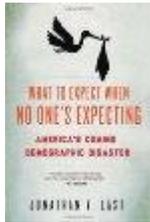




University Bookman

Debunking the Demographers



[*What to Expect When No One's Expecting: America's Coming Demographic Disaster*](#)

by Jonathan V. Last.

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Demography can be dull; to call it unimaginative would be to give it too much credit. But then there is Jonathan V. Last, who upends the demographic genre with *What to Expect When No One's Expecting*, a work of dark humor that undertakes social science with honesty, wit, and razzle-dazzle statistics. One of the surprising joys of reading him entails unlearning: much of what you know about population, he reveals, just isn't so.

The habits of taking something for granted, of supposing it true without any proof, are called, in the vernacular, “assumptions,” and it is always thrilling to discover and correct them. Last generates this thrill so often that he'll cause you to question the convictions and expectations of over a generation of demographers: No, the people of the world are not multiplying beyond excess; we aren't becoming overcrowded; we will not run out of food; we won't even run out of jobs. On the contrary, we are running out of people, if anything.

And this is a bad thing, Last submits, because the proximate consequences of shrinking populations are war, disease, and economic stagnation. “[S]ub-replacement fertility rates,” he says, “eventually lead to a shrinking of population—and throughout human history, declining populations have *always* followed or been followed by Very Bad Things.” He adds that “these grim tidings from history may be in our future, since population contraction is where most of the world is headed.” He doesn't provide much in the way of historical examples except to reference the Dark Ages and quote from Adam Smith, but his point is well taken.

A fertility rate of 2.1 is necessary for population numbers to remain steady. The American fertility rate is at 1.93. The rates for other industrialized countries, especially in Europe, are lower. Even the so-called Third World is reproducing at lower rates than before. As Last explains, “In 1979, the world’s fertility rate was 6.0; today it’s 2.52. From a current population of 6.9 billion, the United Nations and others predict that world population will peak somewhere between 10 billion and 12 billion in the next 85 years and then begin the long, inexorable process of shrinking back down.” Thomas Friedman would have been better off, it seems, saying that the world was “shrinking,” not flat.

In America, Hispanic women are having the most babies, followed by African-American women. American whites are having the fewest babies. The ethnic composition of America is bound to change over the next generations, but even minority populations are having fewer children. Last claims that the overall decline is due to America’s “One-Child Policy,” which is unofficial, unlike the Chinese One-Child Policy, which is official. He puts it this way: “As a result of One-Child, the fertility rate in China is roughly 1.54. In America, the fertility rate for white, college-educated women—we’ll use them because they serve as a fair proxy for our middle class—is 1.6. In other words, America has created its very own One-Child Policy. It’s soft and unintentional, the result of accidents of history and thousands of little choices. But it has been just as effective.”

America’s One-Child Policy is a cultural symptom, not a direct government mandate. I say “direct” because certain government mandates—seat belt and carseat laws, for instance—have affected population numbers, and other factors for declining birth rates are indirectly related to government policies. Such factors include birth control and abortion, women in the workforce, financial burdens brought on by Social Security and Medicare, and the astronomical costs of raising children. Not only is there a “baby industry” bubble, reflected by the high prices of baby furniture, clothes, accessories, and toys, there is also a tuition bubble as education costs have escalated at all levels from preschool to college.

Last estimates that the costs of raising a single child in America exceed, on average, \$1.1 million. Despite the enormous financial sacrifices parents have made, their children—there was a time when college students were “adults,” but Last includes them in the category of “children”—nevertheless fritter away their twenties by binge-drinking, hooking up, smoking dope, borrowing massive federal loans to finance their lavish lifestyles, voting Democratic, cohabiting, and, in some ironic cases, hating their parents for obsessing over money.

American households today have more pets than children. Not that there is anything wrong with pets; it’s just that pet culture has displaced the culture and recreation of traditional families. There are restaurants and hotels for dogs and cats. If you want your pet groomed, you can take her to a beauty salon to get her a perm or a manicure. Gentrified parks have sprung up for dog owners, who detest any child trying to use the doggy playground, which, after all, was not made for kids. A recent bill before Congress contemplated tax breaks for—get this—pet-care expenses. We have, it seems, begun to disregard the important theological, philosophical, and scientific distinctions between humans and animals, and the result has been to reduce our population and degrade our concept of the family unit.

The fuss in the 1960s and 1970s was all about how population was exploding and how government could not keep up. It appeared everyone was worried that the planet was at maximum capacity with no sign that humans were reducing their reproduction rates. Call it divine plan or intervention, evolution, spontaneous order, or whatever—there appears to be a regulating power beyond our control that has reined us back in and slowed us down. We just aren't making babies like we used to.

Last views decreasing population not so much as a crisis, but as something to be deeply concerned about. Last is in favor of facts, and too often our cultural elites have ignored facts about population and sustainable societies in favor of an ideology of individual self-fulfillment and liberation. It can be very pleasant, for some, to live at the end of a cultural era; but it is nevertheless an end. Last is concerned that we fully understand the implications of what we as a culture have done, and not believe progress in one field means progress in all others. Yes, education, for example, is a good, and it is good that more people now have access to it. But that also has meant more time is spent being educated than creating families, and that has negative consequences for a society that should be recognized along with the good consequences.

Aristotle, that sober champion of moderation, indicated in *The Politics* that the population of a *polis* should not be so big or small that a government cannot carry out civic functions with ease and utility. All of the citizens, he said, should know each other personally. A *polis* of this scale is nothing like the Leviathan we have today. “The greatest surveyable number required for achieving a life of self-sufficiency”—that is how Aristotle describes the optimum standard of population. Perhaps we're moving in the right direction after all. Although in light of Last's observations about culture—the pet idolatry, abortions on demand, cohabitations, costs of raising children, delayed maturity, and so on and so forth—we seem to be moving in that direction for unhealthy and in many cases immoral reasons.

If Aristotle is wrong about the optimum standard of population, then surely we are getting what we deserve and suffering the consequences of bad decisions, unethical policies, and narcissistic attitudes. But even if he is right, as I believe he is, then it is too late for us to enjoy the pleasures and comforts of a smaller, more fitting scale of human life, for an optimum society must be virtuous, not just moderate in size, and virtuous we are not.

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