

OF HUMAN FALLOUT

The population bomb has exploded in the undeveloped world, and its political and economic shock waves are rushing for our shores.

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Remember the population bomb? This profound concern over exponential growth of the world's population provided ample fodder for academic dispute and dinner conversation during the 1960s and 1970s. Commentators like Stanford University's Paul Ehrlich warned we would soon see famine, eco-catastrophe, and war as poor nations failed to cope with their surging birth rates. Yet these worries were swept from the popular imagination in the 1990s, when a less gloomy view prevailed: Yes, world population had grown dramatically, but birth rates were dropping practically everywhere. Many conservative commentators declared that the human population explosion was over. The real problem had become the impending global "birth dearth" or "population implosion."

In reality, both sides in this decades-old debate have missed the crucial issue, which is not population growth or population numbers in themselves. The crucial issue is the huge difference in growth rates between the world's rich and poor regions.

Birth rates have fallen much further in rich countries than poor. Some rich countries are projected to actually shrink in coming decades. Italy's population, for example, will decline 22 percent by 2050, Japan's 14 percent, and Russia's 30 percent or more.

Meanwhile, birth rates in most poor countries, though dropping, will remain above the replacement level of 2.1 for many decades. Also, most poor countries still have a large proportion of girls entering their reproductive years. So the populations of these countries will continue to grow. Fifty-nine countries—including several of huge importance to the security of the international system, like Nigeria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan—will see their populations double by 2050. Afghanistan will triple in size; and the populations of Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Somalia, Uganda, and Yemen are predicted to quadruple.

Divergent population growth rates are already causing

a severe imbalance between the North and South, most noticeably at the interfaces between rich and poor regions: along the Rio Grande, between the United States and Latin America, across the Timor and Arafura Seas between Australia and Indonesia, and along the boundaries between Europe, North Africa, and Western Asia.

The European situation is acute. In 1950, the 25 countries of North Africa and West Asia had populations less than half that of Europe: 163 million as compared to 350 million). By 2000, the former region's population had almost quadrupled to surpass Europe's (587 million to 451 million). And by 2050, according to United Nations' projections, North Africa's and West Asia's population will be more than three-times larger than Europe's (1.3 billion to 401 million).

By this time, Europe will have actually shrunk by 50 million people. Its population will be plummeting—at an accelerating rate—by 2 million annually, and half its citizens will be older than fifty. The population of Europe's hinterland, in contrast, will be growing by about 16 million a year, and almost half of its citizens will be under 30.

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Does this shift really matter?

Absolutely. On one side of this rich-poor divide, static or shrinking populations enjoy vast wealth, while on the other side, hundreds of millions of people are unemployed or underemployed. Thanks to global communications, these economically surplus people have a good idea of what life is like in rich countries. Hence, millions of people are on the move from the South to the North, crossing jungles, mountain ranges, deserts, and oceans. They travel by foot, on top of dilapidated flat-bed trucks, in the stinking holds of tramp freighters, and in the suffocating heat and darkness of shipping containers. Many citizens of rich countries see only a faceless foreign horde pushing into their nations from all directions; and, more and more, all they want to hear are right-wing calls for more coastal radar, more barbed-wire fences, and more police ready to crack down on the immigrants who make it through.

Despite these vivid realities, we in the wealthiest nations have experienced only a small fraction of the migration pressure we will face in coming decades.

Today's steady flow of people arriving from poor regions will soon become a torrent, the consequences of which—for us and for the migrants—remain inscrutable. Of course, these developments might be positive: The migrants could bring cultural vitality and needed labor to the North, while their remittances transfer capital and purchasing power to the South. But they could just as easily be disastrous—especially if waves of migration combine with other highly plausible pressures in Western countries, like economic stagnation and mega-terrorism. Such converging events would give a huge boost to neo-fascist movements, and they could make Western publics far more receptive to authoritarian government.

This is the world's real demographic crisis—one we are unprepared to meet because, when we consider the subject of population at all, we usually dwell rather myopically on falling birth rates within the developed world. The forgotten population bomb, in the meantime, has detonated, and the shock wave is about to hit our shores.