Are there too many people?

'Stabilising' human population and the anti-natalists

Nicholas Eberstadt

A demographic spectre is haunting authoritative and influential circles.

This spectre is the supposed imperative to 'stabilise human population'. That objective is today embraced by a panoply of subsidiary institutions within the 'UN family', including the United Nations Environmental Programme, the United Nations Children's Fund, and the United Nations Population Fund, which explicitly declared its mission in 2002 to be the promotion of the 'universally accepted aim of stabilising world population'.'

That goal of 'stabilising human population' is also championed by a broad network of population and environmental advocacy groups, including most prominently Planned Parenthood and the Sierra Club.

Further, 'stabilising human population' is a prospect that has been welcomed and financially supported by many of the world's most prominent and successful captains of industry—among them, self-made multi-billionaires Ted Turner, Warren Buffet and Bill Gates. The propriety—or necessity—of 'stabilising global population' has been expounded by a wide array of respected writers, spokespersons, and commentators in the media. Politically, the goal of 'stabilising world population' is officially approved by USAID (America's foreign aid apparatus).

And the quest to stabilise is championed internationally by political figures who are both influential and widely popular: one of America's most passionate and outspoken exponents of 'world population stabilisation', former Vice-President Al Gore, very nearly won the presidency in the closely contested 2000 election.

But what, exactly, does 'stabilising human population' actually mean? Though the objective is widely championed today, the banner itself is somewhat misleading, because advocates of stabilising are in fact not concerned with stabilising human numbers.

If they were, one would expect champions of stabilisation to turn their attention to the outlook for Europe and Japan, where populations are currently projected to drop significantly over the next half century. Or focused on the decline in the Russian Federation over the past decade—in 2006 alone, that country suffered almost 700,000 more deaths than births. Yet virtually no supporters of 'population stabilisation' have agitated for coordinated measures to lower Russia's death rate, raise its birth rate, and staunch its ongoing demographic losses.

The reason for such seemingly curious insouciance about demographic decline by self-avowed population 'stabilisers' is that their chosen standard does not quite describe their true quest. For exponents of 'stabilising human population' do not simply look for population stabilisation. Rather, as the former Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund framed the goal, they strive 'for stabilisation of world population at the lowest possible level, within the shortest period of time'.

Upon inspection it is apparent that 'stabilising human population' is really code language: a new name for an old and famil-

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iar project. Today's call for 'stabilising human population' is actually a rallying cry for anti-natalism.

After all, its envisioned means of achieving 'stabilisation' is through limiting the prevalence and reducing the level of childbearing around the world, especially in the developing world—implementing policies to reduce births, and thereby depressing fertility in various venues around the globe (and particularly where fertility levels are deemed to be 'unacceptably' high).

The ongoing anti-natal population crusade couches its arguments in the language of social science and invokes the findings of science to bolster its authority—but it cannot withstand the process of empirical review that lies at the heart of the rational scientific method.

The case for action to 'stabilise world population' rests upon four specific premises:

- we are in a crisis of 'overpopulation';
- this population growth is unsustainable;
- reducing birth rates provides a solution; and
- well-placed decision-makers can effectively and expeditiously engineer the desired changes in worldwide population patterns through deliberate policy interventions.

To the extent that any of these separate premises are testable, it would appear that they are demonstrably false. Whether they realise it or not, advocates of 'world population stabilisation' are devotees to a doctrine, not followers of facts.

Overpopulation?

Jared Diamond associates what he calls 'overpopulation' with 'more deforestation, more toxic chemicals, more demand for wild fish, etc', while Gore writes that an 'overcrowded world is inevitably a polluted one'—a verdict that many of those worried about world population growth would accept without reservation.

But 'overcrowding' is not as easily established as some might suppose.

Population density, for example, might seem to be a reasonable criterion for overcrowding. By that criterion, Haiti, India, and Rwanda (each with over six times the world's average population density) would be somewhat 'overcrowded'. Bangladesh—with almost 20 times the inhabited globe's average density—would be massively 'overcrowded'. By that same criterion, however, Belgium (2000 population density per square kilometre: 336) would be more 'overcrowded' than Rwanda (2000 population density per square kilometre: 289).

But the most 'overcrowded' country in the world would be Monaco. With a dire 33,268 persons per square kilometre in 2000, it 'suffers' a population density almost 40 times that of Bangladesh. Yet, as we all know, population activists do not agitate themselves about the 'overcrowding' problem in Monaco—or in Bermuda, or in Bahrain.

Moreover, it is hardly self-evident that there is any association at the international level between population density and economic performance.

Do other demographic measures provide a better reading of the population problem that so many take to be so very obvious today? Perhaps we might look at rates of population growth. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, sub-Saharan Africa was estimated to have the world's very highest rate of population growth, and sub-Saharan Africa is clearly a most troubled area these days.

However, if we look back in history, we will discover that the United States had an even higher rate of population growth at the end of the 18th century—in the decade 1790–1800, in fact, the US pace of population growth was 3.0 per cent a year. Some to-

day may believe that sub-Saharan Africa has too many people—but would they say the same about early frontier America?

The 'population crisis' that advocates of 'world population stabilisation' wish to resolve is impossible to define in demographic terms alone, because it is a problem that has been mis-defined. In most people's minds, the notions of 'overpopulation', 'overcrowding', or 'too many people' are associated with images of hungry children, unchecked disease, squalid living conditions, and awful slums.

Those problems, sad to say, are all too real in the contemporary world—but the proper name for those conditions is human poverty.

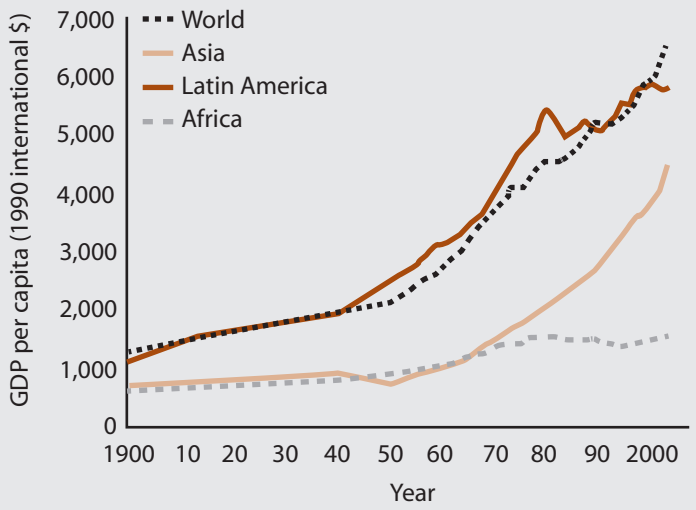
Is population growth unsustainable or unstable?

The relationships between population change and economic or political change encompass an extraordinarily broad and complicated set of interactions with an array of multi-directional influences, and consequential second-, third- and even higher-order impacts.

It is for this reason that the development economist Robert Cassen has described the state of current research trying to demonstrate a link between population growth and per capita economic growth as 'unsettled', writing that 'attempts to demonstrate such an effect empirically have produced no significant and reliable results…'

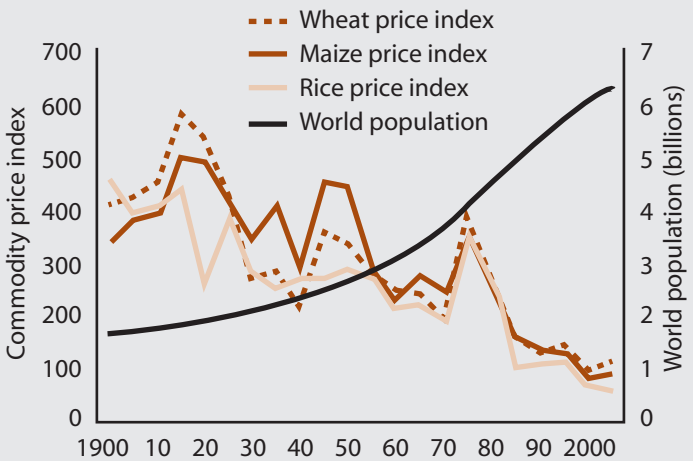
Between 1900 and 2000, human numbers almost quadrupled, leaping from around 1.6 billion to over 6 billion; in terms of pace and magnitude, nothing like that surge had ever previously taken place. But why exactly did we experience a world population explosion in the twentieth century?

Figure 1: Estimated GDP per capita, world and selected regions, 1900–2003



Source: Angus Maddison, 'Historical Statistics for the World Economy: 1-2003 AD,' Table 3: Per Capita GDP, available at http://www.ggdc.net/maddison/

Figure 2: World population vs. prices of wheat, maize and rice 1900–2003



Sources: Commodity price indicies: 1990-1984 compiled from World Bank data by Enzo R. Grilli and Maw Cheng Yant, World Bank; data for 1985-2003 compiled from World Bank data by Stephen Pfaffenzeller, University of Nottingham. (Adjusted for CPI inflation.) The author thanks Stephen Pfaffenzeller for providing this data. World population: US Bureau of the Census.

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It was not because people suddenly started breeding like rabbits—rather, it was because they finally stopped dying like flies.

Between 1900 and the end of the twentieth century, the human lifespan likely doubled: from a planetary life expectancy at birth of perhaps 30 years to one of well over 60 years. By this measure, the overwhelming preponderance of the health progress in all of human history took place during the past hundred years.

Among the most important proximate reasons for the global surge in life expectancy was the worldwide drop in infant mortality rates. In the early 1950s, according again to United Nations Development Programme estimates, 153 out of every 1,000 children born around the world did not survive their first year of life; by the start of the new century, that toll was down to 54 per 1,000.

Even in troubled regions, great advances in infant survival were achieved. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, the infant mortality rate is thought to have declined by over two-fifths, and Russia's infant mortality rate may have declined by over 80 per cent.

These sweeping and radical declines in mortality are entirely responsible for the increase in human numbers over the course of the twentieth century: the 'population explosion', in other words, was really a 'health explosion'.

Now, with respect to economic development, the implications of a health explosion—of any health explosion—are, on their face, hardly negative. Quite the contrary: a healthier population will clearly be a population with greater productive potential. Healthier people are able to learn better, work harder, and engage in gainful employment longer and contribute more to economic activity than unhealthy, short-lived counterparts.

There are, to be sure, explanations for this paradox—but the 'stabilisation' project's second premise, which holds axiomatically that population growth must result in resource scarcity, is hardly able to provide it.

The dilemma can be stated even more starkly: if the presumptions incorporated in that premise regarding the interplay between population growth, living standards and resource scarcity were valid, the twentieth century should not have occurred.

Anti-natalist public policy?

The third premise of 'world population stabilisation'—that birth rates must be lowered to alleviate the world population crisis and to mitigate the adverse economic, resource, and political consequences of rapid population growth—requires absolutely no substantiation if one is a true believer in the anti-natalist creed.

To the anti-natalist way of thinking, the purposeful reduction of birth rates (and especially birth rates in poorer regions) is an incontestably worthy policy objective—for, to this way of thinking, it is axiomatic that fewer births translates directly into benefits for present and future generations. For those who must be convinced that a problem exists before consenting to the public action proposed to redress it, that premise rests on their first two premises—and for the empirically inclined, as we have seen, those are shaky foundations indeed.

But even if we were convinced of the pressing need to take public action to lower global birth rates, it would not necessarily follow that the desired result could be achieved—or achieved at an acceptable cost—or achieved voluntarily. Here lies the pivotal importance of the fourth premise of 'world population stabilisation': for this tenet maintains that it is an established fact that 'population specialists' know how international birth rates can be lowered, and that these specialists can consequently provide policy-makers with reliable advice about the precise interventions that will bring about fertility declines.

In the final analysis, the single best international predictor of fertility levels turns out to be desired fertility levels—the number of children that women say they would like to have.

If a government sets population targets and wishes to stand a reasonable chance of achieving them, the mischievous independence of parental preferences means that wholly voluntary population programmes cannot be relied upon. If states, rather than the parents, are to determine a society's preferred childbearing patterns, governments must be able to force parents to adhere to the officially approved parameters.

Despite previously denouncing coercive and violent population control techniques, Jared Diamond in *Collapse—How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* praises the Chinese government's courage to 'restrict the traditional

freedom of individual reproductive choice…' It is this type of population control—coerced restrictions, forced abortion, infanticide—that apparently 'contributes to [his] hope' and 'may inspire modern First World citizens' to follow a similar path.

Whether they recognise it or not, every advocate of anti-natal population programmes must make a fateful choice. They must either opt for voluntarism, in which case their population targets will be meaningless. Or else they must opt for attempting to meet their population targets—in which case they must embrace coercive measures. There is no third way.

The grim and inescapable connection between population growth and mounting economic problems that is posited by today's anti-natal doctrine is hardly faithful to the actual record of global demographic and economic development over the past century.

But the apparent anxiety that some proponents of 'stabilising world population' experience in contemplating a future with 11 billion, 14 billion, or more human inhabitants of our planet may also be misplaced for a more prosaic reason—to judge by current trends, such levels may never be achieved.

The experience of the past four decades is worth bearing in mind. In the four decades since the early 1960s, global fertility levels are thought to have dropped by almost half: from a 'total fertility rate' (TFR, or births per woman per lifetime) of around 5 in 1960/65 to one of about 2.6 in 2000/2005. Over that same period, the average TFR for 'developing countries' is thought to have dropped by over half, from 6 to under 3.

The largely overlooked fact is that parents still caught in Third World poverty have been choosing to have ever-smaller families.

Fortunately for our perennially troubled planet, humanity's population demographic and development prospects appear to be seriously misconstrued by the pessimistic doctrine of 'world population stabilisation'. While the prevalence of poverty across the globe is unacceptably great today—and will continue be so in the future (after all, what level of poverty should be acceptable?)—humanity has enjoyed unprecedented and extraordinary improvements in material living standards over the past century, and over the past few decades in particular.

Those improvements are represented in the worldwide increases in life expectancy and per capita income levels that we have already reviewed.

The tremendous and continuing spread of health and prosperity around the planet betokens a powerful and historically new dynamic that anti-natalists today only dimly apprehend. This is the shift on a global scale from the reliance on 'natural resources' to the reliance on 'human resources' as fuel for economic growth. The worldwide surge in health levels has not been an isolated phenomenon. To the contrary: it has been accompanied by, and is inextricably linked to, pervasive and dramatic (albeit highly uneven) increases in nutrition levels, literacy levels, and levels of general educational attainment.

It is in ignoring these very human resources that so many contemporary surveyors of the global prospect have so signally misjudged the demographic and environmental constraints upon development today—and equally misjudged the possibilities for tomorrow.

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