

THE PROBLEM ISN'T OVERPOPULATION

AND THE FUTURE MAY BE DEPOPULATION

by Dr. Nicholas Eberstadt

THE CONVENERS OF THIS CONGRESS ASKED ME TO SUMMON THE DARK POWERS OF DEMOGRAPHY TO FORETELL THE WORLD POPULATION SITUATION IN THE COMING CENTURY. I MUST CONFESS THAT I WILL NOT BE ABLE TO DO SO BECAUSE WE HAVE NO RELIABLE WAY OF FORETELLING HOW MANY BABIES CURRENTLY UNBORN HUMANS ARE GOING TO HAVE. I WILL PRESENT TO YOU A SCENARIO FOR A PEAKING OF GLOBAL POPULATION IN THE NEXT CENTURY AND A LONG-TERM DECLINE THEREAFTER. SUCH A SITUATION IS ENTIRELY PLAUSIBLE.

FIRST, LET'S TAKE A LOOK AT the twentieth-century population explosion. Between 1900 and now, the world's population has roughly quadrupled from about 1.6 billion in 1900 to about 6 billion today. But the world's population in our century did not explode because human beings suddenly started breeding like rabbits; world population exploded because humanity finally stopped dying like flies. During our century, life expectancy has more than doubled, from perhaps 30 years around 1900 to about 65 years today. That health explosion is the reason for our great increase in population numbers. But over the century we've also seen something else. We've witnessed a phenomenon of long-term, steady declines in fertility. This process actually began two centuries ago, in France at the time of the French Revolution, and subsequently spread across the globe.

Projections by the U.S. Bureau

of the Census suggest that as of 1998 there were about seventy countries and territories around the globe where fertility levels, if continued, would eventually lead to a peaking and a decline of



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population (barring immigration). We call this "sub-replacement fertility." By 1998 about 44 percent of the world's population was living in countries with sub-replacement levels of fertility.

Moreover, in much of the world where above-replacement child-bearing still prevails, dramatic declines in fertility levels are currently underway. Rapid fertility decline is occurring in some surprising places. Take Iran, for example. Between the time of the Iranian Revolution in the late 1970s and today, fertility levels have dropped from seven to under three births per woman per lifetime. Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East are said to be areas resistant to fertility reductions. But there are countries in the Middle East that have already experienced almost a 50 percent drop in fertility over the past generation. There are also countries in Africa that are beginning a rapid fertility decline.

With all this in mind, let's take a look at the United Nations "low variant" world population projections. By this set of projections, the United Nations Population Division, a group of honorable statisticians within the UN Secretariat, traces out a peaking of world population around the year 2040, and then a subsequent population decline. This is, course, the "low variant"—just one of three alternatives currently outlined. But I want to show you that it's not at all an implausible one. Reaching depopulation would simply require a continuation of existing trends for another quarter century. What would a peaking and subsequent decline of world population portend? I will show you three implications of this. The first, inevitably, would be a rapid aging of the world's population. In the past, the median age for the world's population has been between 20 and 25 years. It is now about 26 years. By 2050, the median age for a depopulating globe would be about 42 years. In the more developed regions the median age of population would be over 50. That is to say: for every person under the age of 50, there would be someone over the age of 50. A complete transformation of the profile of the world would thus occur.

With the population explosion of the elderly there would be a tremendous change in what we could call the "pension burden," the ratio of people 65 and older to so-called working age populations of 15 to 64. In Japan, for every 100 persons of working age, there would be 70 people over the age of 65. How pension systems would operate in such a world is an open question. But even more

significant would be the question of pension burden in low-income countries. The more developed countries, after all, became rich before they became old. In this

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vision of the future, there are many places that would become old before they become rich.

Finally, we would see changes in the demographic balance between generations. Around 1950 there were about four children under the age of five for every person 65 or older in the low-income regions of the world. In this set of projections we would see four people 65

and older for every child under the age of five in those same low-income areas of the world. We'd be in a world where there would be many more grandparents than grandchildren. We could get into a new situation, one never witnessed before: the emergence of societies in which the majority of children would have no blood brothers, or sisters, or cousins, or uncles or aunts, societies in which their blood relatives are all ancestors.

This is not a totally remote possibility. For example, if the current Italian levels of fertility carry on for simply another generation, less than 10 percent of the population would have both cousins and siblings. How would a world work in which this transformation occurred? I confess that as a lowly social scientist, my imagination cannot stretch far enough to imagine this sort of world. But my imagination may be sorely tested, because this prospective depopulation that I have outlined could occur within the next 40 years. This means that most of the people currently alive on the planet could live to experience and see the consequences of depopulation and cope with them. The demographic specter haunting humanity tomorrow may turn out to be depopulation. *mf*

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