

Aesthetic Values of Population Policy

BY WILLIAM DICKINSON

Population policy isn't just a matter of numbers; it's also about aesthetics. Too many people in a country or a city destroy "the nature of the beautiful"—in this case, a society that can maintain quality of life for all people. A world caught in an historic economic downturn needs to rethink the flawed model that equates unbridled growth with endless prosperity.

Will the new frugality lead to decisions, national and personal, promoting a sustainable society built on new habits of conservation and proportion? Happily, the voices of those who seek a balance between consumption and resources seem to be gaining an audience. Population aesthetics speak to our best hopes for clean air and water; new health-care initiatives; protection of public space; and careful planning of new commercial and residential projects.

But hopes run up against the reality of pesky numbers. U.S. Census projections show our population growing from today's 306 million to 409 million in the next 40 years. Birthrates here and elsewhere may decline during recession. Immigration, however, could well increase in coming years as population pressures elsewhere force millions to seek livelihoods in the United

States. Projections have it that today's world population of 6.7 billion people will balloon to more than 9 billion by mid-century.



Before we worry about the impact of runaway birthrates in Africa and the Muslim world, we should look close to home. Even places touted as vacation getaways show the impact of too many people on natural beauty. I recently drove from Los Angeles Airport north along the Pacific Coast Highway to take a look at Malibu, a 21-mile strip of a city that has become synonymous with Hollywood celebrities at play. The 45-minute drive is painful, involving manic highways to nowhere.

Malibu has no discernible center of town. Beaches are hidden by chockablock villas that back onto an ugly commercial highway. Chain-link fencing prevents public access to much of the ocean. Coastal bluffs are dotted with imposing private estates, but where is the neighborhood? This is the place that a *New York Times* travel-section profile enthusiastically describes as "a sun-drenched state of mind." And, oh, well-heeled visitors will also find "a world-class art museum, local wines, top-notch restaurants and chic shops." The storied sprawl and population growth of Los Angeles County threatens to continue, despite the flight of fed-up Californians to such places as the eastern slope of the Rockies.

We are running out of places to hide from ugliness. Frosty Wooldridge, a resident of Colorado, recently wrote in a column: "Denver, where I live, suffers a 'brown cloud' so thick with toxins that every breath fills my lungs with poison air. Our traffic proves a daily nightmare of accidents, road

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rage and wasted hours sitting in bumper-to-bumper frustration. I-70 heading into the mountains makes a weekend getaway a nightmare. Returning proves a study in aggravation. Throw in our water shortages and you've got quality of life racing to the bottom...."

Population aesthetics involve not just the conservation of natural beauty but the preservation of human dignity. Science fiction writer Isaac Asimov put the matter in stark terms: "Democracy cannot survive overpopulation," he said. "Human dignity cannot survive overpopulation. Convenience and decency cannot survive overpopulation. As you jam more and more people into the world, the value of life not only declines, it disappears. It doesn't matter if someone dies. The more there are, the less one person matters." And, I would add, the less a desperate public cares about preserving the beauty of the landscape and the sanctity of the sea.



Environmentalists often have been slow to see the connection between population and a healthy planet. They tend to focus on the symptoms of environmental problems instead of the causes. They want to strengthen laws restricting land development, for example, but ignore the role that population growth and natural resource consumption play in causing the problem. George Plumb, executive director of Vermonters for Sustainable Population, recently wrote that "Some issues, such as landscape beauty, are not being addressed much at all."

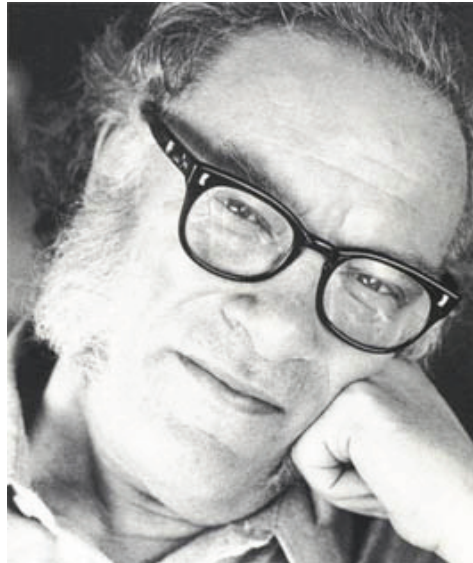
It would help if environmentalists and all of us would step outside conventional thinking and develop a deeper critique. Apologists for ever-bigger population have stepped up their fear mongering by arguing that aging of the global workforce

will undermine economic growth down the road unless birthrates increase. It is true that the number of people over age 60 is projected to reach 1 billion by 2020 and almost 2 billion by 2050. But declining fertility rates may help counterbalance this shift. In addition, suggests David Bloom of the Harvard School of Public Health, older people will be healthier than previous generations and may usefully remain in the labor force longer. Along with an increased female labor force, these offsets could lighten the economic burden of global aging.

Meantime, America's penchant for babies continues apace. Teen birthrates in 2006 rose for the first time in 15 years—with the highest rates in Mississippi, New Mexico, and Texas. A second report from the National Center for Health Statistics highlighted the fact that the 4,317,119 U.S. births in 2007 topped a record first set in 1957 at the height of the baby boom. Fertility rates were higher in every racial group, the highest being among Hispanic women.

Oblivious to the implications for our well-being, TV "reality shows" such as "Jon and Kate Plus 8" and "18 Kids and Counting" continue to send the wrong message.

Population aesthetics remain a hard sell. Growth advocates rarely express any interest in the beauty of the structures being built or the land undergoing development. Our definition of "infrastructure" needs to include projects that will preserve our cultural patrimony. Local, state, and national parks, in particular, should be expanded to relieve chronic overcrowding that prevents visitors from enjoying the outdoors in its natural state. Most of all, citizens need to be aware that overpopulation remains the greatest threat to the dream of America the Beautiful. ■



Isaac Asimov