

Angus Deaton on Population Growth and Development: Globalization and the Greatest Escape, Chapter 6

Source: Deaton, Angus (2013). *The Great Escape: Health, Wealth, and the Origins of Inequality*. Princeton University Press. Kindle Edition.

Foreign aid is often designed to reduce population growth and migration, but this is not your focus, I assume. Melinda Gates is correct, contraception can empower women,

https://www.ted.com/talks/melinda_gates_lets_put_birth_control_back_on_the_agenda

and see their 2014 Annual letter myth 3,

<http://annualletter.gatesfoundation.org/#section=myth-one>

But it is also the case, as Deaton (2013) argues, (p.246) that the idea that over population slows development is one of the greatest academic-intellectual errors recent times. In fact its intellectual roots may have racism as best, and Eugenics at worst. Until 1965, U.S. immigration policy was driven largely by the same prejudices.

Growth, Health, and the Population Explosion In the six decades since the end of World War II, there have been unprecedented reductions in mortality rates and unprecedented increases in life expectancy (described in Chapter 4), together with the rapid growth in average incomes described earlier. Yet this miracle was far from universally predicted at the time— in fact quite the reverse.

When knowledge of the germ theory of disease brought pest control, clean water, vaccinations, and antibiotics to the poor world, it saved millions of lives, especially the lives of children. Sparing those children brought rapid increases in life expectancy and pulled life chances in poor countries closer to life chances in rich countries. Millions of children lived who would otherwise have died. Alongside the universally welcomed increases in life expectancy came millions of additional people—an increase in global population that was far from universally welcomed. It took most of human history, until the early nineteenth century, for world population to reach a billion people. The two billion mark was reached around 1935, only a century and a quarter later, and three billion by 1960, only thirty-five years later. Instead of slowing down at that point, world population in 1960 was growing at 2.2 percent a year, the highest rate in history and enough to make population double every thirty-two years. The claim that population was exploding was no exaggeration.

The population explosion caused general alarm in the 1960s, among the general public— at least in the rich countries— and also among policymakers, academics, foundations, and international organizations. Much of the concern was humanitarian; many poor countries already appeared to find it hard to feed their populations, so that adding millions more would surely make things even worse. It was as if a poor family, having scraped and scavenged just enough for a meager meal, found a dozen hungry relatives at the door. mass starvation loomed. Visitors to India in particular were horrified by the obvious— to them— overpopulation and were appalled at the prospect of adding hundreds of millions more. And indeed, it is easy for first-time Western visitors to be horrified by the poverty and disease in the slums of Delhi or Kolkata; by the beggars, the lepers, the crippled children; by people defecating in the street, and simply by the sheer mass of humanity. How could it be that the addition of yet more people would not make all this even worse?

National security was also a concern. Rising poverty would surely provide a fertile ground for communists— as had already happened in China— and the United States and its allies needed to do what it could to stop the dominoes from falling. Less attractive motives surely also played some role. Concerns about the “quality” of the population had long been a focus of the eugenics movement. Even if eugenic ideas were less popular and respectable after the defeat of Nazi Germany, the possibility that poor, uneducated people should multiply so much more rapidly than rich, educated people seemed to pose a threat to the future of mankind . At the extreme, the enthusiasm for controlling the population of Africa and Asia owed much to the skin color of those whose population was to be brought under control. So it became an object of policy— by countries in their foreign policy , by international organizations in their lending, and by foundations in their giving— to “help” the world’s poor to control their populations by having fewer children. What the world’s poor— the people who were actually having all these babies— thought about all this was not given much consideration.

Why should it have been so universally thought that more people meant poorer people? It may seem obvious that if the world’s food and other goods are shared among more people there will be less for each person. Economists like to call this the lump fallacy: the notion that there is a fixed “lump” of “stuff,” so that the impoverishment that comes from adding

numbers is simply a matter of arithmetic, just as it is for the poor family who have unexpected visitors for dinner. Of course, even this analogy breaks down if the unexpected visitors bring food with them, so that the communal meal may well be better (both nutritionally and socially) than the one that was originally envisaged. The question of impoverishment by numbers is not a question of arithmetic; it is a question of what the new people add, not just what they cost. Perhaps the simplest narrative is that each mouth comes with a pair of hands— too simple for sure, but a better approximation to the truth than the lump story, in which each new person comes with nothing.

We also need to recognize that the African and Asian children who were causing the population explosion were, in the vast majority of cases, children who were wanted by their parents. At the time, even this conclusion was sometimes disputed; people were seen as slaves to their sexual passions, and children were the unfortunate but unavoidable consequence. Certainly, not everyone everywhere has access to convenient modern contraception at low cost, but there is overwhelming evidence—if indeed evidence is required—that on average, if not family by family, people want the children they have, with their own good reasons for having them. The story of unbridled passion provided a convenient rationale for what “we” wanted to do, which was to “help” poor people have fewer children than “they” wanted but “we” did not. No one presented evidence that people wanted such help or that having fewer children would improve their lives. Quite the contrary.

That parents want more children does not necessarily mean that more children are good for society; there may be consequences that parents do not know about, or that they know about but choose to ignore. Children might impose costs on other families. When the costs are borne by the family itself, we see serious crimes perpetrated by a modern government against its people. It is not even clear that the policy has been effective: fertility has fallen much further in Taiwan, by exactly the same amount in Thailand, and almost as fast in southern India, and in none of those countries did governments coerce people or violate their deepest and most personal life choices. In spite of the prophecies of doom, the population explosion failed to plunge the world into famine and destitution. On the contrary, the past half-century has seen not only the decrease in mortality that caused the explosion but also a mass escape from the poverty and deprivation that the population explosion was supposed to cause.

What happened, and how could we all have been so wrong? Not everyone was wrong. The economist and demographer Julian Simon consistently challenged the doomsayers, making uncannily correct predictions about future plenty using arguments that are much more widely accepted today than they were at the time. In his *The Ultimate Resource*, Simon argued that the real source of prosperity is neither land, nor natural resources that might one day be exhausted, but people.¹⁰ Not only does each new mouth bring with it a future worker—which in the long run would make average incomes independent of population size—but it comes with a creative brain. The new ideas that come from some of these new brains are good not only for their owners but also for all of mankind. If having twice as many mouths and twice as many pairs of hands leaves everyone with the same as before, the extra minds can figure out new ways to enable all of the hands to do more. \

Of course, not every newborn is going to be an Einstein, an Edison, or a Henry Ford, nor is every new idea useful for everyone. But because ideas can be shared, not everyone has to be a genius, and any idea that can be applied elsewhere benefits all those who use it, not just the inventor. More children may bring new costs to others—all those schools and clinics—but they also bring benefits in terms of the new ideas and new ways of doing things that are the ultimate basis for economic growth, the tools for the Great Escape. And those benefits might easily outweigh the costs. If so, the world was twice blessed by the health improvements in the 1950s and 1960s—once because of the increase in life expectancy and once because of the explosion of global knowledge and creativity that came with the explosion in numbers. The economist and demographer David Lam, in his magisterial 2011 presidential address to the Population Association of America, identified the keys to global prosperity in the face of record rates of population growth.¹¹ One key was a fall in fertility: In the face of unprecedented declines in the mortality of their children, families reduced their numbers of children. Parents cared not about the number of children who were born but about the number who survived. The children who would have died in previous times no longer “needed” to be those countries and places where it could be done most efficiently. Limited resources were conserved or substituted for. The price system plays a central role in creating incentives; if nonrenewable resources are becoming uncomfortably scarce, their prices will rise, and people will either make do with less, make substitutions, or direct technical change to find ways of doing without the particular resources altogether.

Economists are often accused of trusting the price system altogether too blindly, and that is sometimes true. Yet both economists and their critics agree that there are great dangers when important resources have no prices, so that, in spite of

their value, they are available to users at no cost. Without prices, there is no incentive to economize on such goods. The most important example today is global warming, which, if not addressed somehow, will pose one of the greatest threats to the continuation of the growth of global prosperity.

The misdiagnosis of the population explosion by the vast majority of social scientists and policymakers, and the grave harm that the resultant mistaken policy did to many millions, were among the most serious intellectual and ethical failures of a century in which there were many. Deaton (2013, p. 246).

Contraception itself was not the problem. Contraceptives have allowed couples to tailor their fertility to benefit themselves and their children, and the ability to cheaply and effectively regulate fertility has brought better lives to women around the world. As with most innovations, the first beneficiaries were in the rich countries, and this situation opened up a global inequality. Closing the gap by making the new methods available around the world was rightly seen as a priority and held the potential to do great good in the same way that antibiotics and vaccinations do great good. What was deeply wrong was the coercion and the loss of freedom for millions. Rich countries, in the name of helping the poor, were complicit in the coercion. Instead of helping to eliminate a global inequality they added to it, creating greater global injustice. Some harm was done by mistake, and many policymakers and scientists believed that their diagnoses and prescriptions could help poor people. Yet the mistakes were made more likely by the interests of the rich countries themselves—their fear of what life would be like for them in a world with more poor people, and that the population explosion would bolster global communism.

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