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The eReview provides analysis on public policy relating to Canadian families and marriage.



A review of the *Demographic Bomb*

Released July 2009, the documentary highlights the history and consequences of population control

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When World Population Day came and went on July 11, it was with all the requisite fear mongering about there being too many people on the globe. [1] This accepted view—the fear of people falling off the globe causing grave environmental damage even as they go—is not true. Under population is in fact likely the more pressing problem in our future, not merely in rich industrialized countries, but everywhere. This sounds so foreign as to be false, which is evidence of the ubiquity and success of Malthus and his modern followers—those who believe societal ills could be staved off were there only fewer people on the planet.

Enter *Demographic Bomb*, released on July 1, 2009, a documentary highlighting the history, threat and dangers of population decline. It's part two to *Demographic Winter*, [reviewed here](#). The documentary highlights how even the United Nations is predicting a global population decline by 2050 and questions why and how it is we simply never hear of this reality.

The documentary makes, put very simply, two major points. There are not too many people on this earth, and efforts to control population have oftentimes been coercive and anti-democratic, intrusive, invasive and dangerous for different cultures which depend entirely on family—and large ones, at that—for wellbeing. It's the worst of a modern form of colonialism to assert that they'd all be happier with 2.1 kids, a white picket fence and the Saturday edition of the *New York Times*. But for cynics on that notion, perhaps the second point is more critical: Even if the population did “explode”—why are people the problem?

The movie cites experts who show that demographic decline is not associated with economic wellbeing. The past century has seen the largest population growth in global history, yet simultaneously, the standard of living has risen and life expectancies have increased across the globe as well. [2]

A growing population is associated with economic wellbeing, points out Gary Becker, the 1992 winner of the Nobel Prize for economics. “Adam Smith wrote,” he says, citing the renowned economist, “that prosperity is associated with growing populations and [depression] is associated with declining populations.” [3]

Matthew Connelly, a history professor at Columbia University and author of *Fatal Misconception*, a book about attempts to control the global population, [4] adds that Malthus was wrong in his predictions of mass starvation due to a rising population because people don't merely suck life out of the planet. "The reason [Malthus] was wrong," he says "was because every new person brings not just a mouth to feed but also two hands to help." Across the globe today, abject poverty is highly correlated with bad government, not "too many people."

Still, Malthus has a long shadow. The modern equivalent of his *The Principle of Population* might be Paul Ehrlich's *Population Bomb*, which was published in 1968 and was quickly popularized by non-demographers and the media. [5] Ehrlich predicted mass starvation. "The battle to feed all of humanity is over," wrote Ehrlich. "In the 1970s and 1980s hundreds of millions of people will starve to death in spite of any crash programs embarked upon now." [6] That this prediction did not come true has not put the kibosh on overpopulation talk.

Still, Malthus, Ehrlich, even Margaret Sanger, the founding godmother of Planned Parenthood and a proponent of improvement of the human race by ensuring undesirable populations are not born—none of this would be enough if individuals had not also privately wanted fewer children. In developed nations, the fear of overpopulation fed into private decisions with little to no coercion. Says Jennifer Roback Morse, formerly a professor of economics at Yale University, "[t]he zero population growth movement would not have gotten off the ground except that people had a personal interest in wanting to control their own fertility in the first place. It gave them a rationalization for having sex without having babies." Birth rates fell, as did marriage rates. Sex without the corresponding responsibility of children has always sounded like a good idea—now it would be a moral mandate to save the planet.

United Nations graphs reveal a prediction of a declining global population by 2050. [7] The graphs show that the prediction for the zero to age 14 category fall slightly off, while the older age ranges increase—likely due to the fact that people today live longer. Indeed, another demographer, Nicholas Eberstadt, points out why it may appear that we have a "population explosion" today. "The reason the world has experienced a population explosion over the last century is not because human beings started breeding like rabbits," he says in the film. "It's because they finally stopped dying like flies."

Demographic Bomb has numerous shortcomings, not the least of which is the unnecessarily alarmist affect of the narrator—even the basic facts are put forward with conspiratorial overtones, making her into a caricature of another kind of person—those who fearmonger about demographic implosion. Will the housing market ever rejuvenate? *Not likely*, says the low voiced female narrator, portending worse things to come. Throughout the film one is also left with the sense that we're all too late to the table because population decline is irreversible. If that's the case, then what's the point? The documentary becomes a mere footnote to clarify how our cultures died.

Some valid questions also go unanswered. Yes, the developing world is in population freefall, but does this necessarily imply long term recession? How might the market be able to self-correct? Is it not largely public pensions and state-run social security that will go bankrupt? Do we not perpetuate population decline by the very existence of socialized

programs? (Who needs to have a family in old age when pensions are generous and health care is free?)

Still, taking this topic on is no small feat and necessary to overturn the existing clichéd concern for overpopulation by reducing fertility. There is a nefarious history to population and fertility control—the coercion and the eugenics. Then there's the more well intentioned efforts to bring about a higher quality of life for everyone. But as Connelly writes in his history of population control, "when people set out to save the world, the devil is in the details." [8]

The devil, as it turns out, is also in the overarching worldview. Are people a burden or a promise? Modern, developed nations, now digging their own graves, have already decided. It's a question of whether we care enough to change the prevailing zeitgeist for places where the trend can still be changed.

Endnotes

[1] Cayo, D. (2009, August 1). Growing pains. While population growth in Canada and other rich countries may be stalling, people in many other parts of the world are still multiplying like mad. *The Star Phoenix*, p. E1.

[2] Riley, J.C. (2001). *Rising Life Expectancy: A Global History*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

[3] Stout, R. and McLerran, B. *Demographic Bomb*, an Acuity Productions Film. Available for purchase at www.demographicwinter.com

[4] Connelly, M. (2008). *Fatal Misconception*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

[5] Phillip Longman, demographer says in the film that the myths of the *Population Bomb* were perpetuated by non-demographers and the media. Paul Ehrlich, for example, is a biologist.

[6] Ehrlich, P.R. (1968). *The Population Bomb*, as quoted in the documentary, *Demographic Bomb*.

[7] United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA). World Population Prospects: The 2006 Revision. (2007, March 7). Retrieved August 5, 2009 from http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/wpp2006/FS_ageing.pdf

[8] Connelly, p. 8.