

The United Nations forecasts that in 2050, the global fertility rate will decline to an average of 2.05 births per woman. That is just below the 2.1 needed for a stable world population. The UN has another forecast, based on different assumptions, where the rate is 1.6 babies per woman. So the United Nations, which has the best data available, is predicting that by the year 2050, population growth will be either stable or declining dramatically. I believe the latter is closer to the truth.

The situation is even more interesting if we look at the developed regions of the world, the forty-four most advanced countries. In these countries women are currently having an average of 1.6 babies each, which means that populations are already contracting. Birthrates in the middle tier of countries are down to 2.9 and falling. Even the least developed countries are down from 6.6 children per mother to 5.0 today, and expected to drop to 3.0 by 2050. There is no doubt that birthrates are plunging. The question is why. The answer can be traced to the reasons that the population explosion occurred in the first place: in a certain sense, the population explosion halted itself.

There were two clear causes for the population explosion that were equally significant. First, there was a decline in infant mortality; second there was an increase in life expectancies. Both were the result of modern medicine, the availability of more food, and the introduction of basic public health that began in the late eighteenth century.

There are no really good statistics on fertility rates in 1800, but the best estimates fall between 6.5 and 8.0 children per woman on average. Women in Europe in 1800 were having the same number of babies as women in Bangladesh are having today, yet the population wasn't growing. Most children born in 1800 didn't live long enough to reproduce. Since the 2.1 rule still held, out of eight children born, six died before puberty.

Medicine, food, and hygiene dramatically reduced the number of infant and childhood deaths, until by late in the nineteenth century, most children survived to have their own children. Even though infant mortality declined, family patterns did not shift. People were having the same number of babies as before.

It's not hard to understand why. First, let's face the fact that people like to have sex, and sex without birth control makes babies—and there was no

birth control at the time. But people didn't mind having a lot of children because children had become the basis of wealth. In an agricultural society, every pair of hands produces wealth; you don't have to be able to read or program computers to weed, seed, or harvest. Children were also the basis for retirement, if someone lived long enough to have an old age. There was no Social Security, but you counted on your children to take care of you. Part of this was custom, but part of it was rational economic thinking. A father owned land or had the right to farm it. His child needed to have access to the land to live, so the father could dictate policy.

As children brought families prosperity and retirement income, the major responsibility of women was to produce as many children as possible. If women had children, and if they both survived childbirth, the family as a whole was better off. This was a matter of luck, but it was a chance worth taking from the standpoint of both families and the men who dominated them. Between lust and greed, there was little reason not to bring more children into the world.

Habits are hard to change. When families began moving into cities en masse, children were still valuable assets. Parents could send them to work in primitive factories at the age of six and collect their pay. In early industrial society factory workers didn't need many more skills than farm laborers did. But as factories became more complex, they had less use for six-year-olds. Soon they needed somewhat educated workers. Later they needed managers with MBAs.

As the sophistication of industry advanced, the economic value of children declined. In order to continue being economically useful, children had to go to school to learn. Rather than adding to family income, they consumed family income. Children had to be clothed, fed, and sheltered, and over time the amount of education they needed increased dramatically; until today many "children" go to school until their mid-twenties and still have not earned a dime. According to the United Nations, the average number of years of schooling in the leading twenty-five countries in the world ranges from fifteen to seventeen.

The tendency to have as many babies as possible continued into the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many of our grandparents or great-grandparents come from families that had ten children. A couple of