

Not having babies won't save the planet

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Environmental antinatalisms share the idea that bringing people into existence is bad for the planet, and see a need to discontinue human 'procreation'. They assume that the world needs fewer people (or none), and that there is a self-evident, strong and inevitable correlation between the total number of people in the world and environmentally damaging consumption. Plenty of people of course, by design or by chance, do not have children themselves but could not properly be called antinatalists: they may have freely decided to do other things with their time: ascetics, singletons, couples, humanitarians, and entrepreneurs alike.

Antinatalisms

Antinatalisms are not new. In the ancient world they coincided with philosophies that emphasized body: spirit dualisms. These viewed embodiment with suspicion, and human destiny in otherworldly terms. Antinatalisms are even enjoying a revival of sorts in moral philosophy, chiefly in utilitarian circles. Utilitarians would argue that the worthwhile life is one where pleasure exceeds pain, or happiness outweighs suffering to the greater degree. John Stuart Mill, in the 19th century, endorsed a kind of antinatalism: a responsibility not to bring a person into existence unless the person will have 'at least the ordinary chances of a desirable existence'. Antinatalists argue that this condition does not hold generally and that the birth of a new person always entails nontrivial harm to that person, therefore we ought to refrain.

The assumption by environmental antinatalists is that the world needs fewer people because it is 'over-populated', a calculation borrowed from conservation biology. The argument, in so far as it goes, run as follows: the limits to the carrying capacity of a biological niche imply that there is an optimum population number for a species in that niche. Therefore, there is an optimum population number for every species in every niche, and so for humans on this planet.

However, even if that were a good approximation it is notoriously difficult to quantify an 'optimum' for any population. Such a calculation would rely on a proliferation of assumptions about rates of consumption of non-renewable resources, distinctions between needs and opulence, criteria for standards of living, economic growth models, development and inequality, as well as human capability, agency and freedom.

In the context of climate change and risks to the biosphere environmental antinatalism, among so-called baby strikers, is a personal decision rooted in a commitment to a particular set of priorities. This seems to be aimed not primarily at preventing human unhappiness for future generations but is for the sake of a sustainable planet.

For others antinatalism is more than just a personal preference. It involves advocating for policy changes that sharply curb human population growth, even to the point of advocating a phased human extinction. Humans should be as 'natural as the dinosaurs'.

The spectre of authoritarianism in population control inevitably lurks in the background here. It is true that few of the many forms of recent antinatalism would explicitly espouse coercive or discriminatory policies. But oddly they often end up offering them anyway, mostly of the soft kind, like taxation of third or subsequent children, or the withdrawal of supports from larger families. This is discriminatory and ironically would have no effect on the relatively wealthy who are not dependent on direct social subsidies. Among rich urbanites in overdeveloped countries, it has even been commented, large families have become a status symbol, reinforcing the assumption that only the poor should limit family size.

Demography matters

The global human population is no longer growing exponentially. It currently stands at 7.5 billion, which is four times what it was 100 years ago. But, the global fertility rate is just at replacement. And in half the world the rate is below replacement —in Europe, North America, the Far and Middle East. So for example, without immigration Italy's population is set to halve by the end of the century, what some commentators refer to as a 'baby crash' (Pearce, 2018). And all of this has been driven by free choice and not by coercion.

In country after country, with development, the birth rate has steadied and this stabilisation has clear drivers: education for girls and women, the reduction in child mortality rates, the expansion of economic means and security, and greater public participation in deciding ways of living. In the 1990s the economist Amartya Sen demonstrated that coercive methods, whether direct (one-child policy) or indirect (through taxation and withholding of essential services) have not been more successful than these four factors above, and in comparable time frames.

Indeed there is evidence to suggest that coercive methods, even apart from their negative impact on gender balance and the care of infant girls, which is already a great loss of freedom, may well be counter-productive in maintaining that 'replacement' rate across much of the globe. . The Malthusian prediction, that fertility rates would increase exponentially the more prosperous societies became, has been discredited. .

Some economists argue that this slow growth in the global work force is a cause for alarm because this entails the progressive aging of human populations, impacting negatively on the so-called 'sweet-spot' support ratio, the ratio between workers and their dependents. A shrinking population, rural depopulation and migration to cities pose an 'existential risk' for some developed economies. However, rather than think of children as assets or liabilities that exist to serve the economy what is needed is a more careful analysis of the benefits and challenges in demographic shifts. As Hans Rosling (gapminder.org) observed, we do currently have a young world and this will change anyway.

The world's population will still rise because we are living longer, and although we have reached what Rosling calls 'peak child', the 1960s baby boom generation set a new baseline. The most recent UN report sets the global population peak at c.10 billion by 2100 based on current assumptions and if African countries develop on similar lines to the rest of the world. There are uncertainties of course, but certainty that the world's population will peak and start to decline before the end of the century.

Demography is not destiny

So much for aggregate numbers, how does this analysis relate to climate change, the fate of other species and the biosphere in general? The first thing to acknowledge is that the main driver of climate change is overwhelmingly consumption in developed countries, the countries where ironically population growth has been low or negative. It is more accurate to say that climate change is driven by consumer behavior than simply by population number. Under present conditions, in which developed and overdeveloped economies do not radically reduce their carbon emissions, advocating reduced population growth in developing countries, especially as a condition for development, risks victimizing poorer countries. And when it comes to biodiversity loss there is evidence to suggest that the main driver in all economies is not poverty but inequality.

By some estimates the world's economy will triple in size by 2050, with only c.10% due to rising population (Pearce, 2018). The crucial issue then becomes how do we produce what we consume; when might we reach 'peak stuff'? It is no longer enough to be efficient (reduce, reuse, repair, recover, recycle). Rather the objective is to be effective, to move to a circular economy, to decouple prosperity and consumption. It is reasonable to think the planet can sustain current and ongoing human populations, and to think of development as 'living lives we have reason to value'.

As far as 'baby strikes' go, it might be said that humans are notably poor at predicting their own future state of mind. And human happiness is not a 'success-calculation' but the realising of our freedom. Good outcomes of antinatalist protest could well be a greater commitment to capability-building for current generations, young and old; more opportunities for prosperity and participation; and serious prioritising of the planetary community.