



Written by [Selwyn Duke](#) on June 23, 2008

A Global Population Ice Age

If you're like most alive today, you grew up with Paul R. Ehrlich's Malthusian idea of a "population bomb." It just seems like common sense that man will increase his numbers inexorably until, one day, we find ourselves living a real-life *Soylent Green* scenario, sans drama and Charlton Heston to sound that indelible alarm about the *real* source of a futuristic, overpopulated world's food supply, "Soylent Green is people!"

Yet truth is stranger than fiction, and a work of reality, hour-long documentary *Demographic Winter*, is sounding its own alarm: the population bomb is a dud. It always has been. Instead, Earth's population is poised to implode as birthrates plummet on a scale heretofore unseen in the annals of man.



This may seem, well, counterintuitive. Isn't the world's population still increasing? *Demographic Winter* answers affirmatively, but also says the end of population growth is in sight. While man will add perhaps 1.8 billion more to his flock, it's only due to improved healthcare and increased longevity — the number of children in the world is already declining. In fact, the statistics are staggering. Birthrates are now below replacement level (2.1 children per couple) in approximately 70 countries; in Western Europe, the figure is 1.38, and in northern Italy and parts of Spain it is below 1. As a result, Europe's 65-year-olds now outnumber her 14-year-olds, and one German province had to close 220 schools in 2006. Children were present in 80 percent of U.S. households a century ago; that number is now 32 percent. And while this phenomenon is most acute in the developed world, other nations are beginning to follow suit. Amazingly, for instance, Mexico's birthrate is declining at an unprecedented rate.

Demographic Winter possesses a quality that can be either a strength or a weakness, depending on your audience and goals: it avoids moralization or religious pronouncements, approaching the issue from a scientific, data-based perspective. And while many featured experts obviously care about population implosion, most are not pro-family activists but hail from academia. The majority are social scientists — a group not known for religiosity or moral absolutism — and most are not conservatives. The worldwide experts consulted during production include demographer Phillip Longman, author of *The Empty Cradle: How Falling Birthrates Threaten World Prosperity and What to Do About It*; Patrick Fagan, psychologist and former U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Health and Human Services; Harry S. Dent, president of the H.S. Dent Foundation; and Nobel Laureate Gary S. Becker, Ph.D.

It is an impressive list, but still, why should anyone fret about declining population? Doesn't it simply mean more pristine landscapes and elbow room for the rest of us? That is the knee-jerk reaction, yet there is another side to this story. As Phillip Longman observed, "The ongoing global decline in human birthrates is the single most powerful force affecting the fate of nations and the future of society in the



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21st century.” Without a doubt, warns *Demographic Winter*, it may portend economic decline and the death of the West.

First, rendering demographic-based economic forecasting, Harry S. Dent tells us that when the enormous baby-boom generation moves beyond its peak spending years — which end at age 48 — its reduced spending will cause an economic contraction, one the smaller generation following it will not be able to forestall. We will then follow in the footsteps of Japan, which had no baby boom, grayed before us, and experienced an economic meltdown in the 1990s (which Dent predicted). During this period, the Nikkei stock exchange lost 80 percent of its value, real estate depreciated with it, and Japan has wallowed in continual recession ever since. Of course, a major non-demographic factor falling outside the scope of this film — Japan’s stifling corporate socialism — was also at play. Nevertheless, the film makes a compelling case that aging populations have a huge negative impact on the economy, whether in Japan or elsewhere.

In our own country, our baby boomers will begin crossing the threshold into retirement in 2010. Yet that is just the tip of our demographic winter iceberg. As the old increase in number relative to the young, there will be fewer workers to drive the economy and fund Social Security and Medicare. As a result, the latter may be taxed more heavily and, in turn, work less and have even fewer children, creating a vicious circle. Also, most innovators are between 30 and 44 years of age; thus, innovation will decrease commensurate with the decline of that group. Moreover, with the reduction in overall consumer spending, companies will have less incentive to fund innovation. Gary S. Becker sums up the effects well by paraphrasing Adam Smith: “Depressions are associated with decreasing population.” Was Adam Smith correct? History both before and after his time instructs that he was.

As demographic winter descends upon the West, the economic bust will affect the whole world, according to the film. Countries relying on exports, such as China, will see overseas markets shrink. Undeveloped nations, which provide the labor force via immigration that developed countries aren’t providing for themselves, will continue to drain their own labor pool. The result could be a worldwide depression, with only some enjoying a spring thaw. Much of the developing world will still have the demographics to rebound, but the West will not. It may fade into history, much as the Ottoman, Greek, and Roman empires, paving the way for a more youthful, vigorous hegemon. The rejection of socialism and adoption of freedom in America and elsewhere would certainly help counter the effects of population aging and decline (a factor not considered by the film), but to what extent?

Demographic Winter tackles five main reasons for the drop in fertility: the sexual revolution, prosperity, the divorce revolution, inaccurate assumptions, and women working. Its social science data bears out tradition, embodying what G.K. Chesterton called “that forgotten branch of psychology” — common sense. *Demographic Winter* mentions the pill, which has reduced unwanted pregnancies among married women by 70 percent; promiscuity, which affords men sexual gratification without commitment; reluctance to have children when there is the possibility one’s spouse won’t be around in a few years; and career-driven women having few children; along with other factors. *Demographic Winter* also touches on materialism and immaturity, which make people reluctant to assume the responsibilities of parenthood.

Demographic Winter’s subtitle is “the decline of the human family” for good reason. Addressing not just the number of children born but also the capacity to raise them properly, its experts vindicate tradition again in a staunch, science-based defense of the family. They point out that today there is consensus among the best social scientists: children outside the nuclear family exhibit more social problems of all



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kinds, and, as Rutgers sociology professor David Popenoe said, “It’s married biological parents which is the gold standard.”

With populations already collapsing in Eastern Europe, nations are taking notice. Russia is losing 700,000 people per year, and if this trend continues, her population will be halved by 2050. The Putin government’s response is to pay citizens \$9,000 per child, \$140 per month, and 40 percent of salary to stay home. It’s not working. *Demographic Winter* also tells us that the “Swedish model,” with its all-encompassing nanny state, isn’t working. As Russian sociologist Viktor Medkov said, “Economic solutions won’t fix these problems.”

So, what will? Phillip Longman, a man self-described as “not churched” and part of a “progressive, secular think tank,” prescribes a rather “unprogressive” cure. The facts demand, he suggests, a return to tradition, to a system that persuaded both men and women to have children and take care of them. He calls it “patriarchy, properly understood.”

While *Demographic Winter* avoids political pronouncements, it avers that political correctness is stifling discourse, as college professors, politicians, and others kowtow to what George Orwell called those “smelly little orthodoxies” (my strident characterization). After all, the feminist, faux marriage, and other movements endeavor to devalue the traditional family, and the “people are a pox on the planet” types relish depopulation. This is why *Demographic Winter* is an important work. It shines light on a subject of which most are blithely unaware. One may be secular or prayerful, single or prolific, but open-minded people should find it informative and compelling, from beginning to end.

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