

## World Population Debate Hinges on Land by Heather Remoff

"One of the most disturbing novels of the late twentieth century," Raspaill's *The Camp of the Saints*, provides a harrowing central image for a series of articles on runaway population growth and economic polarization in the December '94 issue of *Atlantic Monthly*. The novel describes an invasion of the comfortable nations of Western Europe by hordes of desperate third-world peasants. The two articles, by Connelly/Kennedy and Abernathy, make clear the danger in the symptoms they describe. However, they fail to address the root cause of these phenomena.

Abernathy is right when she argues that unilateral infusions of economic aid won't work, but she is right for all the wrong reasons. Historically, such aid has failed to address the issues of land reform, and most often leads to a further concentration of wealth in the hands of the recipient nation's elite. I am convinced—and I hope that my upcoming book, *Out of England*, will show—that population explosions are an evolutionarily adaptive response to a loss of guaranteed access to the resources on which all life depends. Abernathy points out that traditional societies are typically able to preserve a balance between population and resources. They do so because they incorporate, in various ways, mechanisms that guarantee all members of the community access to land.

Confusion about the relationship between population and poverty is our Malthusian legacy—and it leads to such muddled analysis as Abernathy's view of the Irish situation: "In Ireland land became scarce relative to the rapidly growing population in the early nineteenth century, whereupon fertility began a retreat to its low, prepotato level." Land became scarce in Ireland because of increased monopoly by absentee landlords from England. Accord-

ing to Stephen J. Campbell, "These circumstances prevented tenants from expanding and improving their farms, and led instead to increasing poverty as holdings diminished through subdivision and subletting, and this in turn engendered over-dependence on the potato."

Abernathy argues that signals of abundance provided by the potato fueled the population increase, a view that contradicts Irish history. The replacement of a varied indigenous diet by a single crop, such as the potato, is almost always an indication that there is a foreign presence driving a demand for export crops. The replacement diet consumed by the workers is not an indication of their prosperity but of their poverty. Ireland was a net exporter of food during the potato famine.

Connelly/Kennedy acknowledge that in the past aid money has fallen into the wrong hands and been devoted to the wrong purposes, but they offer no workable corrections, only increased supervision. They fail to make the crucial distinction between natural resources and wealth—and the generalized failure to make that distinction is the reason that Raspaill's grim predictions have the ring of unpleasant truth. Much as we want to believe the cornucopian literature of most free-market economists, their vision is not coming to pass.

Will the privileged West have to fortify its walls against the starving majority? Can international economic policy do anything to reverse the polarization? There is an answer. What we call a free market will not be truly free until we eliminate monopoly rights in land. Connelly/Kennedy would do well to cast aside Raspaill's *Camp of the Saints* and pick up Henry George's *Progress and Poverty*. George not only identified the problem, but he also proposed an efficient solution.