

An inconvenient truth for Al Gore and the anti-natalist movement: A synopsis by Jim Moreton of “Too Many People?” by Nicholas Eberstadt

Introduction

It has been a persistent agenda of the pro-choice movement to convince us of the supposed beneficial consequences of global access to abortion. One seemingly obvious reason to welcome abortion is that we are in the midst of a global overpopulation crisis, which, according to environmental historian Jared Diamond, has us headed towards “food shortages, starvation, wars among too many people...and overthrows of governing elites by disillusioned masses”. Or are we? In the brilliantly attentive article “[Too many people?](#)”, leading demographer [Nicholas Eberstadt](#) (who holds the Henry Wendt Chair in Political Economy at the American Enterprise Institute) exposes several grave flaws in this increasingly popular view.

Eberstadt identifies three key stages of thinking among exponents of ‘world population stabilisation’; Firstly, the contention that we face continued and rapid growth in world population. Secondly, that this growth rate has serious and immediate adverse effects on the availability of resources and political stability (Hence a state of ‘overpopulation’), and thirdly that the necessary solution of reducing global birth rates can realistically be achieved through government initiatives engineered by population specialists.

Is there a need to ‘stabilise’ the world population?

In light of perceived rapid population growth, the United Nations Population Fund ((UNFPA), with the support of several world figures including Al Gore, outlined in 2002 its aim to promote what it calls the “universally accepted aim of stabilising world population”. To employ such terminology is misleading, however, when we see that the UNFPA’s real goal is to dramatically *lower* world population rather than to *stabilise* it (the latter aiming merely to keep birth rates and death rates roughly balanced). As Eberstadt remarks, talk of ‘stabilising population’ is in reality the worrying doctrine of anti-natalism, which attributes many socio-economic problems to the unqualified belief that there are too many people.

It is no surprise then that the anti-natalist movement has shown little concern for the sudden population *decline* in the Russian Federation since the late 90’s, witnessing nearly 700,000 more deaths than births in 2006. In his best-selling book *Earth In The Balance*, Al Gore warns us that the world population ‘could reach 14 billion or even higher before levelling off’ during this century. The facts, however, show that population growth rates are in steady decline throughout Europe and Japan, indicating a substantial decrease in their populations over the next four decades. As Eberstadt explains, demographic experts are increasingly accepting the strong likelihood (based on demographic trends) that the global population will begin to decline by the middle of this century. Even the United Nations Population Division

has, since 2006, projected that global fertility will fall below the net replacement level (*i.e. where the death rate exceeds the birth rate*) as early as 2030, causing the world population to decrease.

Does rapid population growth inevitably cause economic and political instability?

Further problems arise when we examine the assumption that rapid population growth threatens the availability of resources and political stability. As Eberstadt argues, proponents of this view have misunderstood the real problem of human *poverty* as a problem of *overpopulation* simply because poverty exists in a highly populated world. In reality, there is no clear-cut relationship between demographic trends and occurrences of poverty around the globe. Looking at individual countries we find no discernable correlation between a country's population density and its economic performance (GDP). The idea of 'overcrowding' is typically associated with poverty-stricken countries such as Rwanda and India, with population densities over six times the global average. In contrast, however, figures from 2000 show, for example, that the economically prosperous Belgium has a substantially higher population density than Rwanda, while Bahrain's population density is roughly three times higher than India. Hence, relative 'overcrowding' cannot in itself be said to prevent economic growth.

The argument that rapid population growth inevitably causes a shortage of resources is severely weakened when we examine the relationship between world population and economic progress throughout the twentieth century.

Between 1900 and 2000 human numbers nearly quadrupled, rising from 1.6 billion to 6 billion. This was due not to increased fertility but to a steady improvement in global health that more than doubled global life expectancy. Even the poorest region, Sub Saharan Africa, saw its infant mortality rate fall by nearly a half between 1950 and 2000. Yet despite this rapid population boom, global economies did not suffer. On the contrary, population growth was accompanied by massive economic growth. Every global region became richer, including Africa, which, despite having the least economic growth, still nearly tripled its GDP during the twentieth century.

What is most significant is the fact that, while population growth meant a much greater *demand* for resources, the availability of resources actually increased steadily. This was reflected by a continual fall in the relative prices of nearly all primary commodities. For example, a comprehensive study by Enzo Grilli and Maw Cheng Yang shows that the price of renewable and non-renewable resources (such as cereals and metals respectively) had an average decline of 0.6 percent per year between 1900 and 1986. It is clear then that rapid population growth has actually helped increase the availability of resources and this is simply because a larger and healthier population is inevitably a more productive one. The view that population growth inevitably causes resource scarcity underestimates the immense economic value of *human resources*. As Eberstadt remarks, if this view was accurate then 'the 20th century should not have occurred'.

There is also little evidence linking rapid population growth with political instability. Unless we remove human populations altogether then there is always potential for political instability and this has occurred in a way that shows no special correlation with rapid population growth. An example of this would be the former Yugoslavia, where the region of Bosnia-Herzegovina experienced political turmoil in the midst of war and ethnic cleansing during the early 1990's, despite having a fertility rate *far below* the net replacement level. In the thirty years leading up to the chaos, the region's population growth rate had been at the slow rate of 1 percent per year, just over half the worldwide average, and slower than politically stable countries such as the United States. Examples such as this indicate that it is very naïve to assume that rapid population growth is intrinsically linked to political instability.

Can populations be successfully lowered through government population programmes?

Even if the first two premises were correct (which we have strong reason to doubt) then it still does not follow that government programmes designed to lower populations can successfully achieve their goals. Al Gore has said confidently that 'population specialists know' how to successfully lower numbers. He cites three key forms of modernisation that will reduce fertility, these being; *increased education and literacy*, empowering women to make personal decisions about their fertility; *reducing infant mortality rates*, so that parents can confidently have smaller families, and of course *access to affordable birth control*, including abortion and abortifacient contraception.

However, numerous examples from around the world show that these factors cannot be relied upon to lower fertility rates. Tracing back to the early 19th century, we see that the first major decline in fertility occurred in France, which at the time was seriously poor, predominantly illiterate and Catholic, as well as having a staggering infant mortality rate of 200 infant deaths per thousand births. If Al Gore's assertions are correct then early 19th century France would be one of the most unlikely regions to experience a strong decline in fertility! The assumption that access to birth control will lower fertility rates is also disrupted by several statistical comparisons. For example, comparing the West Bank in 2004 with Bulgaria in 1998, we see that the West Bank, despite its contraception usage being 9 percent higher, had over four times the fertility rate of Bulgaria.

As Eberstadt reminds us, there really are no set rules by which governments can determine fertility trends. What we do know is that *desired* fertility levels simply vary independent of factors such as wealth and education. This is why, for example, countries with a GDP of 1000 dollars had an average total fertility rate of 6 children (per woman per lifetime) in 1960, and an average rate of only 3.3 children in 2005. The worrying implication of this unpredictability is that the only guaranteed way for

a government to control its population is through resorting to *coercive* techniques, the most obvious example of our time being China's one child policy.