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Reflections on Population

Contribution to GTI Forum [The Population Debate Revisited](#)

Herman Daly

1. The Latin word *proles* means *offspring*, and in Ancient Rome the *proletariat* was the class with no property whose contribution to the Republic was to *proliferate* many offspring—servants, soldiers, and laborers for the benefit of the patricians. The association of poverty with both non-ownership of property and rapid proliferation is rooted in our very language. Marx redefined *proletariat*, emphasizing non-ownership of property and avoiding reference to excess population as a cause of poverty, even though it would have provided a better explanation for his needed “reserve army of the unemployed” than did technological unemployment. But Marx wanted the cause of poverty to be rooted entirely in social relations so as to be curable only by social revolution. Malthus, and even more the neo-Malthusians, offered the alternative of moral restraint as an individualistic cure for poverty rooted in the natural tendency to reproduce beyond subsistence. Malthus’s theory of poverty emphasized differential population growth by class and downplayed differential property ownership, while Marx’s theory did the opposite. Today, the Marxian connection to non-ownership of property by itself defines the modern meaning of proletariat, and the literal Latin connection to many offspring has been forgotten. It is past time to remember it, and to think seriously about it again.¹

2. Some say that people who want to limit population by birth control are anti-life. No, the more lives the better, as long as we are not all alive at the same time, elbowing each other and God’s other creatures off our finite planet. Maximizing the number of people simultaneously alive (especially high-consuming people) overshoots and consumes carrying capacity, reducing cumulative lives ever to be lived over time. It is *laissez-faire* reproduction, along with *laissez-faire*

production, that is anti-life. Contraception is pro-life, as is limited production and consumption. Even abortion can be pro-life.²

3. Some say that with more births there is a better chance of getting another Einstein or Beethoven, so we better encourage more births. By the same facile logic, there is also a better chance of getting another Hitler or Caligula. Maybe we already have some potential Einsteins or Beethovens whose genius is stifled by poverty and could flourish in a more egalitarian world.

4. Some worry about depopulation and a shortage of labor (they mean a shortage of cheap labor). Also, a reduction of the working-age population relative to retired seniors threatens the solvency of social security at the existing level of ample pensions and early retirement age. The cheap retirement lobby prefers to increase the younger working cohorts relative to the retired cohorts, and that in turn requires population growth, not reduction.

5. Some personalize the population question and ask, "Where would I be if my parents had practiced birth control?" Maybe you (your self-conscious being, spirit, soul) would have been connected to a child born to other parents, perhaps in a different time and place. Did you not ask in wonder as a child, "Why am I me, and not you?" Did you ever solve that mystery? Has anyone solved it? You might also ask, "Where would I be if my parents had not practiced birth control?" Maybe you would be an unwanted tenth child born to poor parents.

6. Some personalize the immigration issue and ask, "Where would I be if my great-grandparents had not been allowed to immigrate to the United States? You have eight great-grandparents. Did they all immigrate? Regardless of that, is not the US, the third most populous country in the world, historically a "country of immigrants"? Yes, for sure, and net immigration is by far still the major driver of current US population growth. Does that mean that more future immigration is better than less? Does it even mean that past immigration was all good? Indigenous people did not benefit from the immigration of our European ancestors, did they? Nor did anyone benefit from the involuntary immigration of African slaves, except for the slave owners who got cheap labor. In fact, these two immigrations are often considered the foundational sins of the American nation.

7. Without slaves, where can we get the cheap labor needed to keep the economy growing? From the proletariat, of course, just like the Ancient Romans. Encourage the proletariat to proliferate, and make it hard for them to move out of the proletariat by owning property. Concentrate property in the hands of patrician oligarchs. If the fertility of our proletariat should fall, then outlaw abortion, and contraception too, and bring in more immigrants from the global proletariat to depress national wages. Especially ignore undocumented immigration, because it keeps wages low and profits high. We have it easier than the Ancient Romans—they had to conquer foreign nations to add to their proletariat; today, people just come on their own. Indeed, wars, famines, and environmental disasters in our world of ecological overshoot, to which our growth has contributed substantially, make it morally impossible not to accept a large number of immigrants as legitimate refugees.

8. In my lifetime, world population has quadrupled (from 2 to 8 billion). That big fact, plus the above thoughts, makes me wonder why there has recently been such a timorous attitude toward discussion of population (by Neo-Classical Economists, Marxists, Catholics, Evangelical Protestants, and Technological Gnostics), and makes me welcome Ian Lowe's [call](#) to lift the taboo. Certainly, the Great Transition Network should be a major participant in a renewed and frank discussion of population.

Endnotes

1. Herman Daly, "A Marxian-Malthusian View of Poverty and Development," *Population Studies* (March 1970).

2. See Gary Wills, "The Bishops are Wrong About Biden. And About Abortion," *New York Times*, June 27, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/27/opinion/biden-bishops-communion-abortion.html>.

About the Author



Herman Daly is an ecological economist and Emeritus Professor at the University of Maryland, School of Public Policy. From 1988 to 1994, he was a Senior Economist in the Environment Department of the World Bank. Prior to that, he was a professor of economics at Louisiana State University, where he taught for twenty years. He has served as Ford Foundation Visiting Professor at the University of Ceará (Brazil), Research Associate at Yale University, Visiting Fellow at the Australian National University, and Senior Fulbright Lecturer in Brazil. He was co-founder and associate editor of the journal *Ecological Economics*. He has written extensively on theorizing the steady-state economy and co-developed the Index of Sustainable Welfare. He holds a PhD from Vanderbilt University.

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