

# OUR ANTI-CHILD CULTURE

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Jonathan V. Last is a senior writer at the *Weekly Standard*, the prominent conservative magazine that features Bill Kristol and Fred Barnes. He is also a gifted writer, a strong pro-life advocate, and a man not afraid to challenge the conventional wisdom. His new book, *What to Expect When No One's Expecting: America's Coming Demographic Disaster*, is a much needed wakeup call for the nation: we need more children, and we need them now.

It is commonplace for academics and pundits to assume that we have too many people in the world. They paint scary environmental scenarios and trot out mind-numbing data on how our limited resources cannot sustain current rates of population growth. They're wrong. As Last makes clear, it is precisely the current population growth rate that cannot be sustained any longer.

Today, Al Gore likes to wax hysterical over the so-called population problem. A lot of his ideas are traceable to the intellectual godfather of population mania, Paul Ehrlich. His 1968 book, *The Population Bomb*, had a tremendous effect, and it was not salutary. Looking back at its incredible influence, Last labels it "one of the most spectacularly foolish books ever published." He does not exaggerate.

Ehrlich was all over radio, TV, and college campuses in the late 1960s and the 1970s. He was known for proclaiming with dogmatic certainty, "The battle to feed all of humanity is over." Indeed, he predicted that the scale of famines in the 1970s would lead to the deaths of "hundreds of millions of people," all because of overpopulation. But as Last ably shows, Ehrlich's prediction was not only wrong, his "silly book" was wrong when he penned it. To be specific, "Fertility

rates in America and across the world had been declining gradually for decades,” Last says, “but beginning in 1968 they sank like a stone.”

Unfortunately, in many circles data matter less than perception. It was the perception of overpopulation, fed by those like Ehrlich, that allowed elites to see people as the enemy, a foe that must be curtailed. An anti-child culture soon took root, aided and abetted by leaders in education, the media, and government. Foundations also jumped on board, rewarding liberal think tanks with plentiful grants.

The development of an anti-child culture required more than this. Technology played a role. Once the pill became commercially available in 1960, it would not take long before fertility rates would plummet. In 1973, abortion was legalized, adding more fuel to the fire: sex without consequences was the dream of irresponsible men throughout the ages, and now they could get what they wanted *in the name of women's rights*.

As Last points out, the migration of women into the workforce all but insured the prevalence of two-income families. Consider that in 1965, 44 percent of women worked outside the home; by 1990 the figure was 70 percent (about where it is now). Let's not forget about the sharp increase in shacking up (politely called cohabitation). These arrangements, based on convenience, not commitment, pay lousy social dividends: while 78 percent of marriages last more than five years, only 30 percent of cohabitations last that long. Moreover, the divorce rate for couples who previously lived together is much higher than those who waited until they were married.

The illegitimacy rate (thoughtfully called the out-of-wedlock rate) is also related to these social dynamics. What's new is the fact that the rate of illegitimacy has more than doubled for women over the age of 30. The declining influence of religion surely figures here: the stigma once attached to

illegitimacy has all but vanished. The good news is that those young people who are faithful churchgoers are happier in their marriages, and are less likely to divorce. So religion matters.

Is it any wonder why young people are waiting longer to marry, and are having fewer children when they do? This is not the kind of social base upon which a child-friendly society can be built. And it shows: dogs have replaced children as a source of affection in urban America. In 1994, we spent \$17 billion on pets; today we're close to \$50 billion. The same phenomenon is also true in nations that have adopted an anti-child culture, namely Japan and Italy: the "dog mommy" is now a common Japanese stereotype.

But does it matter? Yes, in terms of economic productivity, a declining fertility rate (2.1 percent is the replacement level) is the kiss of death. For senior citizens, the outlook is devastating: every dime paid by workers to the Social Security Trust Fund is spent on *current* retirees—none of it is put away for those who are currently paying into it. To put it another way, thanks to collapsing fertility rates, the huge Social Security bill for the swelling ranks of senior citizens will be paid for by a declining number of workers. The worst is yet to come.

Jonathan Last has given us much to think about; after all, he is really talking about the fate of our nation. While all is not doom and gloom—we are an eternally resilient people—there are plenty of problems built into our demographic profile that cannot be neglected any longer.