

An Essay on Depopulation

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In 1798, Thomas Malthus published the first edition of *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. He began with two postulates. It seemed safe for him to say:

1. Food is necessary for survival, and
2. The passion between the sexes will continue.

Malthus drew the dismal conclusion that population will increase faster than food production, inevitably leading to hunger, unrest, war and famine. When he first published his idea, the world had slightly under a billion people. By 1960, it was up to 3 billion. With the population explosion of the 1960s, this worry returned. Paul and William Paddock used an exclamation point in the title of *Famine 1975!* (1967), Paul Ehrlich wrote *The Population Bomb* (1968), and the Club of Rome issued *The Limits to Growth* (1972). A few years later, after China put the Cultural Revolution behind and began opening up to the outside world, these Western concerns about population and natural resources received a hearing in Beijing. The result was the One Child Policy, which has been mentioned in this journal before.¹

In the 21st Century, I think I may safely make two postulates:

1. Competition is necessary for the survival of the fittest.
2. Thanks to advertising, people will continue to shop passionately.

I draw the dismal conclusion that urban residents will not reproduce themselves. China is becoming more and more urbanized. So the People's Republic will be one of many countries where the population will age, peak in numbers, slowly decline, and then shrink exponentially, decade after decade, dragging economic growth down with it. The reader is free to challenge my logic. I hope that time will prove me wrong.

¹ Michael J. Sloboda, "China's Population: Frozen Policy and Creeping Aging," *Tripod*, Vol. XXXI, No.163 (Winter 2011), pp. 57-64.

Modern Life Will Not Become Less Competitive

Competition is necessary for the survival of the fittest. A little competition keeps people from becoming lazy. In the days of the rural People's Communes, farm productivity was low, while in the cities, the Iron Rice Bowl system made it almost impossible to fire a slacker. Cooperation was constantly stressed, and anyone who worked harder than average to get ahead personally was denounced as a "capitalist roader."

Competition motivates people, yet too much of a good thing is not a good thing. Today, people sometimes work hard enough to slump dead at a fairly young age in front of a computer. More often, workers get ulcers. A child born in 1997 has much more hope than one born in 1957 or 1967. His parents felt that he/she had to enroll in a university, yet the burden of homework in secondary school and the stress of the entrance exam results in mental breakdowns or even suicide. Nothing on the horizon suggests that life will become less competitive at the individual, family, or international level.

Scandal Makers was a hit film in South Korea in 2008. A rich, fun-loving bachelor about age 40 answered the doorbell and saw two strangers: a young woman and a little boy. The woman said, "Do you remember your teenage classmate, Miss X? She was your first girlfriend. She's my mother." The bachelor then looked down at the youngster, who smiled and said, "Grandpa!" The boy went to kindergarten dressed poorly, and his classmates laughed at him. So his grandfather took him to an upscale shopping mall for expensive hair styling. Then he bought him name brand clothes and shoes. When the boy returned to kindergarten looking like a millionaire, his classmates treated him with respect. After several melodramatic ups and downs, the film had a happy ending. The bachelor was happier with his family than he ever was with his girlfriends. South Korea has enormous "soft power" around the world, especially in China.

Scandal Makers is a pro-life film: it does not mention abortion. It also makes the point that the younger generations are precious, and adults can find great joy in caring for children and grandchildren. However, it is an anti-simple life film: both children

and adults need to dress rich in order to receive respect from their peers.

Competition begins early in life. Not every family can buy expensive clothing, a piano, and the best private tutoring for their offspring. Add the cost of rent and tuition, and many couples decide to stop at one child. A few are discouraged to the point of forgetting about even one child. In economics, this is called "demand destruction." Raise the price of petrol enough, and people will combine trips to drive less, or buy a smaller car. Raise the tax on cigarettes and raise it again, and the number of smokers will decline. As the cost of children soars, that destroys the demand for babies. The government sees the need for a higher birthrate; otherwise the labor force will decline while the number of senior citizens soars. But will the state tax the rich to provide day care, and free kindergarten for the children from non-rich families? In Hong Kong, such income transfers would contradict the policy of "small government, large market." Everywhere in the world at the macro-level, the problem is how to avoid bankrupting the nation. At the micro-level, the family level, the problem is how to compete with the neighbors.

A single parent is at a disadvantage in buying things for a child, and in having spare time to help with school homework. Children born outside of marriage are called "privately born." They constitute only a couple of percent of all children born in East Asia. During the high tide of the One Child Policy in the early 1980s, they were almost nonexistent. The birth rate in Korea, Japan, Taiwan and Hong Kong has been low for the past couple of decades. Both business people and officials are worried; some are now worried enough to reconsider the age-old stigma against unwed mothers.

Competition hurts both men and women. After finishing their education, men complain they cannot attract a girlfriend unless they have a high enough salary to purchase a flat. But at least a man does not get the door slammed in his face during a job interview for being male. "Women also meet with discrimination when they look

for a job...We often read about young women in Beijing spending large amounts of money to go through plastic surgery.”²

Advertizing Will Continue to Suppress the Birth Rate

Thanks to advertising, people will continue to shop passionately. If ads did not increase sales, then companies would stop advertising and save money. Ads stress enjoyment, immediate satisfaction, and instant gratification. People without money hear and view such ads, and then they feel even more stressed out. Raising a child entails years of sacrifice, a word that is absent from commercials. Sacrifice and self-control cannot be reconciled with consumerism.

Consider a thought experiment. To reduce competition, increase good relations among neighbors and lessen the anxiety of bringing a child into the world, consider an ad campaign on TV. In a rich apartment building, two men and their sons, all fashionably dressed, are waiting for the elevator. The ad needs to feature men, because child-rearing is not just the mother's responsibility. The father of the older boy says to the other man, "My son has some clothes he can no longer wear. They are still in good condition, but too small for him now. Would your son like to wear them?" The other man says: "That would be wonderful. Thank you!" The boys both smile to uplifting music. A narrator says, "For a more cooperative, less competitive society, and to protect Planet Earth, do not throw outgrown clothes into the rubbish. Instead, donate them to your neighbor's child."

Will the central government produce and air such an ad? Probably not. If people are given used clothes for free, they will not buy new clothes. Consumer spending will decrease. Clothing factories and stores will scream at their diminished volume of sales. A lobbyist will pay a social worker or psychiatrist to say on TV, "Second-hand clothing is harmful to a child's self-esteem. Classmates will laugh, and the result will be a lifelong sense of

² MC [Sr. Maurcen Corr MM], "God created women and men in his own image," *Sunday Examiner*, April 20, 2014, p. 11.

inadequacy. Parents, if you love your children, never let them wear hand-me-downs, not even from an older sibling.”

Bombarded by advertising, the poor and middle classes want to live like the rich. They dream of eating, drinking, dressing and travelling in style. But they cannot afford to reproduce like the elite, assuming the elite are motivated to reproduce. It's easy to find a society where the top 20% of the people control 80% of the wealth. Imagine a place where exactly enough babies are born to keep the population stable, and the wealthiest 20% have 80% of the babies. Slightly more boys are born than girls naturally, and not every baby lives to adulthood, so a fertility rate of 2.10 is needed for the population to remain on a plateau. Let's keep the math simple and say 2.00. If 100 couples (200 adults) have 200 babies, then the richest 20 couples have 160 babies (8 per family), while 80 couples have 40 babies (0.5 per family). Impossible! Even with a low-tech mistress here and a high-tech surrogate mother there, the rich cannot breed like that. If the poor and middle class cannot afford a second child, the rich minority cannot cover the shortfall. Has anyone ever gathered statistics to support that last statement? The raw data on births is kept in the office of Vital Statistics, and a number of agencies track net wealth in society. With computers, someone should be able to correlate the data and conclude, for example, that the richest 20% have 23% of the children under age 15 while the middle 20% have only 17%. Even if the answer is stamped State Secret, someone high up in the government needs to know it in order to adjust the national population policy. Redressing the imbalance by subsidizing kindergartens or rent for housing will not be cheap. It will entail transferring wealth from the rich to the middle and to the poor. Vested interests will fight to stop such subsidies.

Imagine if China were to go from a One-Child Policy all the way to a Three-Child Policy. A few families would opt for that many offspring. Yet many people would remain either single and childless, or married and childless (either due to poor health or to personal choice), or else married with one only child. The net fertility would be less than the replacement level. The total population would coast to a peak and then start to decline, as is already happening in Japan and in some European countries. South

Korea will soon follow. Chinese couples are complaining about the cost of raising a single child. Many will reluctantly forego the legal permission to have a second child. To compensate themselves, they will buy a dog or a cat, play computer games, shop and travel to the extent they can afford.

The previous paragraph talks of children per family. Divorce and remarriage complicate the picture. Demographers gather statistics and discuss fertility in terms of children per woman. It's easier to get an accurate count of children per woman than children per man. Government officials (usually men) forget that men also have a role to play.

In the USA, some families have 4, 5 or even more children. The highly fertile do not quite outbalance the childless or one-child families. The USA now relies upon immigrants to keep growing. China is so huge that opening the door to tens of millions of foreign workers is not an option, even if it were socially acceptable. Hong Kong has decided not to grant the Right of Abode to overseas domestic employees. Citizens in many nations feel threatened by an influx of strangers, whether maids or Ph.D.'s. Friction between locals and newcomers is a global issue, regardless of the nature of the government.

Two religious alternatives: Shia Muslim and Catholic Christian

The Islamic Republic of Iran and the People's Republic of China are both geographically on the continent of Asia, yet politically, economically and religiously they are on different planets. In terms of population, both nations rapidly made the "demographic transition" from the pre-modern norm of high birth rate, high death rate and short life expectancy to low birth rate, low death rate and long life expectancy. Now Iran also is facing a population explosion of senior citizens. The parliament in Teheran is debating whether to ban vasectomies, tighten rules on abortion, encourage large families, and so double the population from 75 to

150 million.³ Iran is internationally isolated, and a trade embargo is choking economic growth, but its leaders have an ace up their sleeve: they can appeal to religion. No one will appear on Beijing TV and address the nation as follows: “Because of hostile foreign forces, our economy is not growing. In 25 or 30 years, your children might be only slightly better off materially than you are. At least they will not starve. We have a large territory for the size of our population, and we can grow more wheat. So, parents, have confidence and have 4, 5 or 6 children. If they will never be rich on earth, no problem! They will enjoy paradise for eternity. Parents! You are not merely providing citizens for the nation; you are producing saints for heaven. God will provide.”

Whatever the Iranian Dream might be, the Chinese Dream will either be realized on this earth, or not at all. In a theocracy, having a baby is a command from God. In a consumer society, giving birth is a lifestyle option. Will there be a baby boom in Iran? The next several years will provide the answer.

In Hong Kong, the Catholic Diocese offers the Choice Weekend to help young adults discern their vocation in life, plus the Engaged Encounter to prepare couples for the ups and downs of marriage. Birthright offers women with problem pregnancies an alternative to abortion. The Cardinal’s Easter Pastoral Letter restated the teaching that “marriage and family is the original blueprint for God’s plan for creation,” and included several paragraphs for “those who have failed in their marriage and family life.” Our Cardinal is also concerned with those who are separated from their families year after year because of working overseas.⁴ Christian love and fidelity offer alternatives to gambling, alcoholism, adultery and domestic violence. When families benefit, not only do individuals feel less pain, but society as a whole benefits. Long-range benefits include fewer lonely, childless elderly,

³ “Iran weighs new laws to double population,” *South China Morning Post*, Thursday, April 17, 2014.

⁴ John Cardinal Tong, “Let us pray for all families and the forthcoming Synod of Bishops,” *Sunday Examiner*, April 20, 2014, p. 1.

and fewer seniors who are estranged from their children because of family conflict and divorce.

The Pastoral Letter is well aware of the problem of people exiting marriage. It does not mention those who are willing but unable to enter marriage. High rent and a limited number of well-paying jobs compel many grown children to keep living with their parents. When those “kids” can finally afford a big wedding ceremony and their own small flat at age 35, the new couple might have two children, usually one, and sometimes not even one baby. The stress of urban life and the biology of human aging combine to suppress fertility. The church cannot pay the rent for those who want to get married, but Catholics can and do work with others on social problems such as high rent and long working hours. Unlike in the old days, a good percentage of today’s young adults seem destined never to get married. Under the circumstances, God seems to be calling more people to remain single for life. Should the Diocese establish a Commission for Single Adults?

A dismal conclusion

There are immediate and long-term benefits to reducing the pressure on modern families, and thus easing the competitive, negative-sum game which is 21st Century child-rearing. If it becomes less stressful to raise a family, not only will children and parents be happier, but more people will have a second child, and society will have more workers and consumers in 20 years. But during those 20 years, parents must shop for essentials and ignore luxury items. This will inflict pain on all those who offer luxury goods and services. Advertisers will react by becoming even more creative in enticing people to spend for non-essentials. People, both atheists and religious believers, will continue to face a barrage of ads to consume and to enjoy life. This is a global phenomenon. This or that government can employ slogans and TV ads to promote childbirth for the future of the nation. Those slogans and ads will be marginally effective. They will nudge the birthrate slightly higher. However, I predict that those efforts will prove to be largely wasted overall. The seductive, pro-consumption propaganda of the market is winning the battle in country after country. Outside of North

Korea and perhaps Iran, consumerism has attained the de facto status of a universal human right.

The government in Beijing was strong enough to impose a drastic, overnight fall in the birth rate on the broad masses of the people. No other authorities on this planet had then or have now the will power and the muscle power to copy China's One Child Policy. A third of a century later, not even the Chinese government is strong enough to raise the fertility of urban consumers to replacement level. Reversing demographic trends is not as easy as flipping on a light that was earlier switched off.⁵ China is becoming increasingly urban, and thus it cannot escape the fate of other wealthy nations: fewer children, more seniors, peak population and then irreversible decline.

Finally, I hope that something is missing in this short *Essay on Depopulation*, just as Thomas Malthus overlooked something critical in his *Essay on the Principle of Population*. Can the reader spot it?

⁵ Dr. Anthony Lam, Holy Spirit Study Centre, personal communication, Feb. 2005.