

In the 1990s, an alarmist but popular program was the need for zero population growth. Warnings were circulated that population growth was reaching disaster proportions, with the collapse of civilization imminent. This alarm was mostly ignored, especially in the lesser developed world, with many women having seven or more children. Civilization did not collapse, but overpopulation certainly did make the lives of many very unpleasant. Food crises were met quickly by the United Nations Food Program, with large contributions from the United States.

We all continued with the growth model of economics: that increasing populations meant more goods to sell, more workers to produce them, more innovation, and general prosperity as a result.

Almost unnoticed at first was the beginnings of declining populations, in some cases, drastically. What ushered in this change was the changing status of women. When women had choices over their own bodies, they chose to have no more than two children. This was true for the Middle East, where overpopulation had caused a decline in the quality of life. Arab countries and most of Africa were finding themselves in continual conflict, dogged by food insecurity and rampant abuse of women. The fertility rate of women in those countries began to drop from seven to five to two.

Politics played a role here as well. Russia's population dropped to half of its pre-World War II level. Communism provided little by way of contraceptives, but much in legal abortions. Women began to have only one child, which halved population growth.

Another fascinating fact was that authoritarian countries, always nasty to their female populations, found women opting for no more than one child. Every 20th century dictatorship (Russia, Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, Fascist Japan, Fascist Spain, and Fascist Greece) sounded the alarm that their populations were crashing. Dictatorships urged women to retreat from modern feminism to stay home and bear children "for the good of the country."

A new entry to the authoritarian camp was Turkey, and their elected dictator, in the name of "family support," condemned contraception, abortion, working women, and all things that interfered with women as child-bearers. Turkish women responded by doubling down, and the population continues to crash.

The Democracies were also finding it difficult to maintain the fertility rate of 2.1 children per woman. From the widespread use of contraceptives and even clandestine abortion, from the 1920s on, women opted for mostly two children, and a few for one or three. Without immigration from the most overpopulated and needy countries, they would not succeed in reaching the optimal growth model of 2.1.

The Growth model so loved by economists bared its underbelly in two world wars and numerous small conflicts worldwide. Population explosion certainly were factors in Nazi Germany, which began World War II for more "living room." Japan did likewise. Is the selling of more goods worth this price?

Economists have not yet addressed the possibility of life in a steady-state population, one perhaps half to two-thirds of today's numbers. But there is thinking already about the declining need for labor when artificial intelligence and robotics can do much work, freeing human beings from some of the most noxious labors.

Consider the benefits of human beings with a much smaller footprint. Consider highways without gridlock; uncrowded schools and universities; more open countryside between towns and cities, freed from urban sprawl. What kind of world will we have in the future when quality is more valuable than quantity. Consider the benefits to other creatures trying to live in our crowded world. Our parks, particularly the much loved National Parks, will benefit by reduced demand and hordes of visitors.

In recent discussions with my peers, all over 70, we remember our childhood worlds with fewer of us. We had better schools, better roads and streets, lovely countryside between towns and cities, and more personal relationships with doctors and other professionals in our lives.

It is time to plan for a different economy, one that is steady-state rather than needing constant growth. Population decline is a good thing, not a disaster.

Ask the Scandinavian countries how they are doing.

683 words

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