Demography is the key factor. If you are not able to maintain yourself biologically, how do you expect to maintain yourself economically, politically, and militarily? It’s impossible. The answer of letting people be larger than other countries come in…that would be an economic solution, but it’s not a solution of your real sickness, that you are not able to maintain your own civilization.

—Viktor Orbán, Prime Minister of Hungary, 2012 (epigraph of What to Expect When No One’s Expecting)

Jonathan Last wants Americans to have more babies. If we don’t, he warns, the proportion of young people will fall while the proportion of old people will rise to unprecedented levels. This aging of the population will bankrupt our retirement system or divert spending from other priorities or—heaven forbid—lead to an increase in taxes. It will weaken America’s capacity to project military power in the world because families with few offspring will be reluctant to sacrifice them in battle. It will diminish the proportion of innovators in the economy and lower America’s rate of economic improvement. It will undermine America’s competitive position in the world.

“In the long run,” Last writes, “the groups that breed will (literally) inherit the future.” To save America from the dire ills that accompany “the long, inexorable process” of demographic decline, he calls for a resurgent American Nationalism—many more babies must be born.

What to Expect When No One’s Expecting is one more in a series of politically tendentious books on population decline, among them Griffin’s The Coming Population Crash (2010), Ben Wattenberg’s The Birth Dearth (1987) and Fewer: How the New Demography of Depopulation Will Shape Our Future (2004), and Phillip Longman’s The Empty Cradle: How Falling Birthrates Threaten World Prosperity, and What to Do About It (2005).

Last claims: “In order for a country to maintain a steady population, it needs a fertility rate of 2.1—remember this as the Golden Number. If the rate is higher, the country’s population grows; lower, and it shrinks.” The truth is subtler. If a country has low and constant death rates, and if migration changes neither numbers nor ages in the population, and if its total fertility rate is constant at around 2.1 children per woman’s lifetime for a sufficiently long period, then in the long run its population size will remain constant.

When the “ifs” do not hold, however, a fertility rate below 2.1 no longer predicts population decline. The population of the United States had a fertility rate below 2.1 from 1971 to 2010 (except in 2006 and 2007, when it slightly exceeded 2.1) and yet it grew from 209 million in 1970 to 310 million in 2010, an increase by nearly half. With a fertility rate that fell steadily from 2.01 in 1995 to 1.61 in 2009, the population of China grew from 1.19 billion to 1.33 billion. Last’s simplification of the Golden Number omits the crucial effects of migration to the United States, China’s high proportion of young people before the One-Child policy, as well as the timing of childbearing and mortality, especially child mortality. In Sierra Leone in 1995–2000, the replacement level of the fertility rate exceeded 3.4 children per woman’s lifetime because of very high death rates in childhood.

America’s fertility rate of 1.93 children per woman’s lifetime in 2010 does not necessarily mean the average American woman alive in 2010 will have 1.93 children in her lifetime, because fertility rates changed in the past and will change in the future. The fertility rate indicates the current level of childbearing in a population. By analogy, a speedometer reading of sixty miles per hour usefully indicates a car’s current speed, without implying that the car will be sixty miles further down the road after one hour (except when the car operates without interruption under cruise control on a superhighway with no accidents or congestion).

Last sees the current below-replacement fertility rates in some parts of America’s population as an acute, momentous problem. “In America,” he worries, “the fertility rate for white, college-educated women—we’ll use them because they serve as a fair proxy for our middle class—is 1.6. In other words, America has created its very own One-Child Policy. It’s soft and unintentional, the result of accidents of history and thousands of little choices.

He recognizes that America has other women:

Black women have a healthy TFR of 1.96. White women, on the other hand, have a TFR of 1.79. Our national average is only boosted because Hispanic women are…having an average of 2.35 babies. . . our concern isn’t that Hispanic Americans are having too many babies . . . . The problem with the elevated fertility level of Hispanic Americans is that it isn’t likely to last.

Immigrants usually adjust their fertility rates to those of their country of destination.

What’s wrong if America’s fertility rate remains below replacement level?

The short answer is that sub-replacement fertility rates eventually lead to a shrinking of population—and throughout recorded human history, declining populations have always followed or been followed by Very Bad Things. Disease. War. Economic stagnation or collapse. And these grim tidings from history may be in our future, since population contraction is where most of the world is headed.

Last leaps from America’s below-replacement fertility rates to the conclusion that American population is headed for decline. He never says how soon that could happen. The United Nations Population Division in 2010 calculated the future size of the population of every country in the world if neither birth rates nor death rates changed from their current values. This “no change” projection is not a prediction. It is a “what if” thought experiment. It oddly assumes that net migration into the US remains constant until 2050 and then declines toward zero. This assumption is even less realistic than assuming birth rates and death rates remain constant at 2010 values through 2100.

In this scenario, the US population rises to 335 million people in 2040 and then very slowly declines to 330 million in 2100, where the projection ends. America’s projected population size would be larger than it is now (around 315 million people in 2013) for the remainder of the twenty-first century. Is this an imminent crisis for America?

Last claims more: “Population contraction is where most of the world is headed.” True, more than half the world’s women have had below-replacement fertility rates since roughly 2005. Still, he ignores that global population grew by a billion people from 1999 to 2012 and is currently rising by 75–80 million people a year (adding every four years or so as many people as the current US population). In the UN’s “no change” projection, global population rises from 7.1 billion in 2013 to 18.3 billion by 2100. In the UN’s “low fertility” projection, assuming fertility rates that are half a child lower than the UN’s best guess, global population rises for at least three decades to 8.1 billion in 2046 and then slowly coasts downward to 6.2 billion in 2100, just above the 6.1 billion people in the world in 2000. Is this an imminent crisis for the world?

Last blames what he presents as a crisis in American fertility rates on “the ubiquity of college, the delay of marriage, the birth-control pill, car-seat laws, [lack of] religious participation, the rise of the thousand-dollar stroller, and Social Security. This is a partial list.” Social Security?

Where people’s offspring had for centuries been the financial needs of their parents and retired people with no offspring now [have] access to a set of comparable benefits. They could free-ride on the system…Those programs are now incentivizing couples to have fewer—or no—children—i.e., children who would have looked after them. That the pensioners who had been employed with and without children paid Social Security taxes all their working lives doesn’t seem to matter to Last.

Other causes of America’s low fertility, in Last’s view, include higher education for women, women’s entry into jobs other than teaching, increasing cohabitation without producing children, falling rates of ever marrying by a given age, the rise of divorce, the decreasing percentage of single-family homes, the rising percentage of apartments and condominiums, frequent change of residence, the high cost of land, and, of course, the Supreme Court’s first mistake, Last writes, was its erroneous decision in Griggs v. Duke Power (1971).
to outlaw using racially discriminatory test results in employment decisions. Because “the Court held that employers could not rely on IQ-type tests if minorities performed relatively poorly on them...”...employers would need to request for test scores through the college system, because colleges are allowed to use such considerations.” In Last’s view this decision gave support for some form of a more liberal approach to immigration. In his opinion, “the answer is not more public transportation.” In his only recommendation addressed to the private sector, Last encourages companies to which would allow people to live where land is cheap. He does not mention the possibility of improving the private sector’s employment practices regarding child care, parental leaves, and guarantees of employment after childbirth. Last estimates that it costs over $1 million to raise a single child, largely in the form of mothers’ (always mother’s) foregone salaries. Meanwhile, “the median price of a home in 2008 was $180,000.” If his figures are right, median home prices are 16 percent of the cost of raising a single child, and in most of the country, the cost of land is a small fraction of the cost of a home. Last’s own statistics do not support his claim that “land costs contribute so much to family formation costs.”

Fourth, fix immigration. “A reasonably liberal program of immigration is necessary for the long-term health of our country. Yet at the same time, however, the current immigration system should be coupled with a staunchly traditionalist view of integration,” Last writes. “Tolerance need not be surrender and a certain amount of cultural chauvinism is necessary for societal coherence.” Just how that cultural chauvinism should be imposed is not clear. Fifth, fix “the Church and the State.” Last insists that it is important we preserve the role of religion in our public square, resting those critics who see theocracy lurking behind every corner. Our government, he notes, is coming of, not hostile to, believers—if for no other reason than they’re the ones who create most of the future taxpayers.

Not to mention most of the future Social Security recipients. Last does not suggest how religious organizations, or any others, could better educate young people in the skills and rewards, as well as the inevitable stresses and strains, of raising children well, within or outside of marriage. Last moves back and forth between contradictory positions regarding demographic determinism, causation, and freedom. Is demography destiny? Yes: he opens with the assertion of the Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán that “demography is the key factor” and cites approvingly Fred Pearce’s The Coming Population Crash, of which the introduction begins, “Demography is destiny.... Never has that been more true than today.” But no: Last states that “demography is not destiny” and warns that “we should be careful never to confuse the two.” Still, his entire book is more on that demographic theme, “an important subject matter of economic, political, and social matters. He tries to have it both ways. In their excellent historical summary in The Fear of Population Decline, written in 1995, Paul Ehrlich and Winter were prophetic: A belief in demographic determinism suffuses the writings of many of those who address the problem of population decline in the period 1870-1945. If contraception was a key subversive agent in contemporary history, then one could dispense with arguments which also makes childbearing difficult and costly conflicts with bearing and rearing children within a stable family (which entails parental sacrifice, personal and economic). These internal conflicts might be reversed in Last’s book than they are in American society.

Let us set aside unknowable future numbers of births. Are too few children being born in these years? Or is the workforce getting smaller? Last answers this question by inferring the eventual effects of assumed fertility rates on retirement systems, military defense, and economic production. I also argue that the demographic transition is a terrible mistake..."Of course, the question here is whether government has an interest in trying to open the field for parents who would have more children if they could afford them.” Accordingly, government should stipulate that public universities become family-friendly”...The deepest unresolved tensions in American life, then I would conclude that we are not having enough children. On the other hand, if children are widely treated as cheap, as a nuisance of small value, then I would conclude that we are having too many children relative to the care we choose to provide them. No doubt, some fortunate children are treated as precious (e.g., my children, and maybe yours). But in a world that produces enough food to feed everyone adequately, 26 percent of all children under age five (roughly the children in the world under 5 were stunted in 2010. A stunted child is abnormally short for his or her age, by the standards of normally fed children, as a result of chronic undernutrition. A stunted person’s mental, physical, and economic productivity for the rest of a person’s life.

According to World Health Organization data of 2012, “childhood malnutrition is responsible for 1.3 million deaths in an estimated 35 percent of all deaths among children under the age of five.” When more than one in four children is stunted and when a cause of death is the one in three of those who die is the lack of proper food, I conclude that, globally, children are being treated as cheap and disposable. We need better care and feeding of the children, and a way to create before we need more children.

In the United States, stunted children are rare. Do Americans have too few children? Ask those who have them. According to the Census Bureau, 2006-2007 County Data, the percentage of children below the poverty level for non-Hispanic whites, 93.8 percent; lower for Hispanics, 83.2 percent; and lowest for non-Hispanic blacks, 73.8 percent. After all miscarriages, induced abortions, and deaths in the first trimester, roughly one live birth in seven was unwanted at conception. The report observes, “Mothers who report a pregnancy as unwanted at the time of conception may later cherish the child born as a result of that pregnancy.” It also warns: “Studies have shown that births from pregnancies that were unwanted at conception may be associated with adverse consequences for the mother and the child.” I conclude that some women are having children they don’t want, and it’s bad for them and those children. Rather than encouraging more women to be restricted contraception and banning abortion, as Last desires, we need to improve mothers’ success in having wanted children.
Are Losing the Fight Against AIDS in Africa.

JEFF MADRICK is Director of the Bernard Joel Epstein is the author of Christopher de Bellaigue is a writer and broadcaster at the University of Iowa. His most recent book is Leo Carey Elaine Blair is a regular contributor to John Dyson Colin McGinn Shklovsky: Witness to an Era by Sara Vitale and three books by Viktor Shklovsky George Soros and Gregor Peter Schmitz The Future of Europe, from Iran to Ukraine: An Interview by William H. Janeway.

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Letters from David Martin, Edward Mendelson, James Piereson, Frank Rich, Jacques Semelin, Robert O. Paxton, and Mario Livio

CONTROLLERS

JOHN ASHBERY’s most recent collection of poetry is Quick Question. His Collected French Translations are published this month in two volumes, one of Prose and one of Poetry. CHRISTOPHER DE BELLAGUE is a writer and broadcaster on the Middle East. His most recent book is Patriot of Persecutions. University of Warwick. COLIN MCGINN is a philosopher whose books include The Emperor of Mind, The Problem of Consciousness, Consciousness and Its Objects, and The Meaning of Dusk. OLIVER SACKS is a physician and the author of ten books, the most recent being In the Elephant’s Brain. He is Professor of Neurology at NYU School of Medicine and a visiting professor at the University of Warwick. CATHLEEN SCHINE’s latest novel, Fin & Lady, was published in July.

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PAUL WILSON is a writer based in Toronto. He has translated major works by Josef Skvorecky, Ivan Klíma, Bohumír Hrabal, and Víclav Havel into English. ROBERT WINTER, Distinguished Professor of Music and holder of the Presidential Chair in Music and Interdisciplinary Studies at UC Irvine, is currently preparing for release Music in the Air, the first completely interactive historical of Western music. He contributed to the article on performing practice in The New Grove Dictionary of Music.

RUTH BERNARD YEAZELL is Chace Family Professor of English at Yale. Her books include Art of the Everyday: Dutch Painting and the Realist Novel and Fictions of Modernity: Women and Courtship in the English Novel.

TOO MANY EARTHQUAKES!

To the Editor:

I was surprised that Joel Cohen's review "The Case for More Babies," N.Y.R. April 24 didn't take the opportunity to talk about the dangers posed by overpopulation. Is that because Cohen does not share my belief that overpopulation is the greatest danger confronting our species? It seems to me that all our efforts to curb the harm that we do to the planet are meaningless if we were not to consider the population size of individuals and have twice as many individuals. I agree with Jonathan Latas in his book Where To Expect When No One's Expecting that the dangers posed by overpopulation are real but I believe the dangers posed by my solutions are greater. I cannot understand the thinking of religious institutions that see the problem as merely an issue of numbers. It seems to me that numbers do not matter so much as sustaining viable conditions in which these souls, from mankind to house cats, can have living worlds worth having.

Dan Streok
Professor of Mathematics Emeritus
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Joel E. Cohen replies:

For a successful airline trip, six ingredients are necessary: thrust, lift, control of roll, altitude, approach, and place to land and take off. Lack any one of these, the airplane will either never get off the ground or end in disaster. So it is with the human populations of Earth. Human well-being depends on solving simultaneously the problems of population, economies, environment, and culture (including values, institutions, laws, languages, and religions). Solving demographic problems is not a necessary condition for human well-being; see my "How Many People Can the Earth Support?" N.Y.R., October 8, 1998, and "Seven Billion," The New York Times, October 23, 2011. I did not consider population problems important, I have not spent much of my life studying them. What I have learned suggests that human population problems arise in a context of economic, social, and political problems that are also urgent on a wide variety of time scales. Dealing with the problems of human populations can make it easier to deal with the problems of economies, the environment, and culture; and, importantly, vice versa.

Focus on overpopulation narrowly attentions unproductively to a single number, the number of people. Population problems are not adequately summarized by any single number. They include problems of spatial distribution, age distribution, labor force, health, and education. These problems vary widely in different regions of the world,东西, within a single community. Population problems vary widely in faces and require multifaceted responses.

STOP THAT TRAM!

To the Editors:

It's a sad fact that if one lets a falsehood get repeated too often, it can become a familiar truth. In his review of David Edmonds's Would You Kill the Fat Man? N.Y.R., April 24, Cass Sunstein says that the hypothetical case called "the Trolley Problem"—in which a bystander can throw a switch, thereby changing a trolley that is headed toward five people on a track on which there is only one track, and ten people on another track on which there is another track—was introduced into the literature of moral theory by Philippa Foot, in an article by her entitled "The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of the Double Effict," published in 1967. I presume that Mr. Sunstein is correct—Foot's book Good News

where Mr. Edmonds got it. (I haven't read his book, so I don't know.) But misinformation is, since the case first appeared in an article by me entitled "The Trolley Problem," published in 1985 in the Yale Law Journal.

Judith Jarvis Thomspon
Department of Linguistics and Philosophy
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Cass R. Sunstein replies:

In her 1967 essay, Philippa Foot posited a case in which someone "is the driver of a runaway trolley which he can only steer from one narrow track on to another; five men are working on one track and one man on another; the person on the track he enters is bound to be killed." Foot wondered why "we should say, without hesitation, that the driver should steer to the less occupied track." David Edmonds, whose book I reviewed, follows convention in treating Foot as the founding mother of trolleyology. But it was indeed Thomas and not Foot, who introduced the Trolley Problem and developed it in the form in which it is widely discussed.

RATES OF RESCUE

To the Editors:

Robert Parson's review of Jacques Seme- lin's book Persecution and Massacre: Occupied France [N.Y.R. March 6] revealed some ignorance. "No detailed comparison of rates of rescue efforts seems to exist..." My book Accountng for Genocide: National Respons Phó and Jewish Victimization During the Holocaust (1979) did compare efforts at rescue and the effect on Jews whether that was left alone, comparing within occupation zone, time of deportation, anti-Semitism prior to the war, and many other factors.

Helene Fein
Cambridge, Massachusetts

RUDDER & STICK

To the Editors:

A tiny quibble with Freeman Dyson's de- scription of Frederick Lindemann's method of spin recovery in his review of Churchill's court by [N.Y.R. April 20] that's there; it's slip, the stick. Applying rudder opposite to the direction of the spin is counterintuitive, but showing the stick forward when the aircraft is already pointed nose-down most certainly isn't.

J. R. Ranney
Escondido, California

MEMORIES OF SUSAN

To the Editors:

For the authorized biography of Susan Son- tag, I would appreciate hearing from people with memories of her. I am also interested in seeing correspondence and photographic material.

Benjamin Moser
bm505@gmail.com

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