

FEMINISM, MIGRATION, AND POPULATION POLICY: A LETTER TO MY FRIENDS

An NPG Forum Paper
by Lindsey Grant

The human population on Earth has quadrupled in the past century. It is degrading the capability of Earth's natural systems to support us. Mathematically, that astonishing growth must stop. How it will stop, and at what level and condition, is thoroughly obscure, but there are changes afoot.

Two fundamentally different and conflicting forces are driving world population change right now. The feminist revolution is driving fertility down in the more prosperous nations, as women discover new interests and opportunities beyond child bearing. It is now far below replacement level. Barring a sharp rise in fertility or massive immigration, it will lead to rapid population declines. On the other hand, fertility remains very high in the least developed countries, where people face a brutal choice between starvation or emigration. If they manage to emigrate, and propagate, they will replace the diminishing cohorts of the prosperous nations, a process with unpredictable consequences perhaps foreshadowed by the hostile German reaction to the recent influx of Syrian refugees.

Fifty years ago, population growth was seen as a major problem by much of our political leadership, including President Nixon. It has dropped completely off the screen. Growth is the reigning mantra, ignoring the scientists who are documenting the damage that population growth is doing to the Earth's life support systems.

This essay is addressed to my fellow population activists in hopes of revitalizing an epochally important cause. Changed circumstances call for an approach very different from the past. I will start by summarizing what I believe is happening, and then offer some suggestions as to how we can best achieve our goal of population decline to a truly sustainable level.

OVERSHOOT: THE GREAT HINGE IN HUMAN AFFAIRS

(I am indebted to William R. Catton, Jr. for the term and a seminal book: **Overshoot: The Ecological Basis of Revolutionary Change**, 1982.)

The quadrupling of human population has been accompanied by comparable or greater growth in consumption of renewable and non-renewable resources.

It would be remarkable if such growth – on a finite planet – did not generate huge dislocations. Indeed, they are under way, and documented elsewhere: anthropogenic climate change, rising sea levels, warming and acidification of the oceans and the loss of corals and other nurseries of marine life, more intense storms and droughts, the looming decline of fossil fuels, growing scarcities of essential non-fuel minerals, shortages of fresh water and receding water tables, desertification, intensified competition for arable land, the continuing loss of forest area and

quality, changes in the character and distribution of species (including human pathogens), and more crowded and conflicted societies.

In our fixation on lesser issues, let's not forget that, barring an external cataclysm such as the Cretaceous extinctions, these are the central changes that are shaping the future of our species. They are driving the rising tensions we see around us. They threaten the most basic of human needs: food. Present populations – to say nothing of those projected – will not be sustainable.

And it is happening in an instant of geological time.

Suddenly, we must confront the question: how many people can exist at a decent level, in a sustainable world?

FERTILITY AND THE FEMINIST REVOLUTION.

Driven by goals unrelated to the population debate, feminists have staked out a view of fertility that may be our best hope for population reduction.

The change in women's roles has been remarkable. They did not even get to vote in U.S. national elections until 1920. Now, they topple CEOs and politicians with the simple charge of past sexual aggression. The new assertiveness has characterized the United States and the so-called developed world, and it is spreading even in the most conservative countries of the third world.

A major consequence of this transformation is demographic. As women gain rights and assert them, they are finding identities for themselves that far transcend the traditional role of motherhood. Fertility declined as the new horizons opened up. Women's fertility (TFR) worldwide was 5.01 children in 1950-55. It is

now 2.5. Such a fundamental behavior change in three generations is a remarkable change for any species. For the "more developed regions", the figures dropped from 2.84 to 1.7. For the "less developed regions", from 6.16 to 2.6. The U.S. figure for 1950-55 was 3.45. It sank in 2017 to a record low of 1.76. (May 2018 data from the CDC National Center for Health Statistics.)

Replacement level fertility is about 2.1 children, without immigration.

I cannot prove causation, but the correlation between the feminist revolution and the decline in fertility suggests that the new attitude is driving the decline, along with the parallel improvements in women's education, property rights, access to jobs, and improved communication among women in different societies.

That decline has been achieved, not by political "leaders" or population activists, but by women contemplating their own interests and deciding how many children they will have. It is a powerful force.

THE DEVELOPED WORLD: UNWANTED POPULATION DECLINE.

I have cited women's average fertility in the "developed" countries: 1.7, far below replacement levels. Some "developing" countries are even lower. Taiwan, South Korea and Singapore are far down at 1.2. We don't know when and where the trend will stop, but there is no sign yet of an end. To the contrary, the loss of jobs to robots and technology suggests lower fertility ahead.

Absent massive immigration, the population of these nations will stop growing within a few decades, and then begin to decline. It is already declining in 18 countries, although all but one of them have pro-natalist policies. (2010-2015 data.)

Alarmed by the prospect of decline, and wedded to the idea of growth, the governments of 62% of the countries with fertility below 2.1 have adopted pro-natalist policies. Others are neutral. Only 2% have policies to lower population growth. Population activists calling for population reduction are not going to win any votes from the other 98%.

The U.S. Government now takes no explicit position on population growth, but its constant generalized exhortations to promote “growth” strongly suggest that it favors population growth, despite our various programs – remnants of an earlier attitude – that would tend to slow it. Neutrality, like overt pro-natalism, is an effective bar to the policies that the population community seeks, and anti-growth advocates in international meetings don’t get very far without the support of their government.

That all leads to some startling ideas about the role of advocacy. I will return to that thesis below.

THE “LESS DEVELOPED COUNTRIES”: MIGRATORY PRESSURES.

The feminist revolution has yet to reach much of Africa and the Middle East. Fertility remains very high, particularly in the poorest “least developed” nations. Many of them still average five or more children. In Niger, the rate is 7.6. Such fertility levels are the driving force in the continuing growth of world population, and a source of the desperation that leads people to emigrate.

The U.N. Population Division in 2011 projected that 58 “high fertility” countries’ population will rise from 1.2 billion now to 4.2 billion by 2100, and from 18% of world population to 42%.

Even that calculation requires an heroic decline in their average fertility from 4.9 children to 2.1 by 2100. That is a bleak calculation, indeed. It represents a 67% decline in countries where fertility has hardly gone down since 1950. Even with such an extraordinary decline, there would be three billion more people in 2100, and still growing – in agricultural economies that are already severely over-loaded. Think Yemen.

I don’t think the numbers will get there, or anywhere near it, because starvation will drive mortality up. People will be desperate to migrate to less impoverished lands. The turmoil in Syria began with a drought. It is a harbinger of turmoil to come. The Syrian exodus to Europe was just a beginning.

– **and the Resistances.** That exodus triggered a violent reaction in Europe, the culmination of long-standing popular anger at European governments’ permissive view of immigration. The reaction was so intense and widespread that it forced governments, most notably in Germany, to retreat from what they had seen as a liberal policy of welcoming foreigners.

That sort of anger lies very close to the surface in most of the “richer” countries, including the U.S. The conflict between the common folk and the political elites exists throughout the developed world. In the U.S., Democrats and Republicans alike, serving the very rich, ignored the warning signs. Rather than leave it to demagogues to mobilize that anger, the population movement has an opportunity to mobilize it as a vehicle to make our point about the ills of growing populations.

PROPOSED POLICIES.

So we find the world in growing turmoil, with different nations’ interests and goals intersecting and conflicting, particularly on migration issues.

In this section, I shall attempt two things: (1) identify the policy positions and actions that will help to bring human populations in line with the Earth's carrying capacity, and (2) suggest how to gain allies in that project.

The infertile and fertile countries have very different problems. They need very different solutions. Population activists should respond. In brief, we can stop worrying about fertility in the prosperous countries, but we should take a much more aggressive position on “overshoot” and the need for population decline. We should promote the feminist revolution in the poor countries, as a means of stopping runaway population growth. In the United States, we should focus on the immigration issue.

The Low Fertility Countries. The feminists have done our job for us. Fertility levels are low enough, on average, to lead to population decline in the immediate future, and average fertility is still declining. The population movement does not need to waste its energy in pressing for lower fertility in those countries.

The pro-natalist government policies I mentioned may not pose a serious practical threat. They probably won't succeed. They have a long history of failure in Europe, and they will be facing the feminist opposition described above.

The population movement has every reason to support the programs and policies that have led to the fertility decline. But it is a secondary focus. The ladies will protect their gains. Count it, however, as one way of courting the feminist movement in hopes that they will come around to supporting our view of population growth.

Eventually, the population movement may well change and call for raising fertility, not lowering it. Otherwise, our descendants will face the prospect of extinction or replacement by immigrants from poorer countries. But not

now. That is a campaign for another time, when human population has declined and with it the human pressures on natural systems. I have earlier described what I think may be a sustainable world population: 500 million to one billion – a decline of roughly 90%. That would take us back to the level at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in the 1700s, when the human drain on non-renewable natural resources was negligible, and land, water and the forests seemed infinite. (NPG FORUM paper “Capitalism: Growth, Greed and Collapse”, 2014, pp. 4 and 5.) That is an ambitious target, and a long way away.

Immigration from poorer countries is the key source of population growth in the prosperous countries. The Pew Foundation has estimated that Immigrants, their children and grandchildren constituted 55% of U.S. population growth since 1965. They forecast that from now until 2065, 88% of U.S. growth will come from immigrants and their descendants. That may be conservative. Given the decline of U.S. fertility, immigration may convert a population decline into continuing growth in 2065.

The Center for Immigration Studies forecasts an even higher percentage by 2060: 96%.

Such calculations are almost universally ignored in the interminable U.S. debates about immigration policy. We must persuade our government to take migration much more seriously than it has been, or it will continue to drive our population growth.

Immigration is an issue that can be treated only at the national level. If we lecture other countries about it, we will be seen as meddling. However, the proposed focus on migration will enlist allies among the “middle class” here and in Europe. The rise of ultra-nationalist parties testifies to the fears people have of increased competition in the job market.

– Single “solutions” will fail. We need a major shift in mindset and a number of approaches to forestall and contain migration. Simplistic approaches such as the proposal for a massive wall along the Mexican border will simply miss most of the problem. Most immigrants are legal immigrants and overstayers of temporary visas. There are many potential ways to immigrate, and many ways to deal with it. We should let reason, not politics, decide how many immigrants there should be, and how to enforce that decision.

I have pointed out the failure of both the major U.S. parties to listen to public opinion on immigration, as they seek to please the wealthy and powerful who profit from growth. That attitude alienated a large part of what we used to call the common people and now call the “middle class”. The alienation provided an opening for demagogues. If the population movement supports reduction of immigration as a means of protecting American jobs, it will tap a potent source of support for our broader message on population.

The High Growth Countries. I have described the pro-natalist tilt of the developed world. The opposite state of mind prevails in the more fertile countries. Governmental alarm at population growth has been growing. All countries with TFRs above 5.0 have policies to lower fertility, as do 64% of those with TFRs from 2.1 to 5.0. (UN Population Division PopFacts 2017/10) This provides a set of ready-made allies who want to do what we would like to help them do.

We can help those countries play out the feminist revolution.

Let me identify some specific ways that we can help to bring their fertility down. “Less developed countries” run the gamut. Many of them are escaping the fertility trap and prospering. Others are mired in high fertility.

We can offer suggestions, and assistance, that will benefit them all.

Herewith some suggestions:

- Promote and help to finance access to modern contraception.
- Do the same for women’s education.
- Support efforts to assure women’s property rights.
- Assist local efforts to assure women’s right to vote and hold office.
- Do the same for women’s access to jobs.
- Help to finance small-scale credit programs (such as the Grameen banks) to help women to start little businesses (chicken and egg raising, textiles, etc.).

We should promote women’s exposure to the advantages of smaller families. Help people in poor countries to realize that women elsewhere enjoy better lives. Promote that exposure by helping poor countries to sponsor dispersed small power sources (mostly solar and wind) which provide power for lights, radios, cell phones and TV receivers in villages and homes. Perhaps we can persuade population groups to sponsor soap operas propagating modern ideas of sexual equality, family planning, and a sense of self worth. The Population Media Center already sponsors such programs.

These things can be done on a shoestring, compared to the foreign aid programs of the past half century, which focused on the wrong things: massive investments in the modern sector that in turn generated overwhelming problems in maintaining infrastructure. Focus instead on these humbler efforts.

This approach requires a certain modesty in our approach. Use others’ suggestions where possible. Give them the credit. Outsiders can be

the source of ideas and money, but the sponsors in the recipient country should be seen as local.

The beauty of this approach is that helping to lower fertility in poor countries makes a better life possible for them, even as it removes the immigration pressures on the prosperous countries. We all would benefit.

The Migration Issue. Helping the poor countries bring their fertility down and thus achieve a population turnaround would be good for them and good for us. On a shared Earth, we have good reasons to do what we can to help them. But let me offer a central caveat: trying to absorb their population growth harms us without doing them any long term good, because it doesn't address their high fertility. We have no obligation to absorb large flows of migrants in an effort to rescue them when they fail.

Most migration is driven by desperation. Many Americans who welcome the migration believe they are doing the moral thing. But welcoming mass migration does not solve the problem. It causes it to metastasize.

The issue is particularly poignant if we have a sense of community, and the Earth is the community. Any humane person will sympathize with the people trapped in the most over-populated countries. But finally, they must solve their own problems themselves. They must find ways to bring their fertility down to levels that the Earth can support. And the measures I suggested above represent, I think, the most effective ways to help them.

As to the claim that people have a right to migrate: even the UN Convention on Refugees – a thoroughly pro-migrant and now archaic document – speaks of the right to leave one's country, not the right to move where one wants.

Courage, Comrades! Let me summarize the approach that I believe the situation calls for.

– Hammer the “overshoot” theme. The reason we advocate smaller populations is precisely because the Earth is in a condition of overshoot. We will win the intelligentsia if they come to accept that proposition. We will win the underprivileged by persuading them that population reduction would help them to obtain the things they seek, such as food and decent jobs. And I think most people would accept population reduction as a goal, once they realize that welcoming mass migration is far from painless.

– Don't settle for “population stabilization”. U.S. population policy groups have retreated to anodyne names (e.g. Population Crisis Committee to Population Action International, Zero Population Growth to Population Connection). Or their titles call simply for stabilization (e.g. Californians for Population Stabilization; Scientists and Environmentalists for Population Stabilization; Center for the Advancement of the Steady State Economy.)

Individual U.S. population activists frequently have the same problem. They recognize that present population levels are impoverishing the Earth, but they call only for “population stability” – i.e. perpetuate the problems we now have. That is a modest goal indeed. Timidity will not create the world we seek.

I urge more candor. “Stabilization” is hardly a battle cry. It is a comfort word for the cautious.

So far as I know, only Negative Population Growth states a bolder purpose out front.

We are faced with declining resources and a deteriorating environment. To establish a truly sustainable pattern of living, we must call for population reduction, not simply stabilization. We will be met by yawns and indifference if we continue to offer stabilization as a goal. Even worse is the target, frequently heard, of “a gradual slowdown of population growth toward

stability”. That may avoid offending people, but it hardly moves them. And the feminists are already ahead of that schedule. Indeed, population growth will be reversed, but nature will reverse it if we cannot sell a less painful solution. The task of the population movement, baldly stated, is to sell the idea of voluntary reduction through lowered fertility and – yes – control of mass migrations.

A footnote here: we may need to find a more powerful word than “sustainable”, which has been bowdlerized into meaninglessness. The popular phrase “sustainable growth” is an oxymoron. Continual growth on a finite planet is an impossibility and an absurd goal. What about “durable”? To me, it has a more muscular flavor. Readers may have their own suggestions.

– The population community needs to get its act together. Right now it tends to be fragmented. We are a very small fish in the political pond. We would be much more effective if we got together on a menu of policies that all can support. As a starter, let me cite The Center for Immigration Studies’ checklist of immigration policy changes it considers most important: limit family immigration to spouses and minor children; make E/verify mandatory; end automatic citizenship at birth; change refugee protection to focus on helping refugees in place. (Mark Krikorian, ‘phone call 9-13-2018) If the community could arrive at such a list, and coordinate their efforts to bring about those changes, we might be heard.

This does not require that we march in lockstep. For example, there is no consensus as to what truly sustainable population levels might be, and that is probably a good thing, but it should be possible to agree that the numbers should be smaller than they are now. We will be heard more widely if we weigh in together when actions are proposed that would raise population.

Perhaps a periodic get-together to coordinate policies would be a good thing.

– Enlist scientists and environmentalists. Scientists identify the limits to growth, but they usually don’t make the population connection, perhaps to avoid getting beyond their specialty. We need to convince them that they have an interest in airing the connections. Environmentalists used to support the population community, but the major organizations retreated for fear of losing big donors. We need to win them back to the population issue, which is often the key to addressing the environmental issues they wrestle with.

A good example of making the connections is John Bongaarts & Brian O’Neill’s article “Global Warming Policy: Is Population Left Out in the Cold?” (*Science* 8/24/2018, which is just the kind of forum to reach scientists and environmentalists.)

– The Virtues of Compromise. Keep a sense of humanity. Don’t alienate our opponents. Win them over. The migrants and would-be migrants are acting from motives that moved our own ancestors. We allowed them to come and stay, legally or illegally. An effort to evict people who we have allowed to come and stay for decades generates opposition proportional to their integration in the communities they live in. It can be a firestorm. Focus on malefactors, bad elements (gang members) and recent arrivals who have yet to establish themselves here (and who are not always welcomed by earlier arrivals.) Most important, try to rewrite the laws so as to forestall future mass migration. There is a lot of it on the way.

NOTES ON SOURCES

All data, and the rather artificial categories, are from the UN Population Division except as noted. See particularly World Population Prospects (various years), World Population Policies, 2009 and 2013, PopFacts (various dates).



About the Author: Lindsey Grant is a writer, former NSC staff member, State Department Policy Planning Staff member, and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Environment and Population Affairs, in which capacity he proposed and served as the Department of State Coordinator for the Global 2000 Report to the President. His books include: *Valedictory: The Age Of Overshoot*, *The Collapsing Bubble: Growth and Fossil Energy*, *The Case for Fewer People: The NPG Forum Papers (editor)*, *Too Many People: The Case for Reversing Growth*, *Juggernaut: Growth on a Finite Planet*, *How Many Americans?*, *Elephants in the Volkswagen*, and *Foresight and National Decisions: the Horseman and the Bureaucrat*.

© 2018 by Lindsey Grant. Permission to reprint is granted in advance. Please acknowledge source and author, and notify NPG.

The views expressed by the author do not necessarily reflect those of NPG.

This Forum, as well as other NPG publications, can be found on our website at www.NPG.org.



Negative Population Growth, Inc.
2861 Duke Street, Suite 36
Alexandria, VA 22314

Phone: (703) 370-9510
Fax: (703) 370-9514
Email: npg@npg.org

**SIGN UP TODAY AT WWW.NPG.ORG
TO RECEIVE NPG COMMENTARY ONLINE!**

Board of Directors

Donald Mann, *President*
Josephine Lobretto,
Secretary/Treasurer
June Bauernschmidt
Frances Ferrara
Sharon Marks

NPG Executive Office
Craig Lewis, *Executive Vice President*

© 2018, Negative Population Growth, Inc. Permission to reprint is granted in advance. Please acknowledge source and notify NPG.

All NPG publications are available online at www.NPG.org.