



OP-ED COLUMNIST

The Kids Are All Right

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Published: October 14, 2006

In 1968, the year after the U.S. population reached 200 million, Linus Pauling, Jonas Salk and other scientific luminaries signed their names to a full-page advertisement. It pictured a beatific baby in diapers who was labeled, in large letters, "Threat to Peace."

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"It is only being realistic," the scientists warned, "to say that skyrocketing population growth may doom the world we live in." They shared the concerns of Paul Ehrlich, who was on the best-seller lists warning of unprecedented famines overseas in the 1970's and food riots on the streets of America in the 1980's.

On Tuesday morning, when the 300 millionth American is born, the parents will not be worrying about a national shortage of food. If anything, they'll worry about their child becoming obese. There is more food available per person — in America and the rest of the world — than ever imagined by the 1960's doomsayers, Malthus or the ancient Greek philosophers who discussed the need for population control.

"Overpopulation" is history's oldest environmental crisis, and it's the most instructive for making sense of today's debates about energy and climate change. It's a case study of intellectual arrogance, and of the perils of putting too much faith in a "scientific consensus" of experts infatuated with their own forecasts.

Four decades ago, scientists were so determined to prevent famines that they analyzed the feasibility of putting "fertility control agents" in public drinking water. The physicist William Shockley suggested using sterilization to impose a national limit on the number of births.

Planned Parenthood's policy of relying on voluntary birth control was called a "tragic ideal" by the ecologist Garrett Hardin. Writing in the journal Science, Hardin argued that "freedom to breed will bring ruin to all." He and others urged America to adopt a "lifeboat ethic" by denying food aid, even during crises, to countries with rapidly growing populations.

Those intellectuals didn't persuade Americans to adopt their policies, but they had more impact overseas. Under prodding from Westerners like Robert McNamara, the head of the World Bank,

countries adopted “fertility targets” to achieve “optimal” population size. When an Indian government official proposed mandatory sterilization for men with three or more children, Paul Ehrlich criticized the United States for not rushing to help.

“We should have volunteered logistic support in the form of helicopters, vehicles, and surgical instruments,” he wrote, and added: “Coercion? Perhaps, but coercion in a good cause.”

India’s enraged voters stopped the government from pursuing coercive policies, but the Chinese couldn’t prevent their rulers from imposing a one-child-per-family rule. It was ostensibly voluntary, but the penalties were so severe that there were reported cases of forced abortions and infanticide.

Now China is facing a new problem: a severe shortage of young workers to support an aging population. The one-child rule turned out to be both an assault on personal liberty and a public-policy mistake. The parents made short-term sacrifices that left them worse off in the long run — the same risk we run with policies designed to curb global warming many decades from now.

Of course, the graphs projecting future temperatures could turn out to be more accurate than the old graphs forecasting food production and population growth. Global warming is a real danger, and in some ways controlling carbon dioxide is a more daunting problem than growing more food. It’s worth paying for some insurance against drastic climate change.

But we need to balance uncertain future benefits against certain costs today. Most steps to combat global warming will be expensive and will slow economic growth, inevitably affecting poor people around the world. More of them will be sick, and more of their children will die. They’ll be less educated and live in less technologically advanced societies.

If the past is any guide, the chief plagues and disasters afflicting future generations will be different from the ones forecast by Al Gore or any other popular prophet. The best insurance policy is to build free, prosperous societies of smart, adaptable people.

In the long debate about overpopulation and famine, none of the gloomy projections by intellectuals proved to be as prescient as an old proverb in farming societies: “Each extra mouth comes attached to two extra hands.” No matter what problems lie ahead, the good news on Tuesday will be that America has 600 million hands to solve them.

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For Further Reading

- "The Tragedy of the Commons" by Garrett Hardin. *Science Magazine*, December 13, 1968.
- "The Ultimate Resource" by Julian Simon. Princeton University Press, 1998.

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