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# Toward 150 Million Americans

Book Review by Daniel C. Abel

A friend of mine, a part-time stand-up comedian, has but a single version of his performance. It is far easier to find a new audience, he explained, than a new routine. Similarly, most of the content and message of *How Many Americans?* is not new to population scholars. What is fresh is that the authors, both population experts, have written a provocative analysis of both present and projected population growth and the resulting societal and environmental effects that is very convincing, and have packaged it in a thoroughly readable, compact publication. If this book finds its way into the hands of the public, educators, and policy makers, then perhaps at long last meaningful, reasoned discussion of population — the real parent of all environmental issues, if you will excuse the pun — can begin.

The approach of the authors is simple and direct. They examine the current population of the U.S. (261 million) and assert that by any standard we have already exceeded our carrying capacity by as many as 100 million. A 4-page section entitled *The Statistics of Degradation* presents a litany of population-related environmental problems (e.g., acid rain, erosion, loss of old-growth forests). Critics might find the presentation oversimplified and superficial and the conclusions too sweeping (e.g., *Our agriculture and household wastes are poisoning the wetlands and wiping out our coastal fishery* [p. 15]), but hardly controversial.

Here is where the authors truly do the non-specialist reader a service. Many Americans, even the college-educated, display a fear of numbers that hinders their ability to understand complex issues, including environmental ones. The consequences of this fear are an inability to evaluate critical data, and a reliance on others, such as sophistic radio talk-show hosts and demagogues, for opinions. In *How Many Americans?* only the most essential, widely-accepted numbers are given, and they are repeated frequently enough so that they should become incorporated into the reader's memory, or at the very least become familiar. They include: current annual rate of population growth in the U.S., 1.3%; total fertility rate for non-immigrant Americans, 1.9; for first-generation immigrants, 2.7; current yearly immigration: about 1 million, plus 300,000 illegal aliens who settle permanently in the

U.S. illegally each year. (The Total Fertility Rate [TFR] is the *completed* family size — the total number of children born. Replacement fertility is an average of 2.1 children per couple.)

In chapter 4, *Alternate Demographic Futures*, these rates are used to project the U.S. population into the next century under four basic scenarios: doing nothing, reducing fertility, reducing immigration, and reducing both fertility and immigration. The percentage that each variable is reduced in the projections varies, and is not unrealistic (e.g., total immigration reduced by about 50% to 500,000, or 80% to 200,000). What emerges from these calculations and projections is that any effort to maintain our current population level into the future or reduce it cannot be successful without decreases in both fertility and immigration. These conclusions

should come as no surprise to readers of *The Social Contract*, but they may be new to those not participating in the population debate. To reach the author's optimum population of 150 million by the end of the twenty-first century, fertility must decline to 1.5 (perhaps an unrealistically low number) and total immigration must be reduced to 200,000 annually, according to the authors.

The final chapter, *The Diverging Roads Ahead*, compares the laissez-faire approach to population control to one emphasizing managed reduction by decreased fertility and immigration. Again, the argument is made that doing nothing is likely to have dangerous, perhaps irreversible repercussions.

A few words on the presentation of the immigration issue are in order. Immigration reform creates very strange bedfellows (not unlike the GATT-induced Ralph Nader-Patrick Buchanan affair). It is also an issue where latent or conspicuous racist or xenophobic motives cannot be successfully camouflaged. With only a few exceptions, the authors deal with this issue skillfully and sensitively, labeling it as the moral dilemma that it is. In fact, the discussion makes it legitimate for a leftist in good standing to favor controlling the U.S. population by, among other things, cutting both legal and illegal immigration, without ideologically sleeping with

HOW MANY AMERICANS?  
POPULATION, IMMIGRATION,  
AND THE ENVIRONMENT  
by Leon F. Bouvier  
and Lindsey Grant  
Sierra Club Books (1994)  
174 pages, Hard cover, \$18.00

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If the presentation on immigration had not been objective throughout almost the entire book, I would have been suspicious about a few questionable statements, such as: *Just as some Americans are "pro-children" but value quality over quantity, so too some are "pro-immigrant" and, again, prefer quality over quantity. This does not make them racists* (p.113). Perhaps not, but if quality means Europeans and quantity means Haitians or Guatemalans, and it might in our Newt-ered society, then that statement needs rethinking.

I was also somewhat disturbed by the list of deterrents to illegal immigration "worth considering" (p.118), among them proof of citizenship as a condition for entering into contracts or obtaining professional licensure. These are not as severe as Proposition 187, but they're within spittin' distance.

Does *How Many Americans?* successfully avoid controversy? Not really. For example, the book explicitly states that immigration is particularly harmful to inner city Blacks, since they are outcompeted for jobs by immigrants more than happy to work long hours for extremely low wages. The powder keg that became the L.A. riots had its roots here, according to Bouvier and Grant.\*\* Yet, David Cone, writing in *The Nation* (Oct. 17, 1994) asserts that immigrants actually create more jobs than they take — some 78,000 in Los Angeles County between 1970 and 1980. Whether the authors or Cone are correct is obviously important but is of little consequence in the overall debate, because there is so much more verification of the effects of immigration on population levels that one is left with little choice but to accept that we cannot correct our course without immigration reform.

The book's few other distractions are due largely to its brevity. Thus, there is a reliance on broad generalizations in place of fully supported assertions. Some parts, e.g., sections on multiculturalism and national identity (p. 146), are weak and oversimplified. Since the book is a call to arms, it would have benefitted from a chapter on how to convince business leaders and politicians that the issue of population transcends all other environmental issues. But perhaps that's what the entire book is for. Send a copy to your legislators. Better yet, get a copy into the hands of your

chamber of commerce, city and county councils, planning commissions; send a copy to your children's teachers and to their school library.

One wonders about the extent to which this book's message will be ignored in this Age of Newt. With our hearts, minds, and souls we should strive to reduce or stabilize our population by combining reduced immigration and fertility with changes in our consumption-intensive, profligate lifestyle. Instead, the government likely will now promote unfettered consumerism and kamikaze economic growth with renewed vigor, and cultivate population growth through a proposed \$500 tax credit per child.

Whatever the future, the authors have given their best effort here. They have avoided a pedantic approach to the subject of the carrying capacity of the United States (the title notwithstanding) and have substituted a very effective, short readable, factually correct, straightforward analysis without a political agenda. I hope it finds its "new" audience. ■

\*\* [Editor's note: And also according to Jack Miles. See his "Blacks vs Browns" *The Atlantic Monthly*, October 1992, pp.41ff.]