

# Review

## ***The Good Crisis: How Population Stabilization Can Foster a Healthy U.S. Economy***

John Seager and Lee S. Polansky, (eds). Washington, DC: Population Connection, 2016. 220pp.

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Even though there is a notion of a birth dearth, this text aims at debunking the common belief that a population that is not growing due to declining fertility spells disaster for our world. The population has declined over time, but in reality the world continues to add 83 million people each year. Some birth dearthers, citing low fertility in affluent nations, express concern about “moral decay” (vi). For example, “smaller and unconventional families” will harm the United States because there will be fewer children and there will not be enough people to care for the elderly (vii). The authors of this book, however, show how a lower fertility rate will not pose an economic threat but will lead to population stabilization and even reduction. Reduction in family size in Europe and Japan, for example, has not resulted in negative effects.

Another issue is that retirement security depends on productivity, and the future of social security depends on national productivity. This hinges on the fact that there will be insufficient funds to cover future retirement costs. The notion of birth dearth transcends the availability of retirement programs. Capitalism, it is said, has only thrived where there is population growth, and is now affecting Japan, Europe and the Great Plains of the United States because an expanding labor pool is necessary for economic growth. Population aging and lower fertility can cause anxiety, but these, by themselves, would not affect

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environmental destruction. Smaller could be better for the planet's sustenance. As it is, the U.S. now has a larger percentage of older and fewer young people, but over the last decade, there has been a great rate of change due to new technologies. Myriads of people are employed in jobs that weren't anticipated 100 years ago. New developments have contributed to making things better, such as medical advances, reduction of pollution, etc. So, the graying of the population of the U.S. this century is bound to provide challenges as well as opportunities. Workers for tomorrow's world will include women and people of color, people with disabilities, as well others who have been marginalized.

Another issue is the number of children in the U.S. living in poverty. Breaking this cycle of economic despair, through viable quality education programs and delayed parenthood, can prepare children for STEM jobs, teaching, and entrepreneurship, thus enabling meaningful and resourceful life for many. The world at large, at the bottom of the global economic level, could also live quality and meaningful lives in a less crowded world. This would help them experience what it means to be truly human, "to work, play and die with dignity" (x).

The book consists of 18 chapters, and contributors include: Katherine Baicker, Norah Berger, David E. Bloom, David Cutler, Brian Czech, Herman Daly, Peter Fisher, Matt L. Huffman, Lori M. Hunter, Ronald Lee, Jay W. Lorsch, Hal Marcovitz, Robert D. Plotnick, John Seager, Zirui Song, and Alan Weisman.

Chapter 1 deals with the "dramatic demographic and economic changes in the post-World War Two era" experienced by the United States (1). The United States is on the decline with regard to an all-time high in the ratio of working-age to non-working population. Declines are also experienced by both Germany and Japan. China and Russia have peaked but will also experience a rapid decline. In the U.S. demographic changes are taking place: the population is aging and the racial and ethnic make-up of the country is changing. Economic and political concerns associated with these demographic trends include: the falling of productivity; skill shortages, impeding competitiveness; aging, creating financial problems; social security; and social welfare dependency, bound to rise. In comparison to Germany and Japan, the relatively high rate of fertility in the United States will increase the labor force in the coming years, but a concern is that minorities will make up a low-education and low-skill portion of the work force. American education, whether K-12, college or university, needs be involved with the acquisition of skills pertinent to changing population and the technological change that is occurring. In terms

of older Americans, in addition to reinforcing Social Security System, and accompanying benefits, there should be a rethinking on how older Americans can contribute to society, both through paid work and volunteering, as long as they are willing and able. The predictability of demographic trends should help us plan and devise strategies to prepare for the future.

Chapter 2 focuses on companies valuing older senior employees and their skills. Examples of companies using the services of older citizens are Tottster and Vita Needle. Older workers set their own working hours and schedules, and are not paid full-time income. There are benefits to both the employer and employee. The companies can be adapting to new technologies, but provide goods by utilizing the skills of older citizens, even in their seventies, eighties and nineties.

Chapter 3 is based on a National Research Council report on long-term macroeconomic consequences of population aging in the U.S. The population is expected to grow at moderate pace, but if this growth were to cease, population aging would increase. Population aging is due to longer life, but lower fertility also causes slower population growth. The U.S is compared to other countries in terms of population aging. Aging also means more consumption by older people in terms of health care, education and long term care. The 80-year-old consumes two times as much as the 18-year-old. This is due to the growing cost of public and private health care and this consumption by the elderly compounds the economic cost of the aging population.

Chapter 4 touches upon trends relevant to the Millennials. They stare into their smartphones, etc. They want to live in cities and towns and prefer downtown to suburbia. Young people are living in places where they don't need to drive—the cafes, theaters, shopping, schools: all within walking distance of the nearest subway. Most young people like to ride bicycles and want to be able to ride bicycles to work, etc. The suggestion is that cities lay bike-only trails throughout the city. Currently cars are parked 95% of the time. It is expected that twenty years from now cities may look very different.

Chapter 5 is concerned with ecological economics coming of age. The ecological point of view states that mainstream economics has ignored economic principles that apply to economic growth in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Economic growth is prominent and supported by a growing academic movement. Reference is made to *Limits to Growth* authored by researchers from MIT. Howard T. Odum's concern with energetic limits to economic growth is also highlighted, and both philosophers and historians will add their own take to

this. Demand and supply are tied to the production of goods and services. So, in a free market, energy requirements do affect prices because they have to do with effective supplies, and the demand does affects prices. Helping to get prices right, such as higher energy taxes in American dollars, should provide security to future generations.

According to Hal Marcovitz, in chapter 6, praise is given to The Gray Charter School in Newark, New Jersey because kindergarteners learn about careers, Shakespeare is taught to eight-year-olds, and parents attend classes on how to organize their lives at home. At this school mission statements and music lessons help raise the bar, and reading music contributes to reading in general, so that by November 1st kindergarteners are reading fairly well. Parents are expected to be involved with their children's school work. Another successful program designed to meet the needs of middle and high school is run by Humble Independent School District located near Houston, Texas. Emphasis is placed on study groups and serious preparation for college. High school students read at a high level; and even if they elect not to go to college, they still leave high school eligible for college admission. Sally Wagner of Humble Independent attributes the idea of arming students with a higher set of skills to a lecture she heard given by Dr. Willard Daggert, founder of the Utah-based International Center for Leadership in Education. Wagner feels that having students for thirteen years and putting them on the street without the necessary skills to survive is insane. And, as discussed in chapter 7, a well-educated workforce is key to State prosperity.

Emphasis is also placed on living a healthy life, as articulated by Marcovitz in chapter 8. Community health efforts supported by Duke University and West Virginia University, for example, help contribute to future health. Bettyann Creighton states that Philadelphia schools, in particular, must find ways to integrate healthy living across the curriculum. Teachers can include discussions relevant to healthy living and wellness in math or science or social studies or English.

Added to this is the fact that workplace wellness programs can help save money. Chapter 9 is a research article that references the cost of health care promotion and disease prevention. Growing literature building incentives into wellness programs helps to elevate the participation among employees and financial incentives motivate weight loss and smoking cessation, for example. Employee healthcare costs pre- and post-intervention, and employee absenteeism are also discussed. Health insurance in the United States is

likely to be employment-based and may not only improve health but may also result in substantial savings even in the short-term.

Although employment of the disabled is an issue, employers are not intentionally excluding disabled persons from the workforce; they are prohibited from even asking whether a job applicant is disabled (chapter 10). The problem lies with society not doing a good job of preparing the disabled to compete with others in the job market, so the disabled find themselves at a disadvantage. It all boils down to "if": if companies made provisions for the disabled, if Congress made changes in the American Disabilities Act and mandated more vocational training, disabled people would be better prepared to enter the workforce and there would be less unemployment. In a perfect world, the day after graduation, a person would have a job. Other issues of social import have to do with the persistence of inequalities connected to gender and race (chapter 11), peer counseling relationships and activism involving young people in order to prevent pregnancy (chapter 12), and the benefits of declining teenage childbearing (chapter 13).

Topics regarding future preparation involve listening to nature, for example, to termites (chapter 14), somewhat decrying the fact the millennials are prone not to listen to nature. Global future population stabilization should also be deemed a priority (chapter 15) and population stabilization would contribute to environmental gains through the reduction in future consumption. Economic growth and economic status can be coupled with advancements in environmental efficiencies. This, of course, requires engaging all cultures globally. The real world of tomorrow will be dependent on solar energy (chapter 16).

In chapter 17 Herman Daly addresses the concept of a steady-state economy. Throughout his career, Daly has published several books and articles on the subject. He has also founded a center for the advancement of the steady-state economy. Alan Weisman in "Shrink and Prosper" (chapter 18) examines how we can shrink our collective human footprint so that we do not stomp on any species, including our own, out of existence. Weisman considered how the earth could heal and even refill empty niches if relieved of humanity's constant pressures. The hope is that a way could be found to add humans back to this vision of a restored, healthy planet that is in harmony and not in conflict with the rest of nature.

*The Good Crisis: How Population Stabilization Can Foster a Healthy U.S. Economy* is a very informative work which could be of value to people in leadership

positions in business and government. It could also be a valuable resource to academic fields, such as sociology, demography, gerontology and environmental studies. In addition, people interested in current affairs and restoring the planet can find the information in this work useful.