

Debunking Overpopulation Dogmas

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In “Population Sense and Nonsense. Everything the experts think they know about overpopulation is wrong,” Nicholas Eberstadt, formerly of Harvard and now at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C., challenges the conventional wisdom on “overpopulation” and “sustainable development” (THE WEEKLY STANDARD, 9/16/02, 29-33).

Eberstadt examines several “premises” of the overpopulation thesis, and finds them wanting. Three interlocked premises I will discuss here are (1) the world is in an overpopulation “crisis”; (2) the current rate of global population growth is unsustainable; and (3) from (1) and (2) it follows that reduced birthrates are the solution. Eberstadt avers that “All these premises are highly problematic. None of them is self-evidently true. Indeed, to the extent that any of these are testable, it would appear that they are demonstrably false.”

Premise #1. Neither population density nor population growth bears any relation to “overpopulation” or an “overcrowded” state. According to this criterion, Belgium is more “overcrowded” than Rwanda, the Netherlands is more “overcrowded” than Haiti, and Bermuda more “overcrowded” than Bangladesh. In fact, one of the highest population densities in the world (at 33,000 per square mile) is found in Monaco, a country that enjoys one of the highest standards of living anywhere in the world. Neither is population growth rate an obvious measure of a demographic crisis. At 2.5 percent per year, Sub-Saharan Africa was estimated to have the highest growth rate during the 1990s. Yet, at the end of the 18th century, the U.S. had an even higher growth rate: 3 percent per year.

Eberstadt notes: “In most minds, the notion 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 *poverty*. It is a fundamental lapse in logic to assume that poverty is a 'population problem' simply because it is manifest in large numbers of human beings.'"

Premise #2. As a matter of fact, taking the planet as a whole, the "explosive" population growth of the 20th century is associated with a remarkable increase in human welfare as measured by life expectancy, child mortality, and income per capita. "Between 1900 and 2000, human numbers almost quadrupled, leaping from around 1.6 billion to over 6 billion; in pace or magnitude, nothing like that surge had ever previously taken place." The reason for the increase, however, was not because people began to reproduce "like rabbits," but because, thanks to unprecedented improvement in medicine and health, they "stopped dying like flies." As a result, people's life expectancy doubled during the century, from a planetary average of 30 years to 60 years. Eberstadt argues that the so-called "population explosion" is actually a "health explosion."

An increase in health, however, should be associated with an increase in productivity: "Healthier people are able to learn better, work harder, and engage in gainful employment longer than unhealthy, shorter-lived counterparts." Indeed, "the health explosion that propelled the 20th century's population explosion was an economically auspicious phenomenon rather than a troubling trend." As a matter of fact, "global GDP per capita (in internationally adjusted 1990 dollars) more than quadrupled." Even in Africa, which lagged the rest of the world, "per capita GDP was roughly two and a half times higher in 1998 than it had been in 1900."

But, hasn't this increase in income and, hence, consumption, taken place at a rate that is exhausting world resources? As a matter of fact, no. There's no better measure of scarcity than commodity prices, and these have been *falling*, not rising, during the last century. Prices for widely consumed cereals (wheat, corn and rice) as well as of internationally traded metals have plunged between 70 and 80 percent since 1900. In other words, as the human population shot

up, food, minerals, and other resources have become not less but more abundant. This paradox is dissolved in the next paragraph.

Premise #3. For the “true believers” in overpopulation, those who take premises #1 and #2 as an article of faith, no amount of evidence will shake their Malthusian faith. But “for the empirically inclined--those who must be convinced that a problem exists before consenting to the public action proposed to redress it--the shakiness of the first two premises means there is barely any foundation to support the third.”

The fact is that there is no evidence that human population is exhausting the supply of resources. To the contrary, it appears that as humanity grows in numbers and in health, so does human capital, i.e., “the human potential to generate a prosperity based upon knowledge, skills, organization, and other innately human capabilities.”

I recall someone once pointing out that the relation of human beings to their supply of food is not the same as in other animals. For example, an increase in the number of birds of prey results in a decrease in the rabbit population; as the rabbit population declines, fewer birds of prey can live off of it, so this results in a decline in their number, which enables more rabbits to live, and so on.

But we human beings are not locked into those dismal cycles. The more of us there are, the larger the population of chickens, cattle, and other sources of food. So, it would seem, the greater our numbers, the greater our capacity to discover, extract, and produce resources, old and new, the better our managerial methods, and so on. Provided, that is, society is so organized and government is so constituted that individuals and associations are free to apply their minds and hands to economic problems--and reap the rewards of their effort and inventiveness.

As Julian Simon, another dissenter from the overpopulation dogma, put it, the ultimate resource, one which is as fertile as it is inexhaustible, is the human mind.