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Population AND ITS DISCONTENTS

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The Positive Side of the Older Populations To Come

Birth and death rates in countries of largely European origin, as well as in Japan, are now at their lowest levels in history. If this situation continues, these countries will inevitably have much older populations and will experience declines in total numbers. That prospect has generated a host of fears: of labor shortages and wage inflation, unsustainable calls on the public purse, weakened national defenses, shortages of intellect, declines in national “vigor,” even race suicide and the disappearance of European culture.

The greatest of these fears relate to the anticipated additional financial costs—for pensions, health care, and custodial services—associated with older age structures, and whether there will be enough younger people earning the money and paying the taxes to defray them. But, while providing comprehensive health and pension programs appropriate to older age structures could be expected to require some readjustment in both perspective and social policy (regarding health care or taxation, for instance), in none of these countries are the financial barriers to such provision impossibly high. Whether this provision is actually forthcoming is another matter, but it is a matter not of money but of social priorities.

Is an aging population something we realistically need to be concerned about? Well, yes, it is—but not as much as most people seem to think, and not for the reasons commonly cited.

Let’s begin with two pertinent truths: first, no population can increase indefinitely. There are limits: to resources, to physical space, to what might be termed “social space.” Though these limits can be extended by changing the way we behave and use our environment, there will come a point, even with the most judicious behavior and use of the environment, beyond which population increases will inevitably result in declines in the quality of life, and ultimately in life itself.

Second, the changing age structures and imminent numerical declines we are now seeing in some countries stem from two great human achievements: *the ability to control one’s childbearing* to the point where the goal of “every child a wanted child” is now a tangible possibil-

The huge change in the age structure that would come with a slowing or halting of population growth need not result in older people becoming an economically crippling burden. In fact, the kinds of policies that could stimulate this change are the same ones that would produce a more ecologically viable and vital society as a whole.

ity, and *the ability to postpone death* to the point where the great majority in these countries now die at what not so long ago was considered a highly advanced age.

Thus, older age structures and imminent numerical declines are to be welcomed, not deplored. They indicate that we now have the ability to adjust human numbers to the realities of limited resources in a rational and humane manner, no longer having it cruelly forced upon us by way of higher death rates.

What Are Those Europeans Really Worried About?

But it is not just the existence of limits that argues for welcoming these demographic changes; it is also the alternatives—for these are all either manifestly undesirable, irrelevant, or ineffective. If those who are concerned about these changes simply wanted a younger age structure or a cessation of declining growth rates, the specifically demographic means to reaching this goal would be to allow mortality to increase among the elderly; and fertility and immigration to increase among the young. None of these is realistic.

For ethical reasons, any shortening the lives of older people by increasing the availability of suicide and euthanasia would have to apply only to the most helpless and those suffering extreme and permanent pain—and these, fortunately, are but a very small proportion of the total, even among the very old. The effect on age structure of allowing increases in mortality at the older ages would be no more than minimal.

Fertility is another matter. Declines in fertility account for most of the trend to older age structures in these countries, and it is through increases in fertility that this trend is most likely to be halted or reversed. Ultimately, of course, if these populations are to avoid com-

pletely disappearing (in a purely biological sense), their fertility rates will have to return to replacement levels. But that is a long way off. The main concern at present is with achieving a younger age structure, and policies specifically intended to increase fertility offer little to go on. Coercing women to bear children they *do not want* by denying them access to contraception and abortion is not only objectionable on both moral and health grounds but also unlikely to meet with any enduring success among people who have already brought fertility under extensive control. On the other hand, non-coercive efforts to increase the number of children people *do* want (or, at least, are willing to bear) have, so far, been notably unsuccessful. Raising the birth rates in particular countries could often be self-defeating, not only because it would increase the total numbers of people on the planet, but because these additional children would eventually become old themselves.

What, then, of immigration? Apart from the numerous social, economic, emotional, and political problems associated with immigration is the demographic fact that immigrants, too, grow old.

In short, the specifically demographic approaches to the problems presumably associated with older age structures and imminent numerical declines won't work. If we are to enjoy the benefits of low mortality, we must accept the fact that age structures will be older than ever before, and that fertility will have to remain at no more than replacement levels. The prudent course, then, is to set about doing what is required both to adjust to these conditions and to realize the benefits inherent in them.

Adapting to—and Benefiting From—an Older, Smaller Population

What would this prudent course entail? Let's recognize, first, that the needs of older people are not all that different from those of the rest of the population. Ultimately, having an older age structure will require that we find ways to enable older people to look after themselves more effectively, to enable them to live lives of dignity and reasonable comfort as actively participating and respected members of society. We can begin to approach these long-term goals by focusing on six intermediate goals, all of which are to some extent interrelated:

Lower car usage. Reducing dependence on motor vehicles is important not only because of the great damage cars do to health and the environment, but also because, among other things, extensive car usage requires such vast public expenditure that it limits what is available for more socially useful purposes and encourages excessively low-density urban layouts—layouts that add greatly to the costs of establishing and maintaining urban services and, by militating against the pro-

vision of either convenient public transportation or shops and other facilities within walking distance, make it especially difficult for older people to remain active participants in the community and to take major responsibility for their own care.

A high rate of car usage, because it reduces the extent of one's contact with the physical, social, and human environment, also militates against the development of various individual coping skills and traits, like self-confidence, self-discipline, and the ability (limited when one is insulated from them in the cocoon of a car) to encounter without fear or anxiety such elements of the social setting as novelty, strangers, human variety, and dissimilar life styles.

More livable cities. This is closely related to reducing car usage. As a British visitor to the U.S. Midwest once wrote:

Detroit is synonymous with two things: cars and violent death.... But the city does not just make cars; it has also been made by the car. The city core is dominated by an indoor shopping mall which you can reach only by automobile. The "Renaissance Centre" is surrounded by a network of access streets which funnel cars directly into cavernous underground parking lots. Outside, the old commercial streets are largely deserted and the buildings derelict.... Says local resident Ralph Slovenko: "Everything has been removed from the streets except cars and hoodlums. The more people you take off the streets, the more people become sitting ducks for crime." [W. Ellwood, "Car Chaos," *New Internationalist* No. 195, 1989]

When it comes to the layout and functioning of towns and cities, the particular needs of the elderly include:

- public transportation that is readily available, affordable, safe, and clean;
- a high degree of freedom from the physical, visual, aural, and neurological intrusion of trucks and cars;
- medium-density (but not high-rise) urban layouts, to permit greater environmental (and economic) efficiency in the provision of services, and greater ease of mobility and contact with others;
- readily accessible local parks, promenades, and informal meeting places;
- shops and eating places that are to human scale and readily accessible;
- neighborhood diversity in available housing types and living arrangements; and
- less geographic and functional specialization by stage-of-life and economic activity. Older people need frequent, informal contact with others if they are to remain participant members of society. And children and young people, in turn, need to have contact with old people—so they will learn not to fear them; and so they will learn something of the needs and thoughts of old people, and of what to expect

when their own parents, and later they themselves, reach that stage of life.

Social services specifically geared to the needs of older or infirm persons. These range from home assistance with certain elements of personal care to shopping and delivery services, and respite services to provide occasional relief for care-givers.

Certain facilities that would directly benefit not only the aged and infirm but other sectors of the society, such as:

- walk-in health and counseling services
- inexpensive recreational facilities
- libraries
- clean, safe public spaces
- clean public toilets
- public activities (such as open-air band concerts and free night-time athletic events).

And a word could be put in, too, for the value of having that great English contribution to civilization: a well-run neighborhood pub.

These would give people some exercise, get them into public areas, mix together different sectors of the population, and introduce some variety and interest into people's lives. They could also strengthen initiative and independence, and foster a sense of community. They could enrich the lives of older people and put them in better frames of mind for coping with life's exigencies, and reduce the likelihood of their becoming entrapped in a low-expectations model emphasizing age-based deterioration and loss of function.

Less use of age as a criterion for participation in society. There is much that younger people can learn from the skills and experience of their elders—perhaps especially with respect to interpersonal relations, adjustment to role change (as, for example, with retirement and widowhood), loss of physical and mental capacity, redundancy, and bereavement. And, of course, older people have much to learn (and not only about computers!) from those who are younger.

More equal distribution of wealth and income. With their superior strength in the marketplace, rich people are better able to direct society's energies and its allocation of resources into channels from which they, the rich, can most benefit. There is nothing necessarily either intentional or malicious about this. But it takes a lot of poor people to consume as much as the rich—what with their vacation homes, their second cars, their greater amounts of travel, and their higher rates of consumption overall.

Assisted by mass advertising, the rich also set the pattern for much of the consumption of the rest of the society. The result is higher resource consumption levels (and the waste this gives rise to), often undesirably high levels of consumer indebtedness, and a greater emphasis on instant or short-term gratification as against

saving, the husbanding of resources, and planning for the future.

This pattern of consumption grounded in marked inequality of income and wealth also nurtures privatism: the idea that to enjoy something—a beach or lakefront, a piece of equipment, the open countryside—one must *own* it. This limits development of those habits of sharing that, while underlying any healthy society, become increasingly necessary with the aging of its members. It also locks up, for use by only a minority, many resources (access to nature or open space or solitude, for example) that are of singular importance to the emotional and physical health of the society as a whole.

The issue is not one of absolute poverty but of relative deprivation. In an industrial, high-consumption society with a markedly unequal distribution of wealth there is both more to *feel* deprived of, because of advertising and the example of consumption set by the better-off, and more *actually* to be deprived of, because of what the better-off are able to appropriate to their own use. Such marked inequality also entails emotional costs: invidious comparisons, discontent with what one has, and frustration over not being able to do “better.” Under such conditions, low income can all too readily lead to low self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy and failure—conditions little associated with being able to cope, or even with trying to.

Older age structures in low mortality/low fertility populations are either already under way in many countries or likely to be so within a generation or two. But a society's conditions of life are unlikely to be much affected simply by the number of old people or their share of the population. Old age will be a problem to the extent that social and environmental conditions fail to meet the needs of *all* age groups (and of future generations no less than present). The importance of social policy in this regard can hardly be exaggerated. Meeting any society's needs entails giving some extra attention to the special needs arising at particular stages of life, old age included. But the threats to human wellbeing in these countries would appear, still, to derive more from non-demographic than demographic phenomena; and, so far as demographic phenomena are concerned, more from past increases in numbers and marked fluctuations in annual birth rates than from either prospective numerical declines or the trend to older age structures.

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