

Phillip Longman, *The Empty Cradle: How Falling Birthrates Threaten World Prosperity and What To Do About It* (New York: Basic Books/Perseus Books, 2004), 240 pages

Reviewed by Agata Rottkamp

On October 31, 2011, the world's population is supposed to have reached seven billion people. Though the Associated Press reported that this milestone was "celebrated" by countries around the world, the popular reaction seems best summed up by the response of a South African woman who named her son, born that day, "Gwakwanele," meaning "enough" in Zulu. Enough – enough children, enough people – the little word perfectly encapsulates the firmly embedded common belief that the world is indeed getting *too* populous, that we are in the midst of a demographic boom which, should it continue, will eventually bring humanity to the brink of extinction as natural resources are depleted and can no longer meet the needs of mankind.

Phillip Longman, demographer and Senior Fellow at the New America Foundation, tackles this notion head-on in *The Empty Cradle: How Falling Birthrates Threaten World Prosperity and What to Do About It*. Taking on the task of teasing out "the deeper, slower movements in history" behind demographic trends, Longman points out that the modern, secular worldview depends on the perception that the world's population will continue to grow. Capitalists, policy makers, environmentalists, feminists: in order to further their agenda, all interest groups rely on the popular belief that there will always be more people. This notion is either touted as a boon, as, for example, in the case of policy makers who consider a growing population necessary to support established social security systems, or as a drawback, as in the case of environmentalists who regard a booming population as *the* problem facing the planet. Most frequently, these two extremes coexist in the public imagination: a fear of what the Malthusian-like population explosion will do to the earth coupled with an unspoken hope that economic growth will continue indefinitely as the upshot of an ever-growing base of customers and workers.

There is truth to the claim that the world's population is increasing; the absolute number of human beings is still growing. However, this growth is taking place against the backdrop of an unprecedented fall in fertility rates – current global birthrates are just half of what they were in 1972. This "loss of momentum" is particularly true for the developed world, but is in evidence in all geographic areas. European countries are seeing the lowest birthrates in recorded history, but rates are also falling in areas once considered highly fertile, such as the Middle East and Asia. Indeed, some 59 countries, home to approximately 44% of the world's population, currently have fertility rates below replacement level. Given these figures, Longman makes the case that it is already inevitable that rapid population aging will take place, and that an absolute fall in population is likely.

More interesting than the statistics, however, is Longman's analysis of this downward trend – its underlying reasons and possible solutions, as well as potential consequences. This analysis, which makes up the bulk of *The Empty Cradle*, is heavily colored by Longman's interest in fiscal policy, but he weighs cultural aspects in addition to the political and economic. He draws a clear link, for example, between feminism and fertility, pointing out that the best predictor of how many children a woman will bear is her educational level. Longman's writing is at its best when he explores the notion that falling birthrates are the result of a profound change in the human environment. A contrast between primitive and civilized societies illustrates the point: in primitive societies, it is the most powerful and successful members who have the most children, while *the opposite* is true in

civilized countries where “materially successful men still have more sex, and more sexual partners, than their less fortunate peers, but produce fewer offspring” (p. 30). What has taken place is a cultural shift resulting in a new paradigm: success means having few, if any, children. Brazil, which never introduced “family planning programs,” is a clear example. If not for government intervention, then why have Brazilian birthrates fallen? The answer is simple yet breathtaking: the introduction of television. Exposing the populace to a certain cultural message which is reinforced by “telenovelas” and held up as worthy of imitation has had a dramatic effect.

Longman also examines another common reason cited for choosing not to have children: the high costs associated with raising kids. Though money is never the primary motivator for procreation, he points out that the economic dimension cannot be ignored. In modern societies, parents are expected to bear the entire burden of childrearing without garnering any benefits but pride and joy, if that. That is to say, parents *alone* take responsibility for forming and educating their children. These same children eventually find jobs and pay into programs such as Social Security and Medicare which, in turn, profit *all* members of society, even the childless. Also, couples dealing with a high debt load as a result of an expensive education, and facing the ever-greater expectations on those who would be parents, simply feel that they cannot afford children. It’s not a matter of selfishness, Longman insists, for statistics indicate that many wish they had had more children. The problem is not moral, but political: institutional arrangements designed to better society, such as more educational opportunities for workers, income support for the elderly, and greater expectations for child welfare and safety have simply made the cost of parenthood too high.

Longman’s ultimate goal is to explore how falling birthrates “threaten world prosperity” and to consider possible solutions to this greater problem, and it is therefore no surprise that the three-pronged approach he proposes addresses human factors in the economy other than fertility rates, such as productive aging and strong families. The final chapter presents a series of policy prescriptions: 1) The introduction of “parental dividends,” i.e. substantial tax relief to parents with children under the age of eighteen, which would shift some of the benefits of having children to the parents; 2) policies that encourage more productive aging, such as ones that promote the benefits of physical exercise for the elderly; and, 3) an Allan Carlson-inspired proposal to make the home “the locus of economic activity” by encouraging home-based employment and family businesses. In short, a scenario where there are natural advantages to having children, and where human capital isn’t “overconsumed” by making material goods too cheap and children too expensive.

These proposed “solutions” are somewhat disappointing. Early on in the book, Longman claims that “if human population does not wither away in the future, it will be because of a mutation in human culture” (p. 35). And yet, it is not culture that is addressed here, except by way of fiscal policy. Is that enough? By Longman’s own admission, European countries that give generous family allowances see some increase in birthrates, but none have reached replacement fertility levels. Indeed, the high cost of children frequently is a real deterrent to procreation, but is there not something more sinister lurking beneath the surface? A lack of understanding of what the child is – not just an investment, or one that gives joy and comfort like a pet, but a gift, an expression of love between the parents and a sign of hope. “Telenovelas” in Brazil do not deplete a family’s resources; rather, they introduce the ideal of a consumption-driven individualism that precludes the very possibility of welcoming another human being for their sake alone. Yes, there is a need for a dramatic change in “the economics of parenthood” – but it is for naught if not accompanied by an internal shift which is capable of seeing a person in terms of love rather than in terms of numbers indicating productivity.

Throughout the book, Longman makes the mistake of seeing man as *homo economicus* – whether this is expressed in terms of falling birthrates (i.e. not enough workers and innovators for the future) or decreased output by the elderly. Therefore, though he (wisely) proposes the need for revaluing the family, by this he means merely a shift from considering the family as a unit of consumption to one “most responsible for human capital formation.” In both cases, however, the family remains a group of individuals who remain *per accidens*. The constitutive bonds between family members, relying as they do on the selfless self-giving of the parents, are not worth the mention. But without the categories of love and self-gift, how can the “value of children [be restored] to their parents, and of parents to each other” (p. 196) – which, Longman claims, is the only way that societies can hope to have a future?

A fascinating thread is woven in throughout the book which may explain Longman’s reluctance to look at non-fiscal, non-policy – that is, theological or philosophical – solutions. When discussing the potential consequences of falling birthrates, in addition to pointing to the risk of the failure of programs like Medicare and to financial crises which could lead to political unrest, Longman repeatedly returns to the menace of fundamentalism. Even if birthrates continue to fall, there are those who will continue to have children, despite the economic disadvantages this brings. These are people who are “at odds with the modern environment,” those who “reject the game,” that is modernity, and for whom faith is a primary motivator. These are “fundamentalists,” who Longman defines as follows in the Preface (xi): “all who rely on literal belief in ancient myth and legend, whether religious or not, to oppose modern liberal and commercial values,” whether Catholic, Islamic or Protestant. Should current downward trends in fertility rates continue, Longman warns that the future will fall into the hands of “those who reject markets, reject learning, reject modernity, and reject freedom” (p. 169), i.e. fundamentalists who will “create an anti-market culture.”

Longman’s definition of fundamentalism is startlingly broad, and, given the very frequency of warnings against it, his fear thereof just as great – for fundamentalism, in his mind, seems to signify the end of life as we currently know it. And yet, isn’t the very culture that Longman wants so badly to preserve the one that is at the root of the problems to begin with? And is it really true that, for example, Catholic “fundamentalists” reject learning and freedom? These allegations raise more questions than can be discussed adequately in the present forum. Suffice it to say that something in the modern environment is preventing couples from welcoming children into their lives, while those who stand apart from “modernity” because of their beliefs still have open arms. Would intellectual honesty alone not dictate exploring the reasons for this? After all, do we want to live in a world where human life is celebrated? Or one where the response to each child is “Gwakwanele” – enough?

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