



6 Billion People Are A Blessing, Not A Curse

by Arlan DeBlieck

Sometime in October, in some country, the United Nations (UN) estimated that the six billionth human was born. Because of poor record keeping in most countries, the United Nations can only guess. United States Census Bureau models estimated July 19, 1999 as the big day while United Nations Population Division models predicted October 12, 1999.¹ The importance of this event was to tout the success of world population control measures, the ramifications of not controlling population, and the need for continued support of United Nations population control programs.² Instead of celebrating the fact that the world could comfortably handle a six billionth person, the event was bemoaned as a step closer to the eventual demise of the human race. However, the facts do not support such doom-and-gloom predictions.

The United Nations Population Division's Department of Economics and Social Affairs published a 1998 "Revision of the World Population Estimates and Projections." In this report, the agency postulates that the world's population surpassed one billion in 1804, two billion in 1927, three billion in 1960, four billion in 1974, five billion in 1987, and six billion in 1999. It is quick to point out that it took 123 years to get from one to two billion people, but only 12 years to get from five to six billion people.³ What they do not show is that the population growth rate peaked in the mid 1960s and has been slowing ever since. The world growth rate peaked at just over two percent per year and is currently at 1.33 percent per year.⁴ It is expected to drop to one percent by 2020.⁵ It is predicted that the world's population will not double again at these rates and will peak at 10 billion people.

As the world becomes wealthier, birth rates decline. The global average fertility is 2.7 births per female; in 1950 it was five.⁶ Japan and many countries in the European Union are some of the wealthiest countries in the world. They are experiencing fertility rates below the replacement rate of 2.1 children per woman.⁷ Europe's average fertility rate is 1.38 children per woman.⁸ Japan is looking at creating incentives for families to have more children. Europe's population averaged 31 years of age in 1950; it is expected to rise to 49 years by 2050. The fertility rate in the U.S. is 1.93, but because of immigration the U.S. is expected to increase its population to roughly 372 million by 2050. Conversely, Europe's population is expected to drop from 300 million today to 240 million by 2050.⁹

Worries over the density of the world's population are not new. Great thinkers of earlier eras such as Euripides, Polybius, Plato, and Tertullian have all prophesied doom because of food shortages and environmental ruin caused by over-population.¹⁰ In particular, Thomas Robert Malthus (1798) theorized that food supplies could not keep pace with the growth of the world's population and that famines and wars would keep our growth under control. This theory fits well with the animal kingdom, but as even Malthus admitted later, humans are rational and will change behavior to adapt to their views of the future. An example of this is families' views on children and wealth. As families get wealthier and their time more valuable, they tend to view the cost of having one parent stay home to raise children as being too expensive. Hence, as nations become wealthier they tend to have fewer children.

Technology will probably delay resource shortages for the foreseeable future. This is evidenced by the declining prices of most resources over time (except for the price of human labor which is rising). However, this is not deterring modern Malthusians; they are just changing their argument. Their view is that increasing wealth is increasing the need for energy which will cause global warming and eventually lead to the burning up of the planet.¹¹

If technology has been delaying our demise as a race, then it has been going on for at least 10,000 years. The human population has been increasing and seems to take big leaps following the advent of new technologies. According to paleoecologist Edward Deevey, three such leaps in population occurred.

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The first (roughly 1 million B.C.) followed the "...innovation of tool-using and tool-making." The second was 10,000 years ago "...when men began to keep herds and to plow and plant the earth..." The third came roughly 250-350 years ago with the start of the Industrial Revolution. As the initial gains in productivity were exploited, growth in population slowed.¹²

Finally, some of the most significant progress in the human condition occurred at the turn of the 19th century because of advances in medicine and a better understanding of the human body. Many people assume increases in population are the result of increased birth rates. However, decreasing mortality rates may have had a larger impact.

According to the Center for Disease Control, Americans are living 30 years longer than they did at the turn of the century. Prominent killers in 1900 were pneumonia, tuberculosis, and intestinal-related diseases. The overall death rate from diseases like pneumonia and tuberculosis (TB) has decreased from 797 per 100,000 people to 59 per 100,000 in 1996. As a result, life expectancy has risen from 47.3 years to 76.1. Today the three leading killers are heart disease, cancer, and stroke. Improvements such as cleaner drinking water, nutrition, and antibiotics have allowed more children under the age of five to live. In 1900, 30.4 percent of all U.S. deaths were children under five. That has dropped to just 1.4 percent in 1997.¹³

The world's population and its standard of living have increased dramatically since the one billion mark of 1804. Unfortunately, unscrupulous bureaucrats prey on the fears of people and promote impending doom in order to get control of the lives of others. Data and history do not support the need for this meddling view; if anything, it shows the opposite. People are a gift. The more people there are, the better our chances for survival, not worse. The birth of the six billionth human on earth should have been celebrated, not lamented.

Endnotes:

¹United Nations Population Fund and U.S. Census Bureau as reported by Howard Scripps news service in the Quad-Cities Times. Date unknown, but printed in or near August 1999.

²Lecture given by Sheldon Richman on October 23, 1999 at the Foundation for Economic Education, titled "Population Growth, the Environment, and Resources." Sheldon Richman is editor of the Freeman and a frequent contributor to the Freedom Daily.

³Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, United Nations, "Revision of the World Population Estimates and Projections," p. 1. URL: <http://www.popin.org/pop1998/>.

⁴Michael Sanera and Jane Shaw, Facts Not Fear, pp.58-9. See also note 3, p. 1.

⁵*Ibid*, p. 59.

⁶United Nations 1998 Population report, p. 1.

⁷Ben Wattenberg, "Counting Change in Euroland," On the Issues, (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, February 1999), p. 1.

⁸*Ibid*.

⁹*Ibid*, p. 2.

¹⁰Julian L. Simon, "World Population Growth: An Anti-Doomsday View," The Atlantic Monthly, (Boston MA: Atlantic Monthly Group, Inc., August 1981), p. 70.

¹¹Mark Hertsgaard, "Will We Run Out Of Gas?" Vol. 154, No. 19 Time, (New York, NY: Time, Inc., November 8, 1999), pp. 110-111.

¹²Julian Simon, pp. 70-1.

¹³Times Wire Services, "CDC: Life Expectancy Has Climbed 30 Years," Quad-Cities Times, (Davenport, IA: Lee Enterprises, Inc., July 31, 1999), p. 3A. Dateline Atlanta, GA.

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