

Book Reviews

History of Population Theories. J. Overbeek. Rotterdam: Rotterdam University Press, 1974. 232 pp.

Theories of economists, biologists, sociologists, and demographers have been woven by Overbeek into an historical fabric which portrays mans, intellectual attempt to determine the consequences of human population growth. The heart of the book consists of a series of short precis summarizing and commenting upon the theories of noted scholars dealing with population from the late 18th century to date. The organization of the book is basically chronological although the chronology is dichotomized into two camps: those pessimistic about future population/resource relationships and those who refute or deny predictions of overpopulation. Following a brief introductory chapter, Overbeek devotes one chapter to a recitation of the facts concerning world population growth with projections to 1985. There then follows a very cursory review of pre-Mercantile theories of population and a brief chapter describing Mercantilism which sets the stage for the ensuing expansion of theoretical concern with human numbers

Overbeek writes with a lively and imaginative style which heightens readers' interest in a subject which could easily have been presented in a most dry and boring manner. Since 37 separate theorists are reviewed in less than 200 pages, comments concerning the contribution of any given theorist are of necessity fairly brief. The result is a book which should prove extremely useful in providing the reader with a general sense of the evolution of population theory as well as with some idea of the major currents and counter-currents surrounding the question of overpopulation. As a work of reference for seeking a detailed exposition of the theories of particular scholar, the *History of Population Theories* will very likely prove inadequate. But Overbeek has provided ample annotation and includes a selected 10 page bibliography which will permit the interested student to use his work as a point of departure.

It is of course possible in the review of any compendium such as this to argue the relative merits of those theorists who were included against those who have been excluded, but such arguments are deemed by this reviewer to be pointless and of scant contribution. Overbeek admits that the selection of theorists was determined by his own interests and prejudices, and if those interests and prejudices do not match those of a particular reader the author can hardly be faulted.

Overbeek attempts no grand synthesis to form a conclusion distilled from the array of presented theories. Instead he offers three brief observations, two of which are particularly useful to be kept in mind as one is exposed to the mounting debate over world population. First, population theories have a long history with at least some tracing roots back 2000 years and many other arising from the period of heated debate which characterized the 19th century. Second, old theories tend to reappear in new guises, and many arguments which have appeared in recent years, dressed out as revolutionary thought are really simple restatements of theories current more than a century ago.

Richard W. Helbock

**Pakistan Institute of
Development Economics,
Islamabad.**