the right direction.

And the reason for it is that I, and others like myself, have endlessly and tirelessly drummed away at the world concerning the dangers of overpopulation, and that more and more people are beginning to understand, and that the word is spreading and the fashion is being set and that it may take hold—

And who knows, maybe we'll make it, despite Larry.

**WE'VE STILL GOT A MARCHING MORONS
PROBLEM**
by Larry Niven

Isaac:

Kick aimed at the groin, my foot! That parenthetical insert is there for accuracy, and it says something you ought to keep in mind. You can keep saying "everyone" till Hell freezes over; but in practice, you are shouting in the ears only of English-reading people willing to listen, and understand, and act upon their understanding.

I'm not against limiting the birth rate. It's persuasion that sticks in my craw.

Put aside your characteristic humility for a moment, and remember that your readers are *brighter* than humanity's average. Persuading *them* not to have children is a mistake. Persuading anyone else is impossible. (Are you seriously counting on making it *fashionable* to have fewer children? Don't you know how fast fashions change? Next year it's the pregnant look, folks—)

You mentioned a possible answer, but you're not holding it by the handle. Our tax structure encourages children. The welfare system offers *extreme* encouragement to having children; there are those for whom it is a profession! You and your allies could be using your -powers of persuasion to remove that



bonus. (And you are, of course; I'm suggesting that it could be the main thrust of your attack.)

But birth control by coercion isn't just unpleasant; it could conceivably get us lynched. Whichever groups take the biggest proportion of welfare checks, won't they be the ones to scream "Genocide?" And won't the lawyers and the newsmen love it? In fact, they'd be right. It's the thrust of my argument: you're committing genocide, in your fashion, against altruists who read.

If there's a better choice, we should take it.

And there is.

You say, "Nations have become rich in the past, but always at -the expense of other nations who became the poorer for it." You're dead wrong, but in this case it doesn't matter. What counts is that *there are no such nations now in orbit, on the Moon, or in the asteroids.*

There's nobody to be hurt out there. The wealth is there to be grabbed: sunlight, metals, oxygen loosely bound in rocks, free fall, all raw materials for creating clean power and wealth; and one more the space to dump endless pollution. You could vaporize the Earth without noticeably polluting interplanetary space. If we could move most of our polluting industries into orbit, we create considerable elbow room, not to mention drinkable river water and breathable air.

Now let's make the whole world rich. The population *might* drop, and we've given them more room. and if civilization fails anyway, there would be populations off Earth who might be able to start it over.

RE-REBUTTAL

by Isaac Asimov

Larry, you've simply repeated what you said in the first place, in a louder voice.

I'll stand on what I said in reply.