

Making Democratic Babies

By JOEL E. COHEN

Will America bomb out in the bedroom?

Since the early 1970s, the people of the industrial democracies have not been having enough children to replace themselves. For a population with low death rates and no net migration to replace itself, the total fertility rate needs to be about 2.1. The TFR is a composite measure of the birth rates in a given year; it estimates the average number of children ever born per woman. Currently, the TFR in the industrial democracies is 1.8.

By contrast, the industrial communist nations have fertility modestly above replacement. Third World countries have a TFR of 4.1. The U.S. had a TFR of 3.8 in 1957 at the peak of the Baby Boom.

In his new book, "The Birth Dearth: What Happens When People in Free Countries Don't Have Enough Babies?" (Pharos Books, 192 pages, \$16.95), Ben J. Wattenberg warns America that he thinks these figures portend a serious threat to democratic civilization. Mr. Wattenberg is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and was a member of the U.S. delegation to the International Conference on Population in Mexico City in 1984.

Slower population growth at home means slow-growing domestic markets (fewer starter houses and baseball mitts) and relatively more old people. Innovation may suffer, he says: The number of working-age people per retiree will fall from five in 1985 to 2.5 by 2035. America's pay-as-you-go Social Security system will be in big trouble.

An increasing proportion of American college-educated women (who are largely of white European origin) are ending their fertile years with one child or none. Mr. Wattenberg argues that these women are overlooking an important cost of not having children, namely, that the white European share of the U.S. population will shrink, at current fertility and immigration levels, from 80% now to 60% by 2080. Mr. Wattenberg does not want to sound racist, he says, but wants to forestall the social turbulence that he expects to follow such a shift in our population.

In 1950, 22% of the world's population lived in industrial democracies; in 1985, 15%. According to the projection, by 2100, 5% will live in industrial democracies. Nine-tenths of the world's people will live in the Third World.

The relative demographic decline of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization nations compared with the industrial communist nations could lead to a Finlandization of Western Europe, he says. Democratic values need large and powerful nations to assure their continued spread through the world.

What to do? Imitate Eastern Europe, Mr. Wattenberg says, and have the federal government spend massively to increase fertility. (How about paying women \$2,000 per year per child under age 16? he asks.) Press for day care at the job site. Forgive or defer college loans of graduates who have a baby soon enough. "Gently"

inform women who seek an abortion of their options and encourage them to bear a baby for adoption. Try communal child-care arrangements, as in a kibbutz. Enhance voluntary family-planning assistance to Third World countries, he says. Increase legal immigration.

Bedfellows make strange politics. Hearing a call from the American Enterprise Institute for a massive federal spending program modeled on Eastern Europe is even more surprising than hearing a member of the 1984 U.S. delegation to Mexico City urge more federal aid to family-planning programs abroad, which the delegation opposed and the administration subsequently reduced.

Mr. Wattenberg sometimes overlooks inconvenient facts in his own numbers. The lowest projected population of the industrial democracies, 590 million in 2100, still exceeds the highest projected population of the industrial communist nations, 525 million. Giving these projections in separate graphs with different scales obscures the comparison. Similarly, in spite of massive expenditures to raise fertility, the TFR of



Bookshelf

"The Birth Dearth"

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Eastern European countries has declined steadily since 1960, though more slowly than that of Western Europe.

A much more serious problem is Mr. Wattenberg's unquestioning reliance on the World Bank/United Nations population projection, much of which hinges crucially on future fertility. Demographers' failures to predict fertility have been spectacular. They did not foresee the postwar Baby Boom in the U.S., beginning and end, nor the subsequent tremendous decline in the TFR of Third World countries, from 6.1 in 1970 to 4.1 in 1985. The history of demographic, economic and social predictions demonstrates that, as the Danes say, it is very difficult to make predictions, especially involving the future. There is far too much uncertainty about fertility a generation ahead for a demographic projection to justify many actions Mr. Wattenberg presses for, whatever the merits of those actions on other grounds.

The same anxieties and policies that Mr. Wattenberg advertises here have surfaced repeatedly in the past century. For about the price of Mr. Wattenberg's book, you could buy less one-sided accounts of them in either "The Fear of Population Decline" (Academy Press, 1985) by Michael S. Teitelbaum and Jay M. Winter, or "Below-Replacement Fertility in Industrial Societies" (Cambridge University Press, 1987) edited by Kingsley Davis, Mikhail S. Bernstam and Rita Ricardo-Campbell. These recent studies suggest that a false assurance about the future is more to be feared than the future itself.

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