

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2026 • VOLUME 105 • NUMBER 1

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After the Spike: Population, Progress, and the Case for People

BY DEAN SPEARS AND MICHAEL GERUSO. Simon & Schuster, 2025, 320 pp.

In 1980, the economist Julian Simon took to the pages of *Social Science Quarterly* to place a bet against his intellectual rival, the biologist Paul Ehrlich. *The Population Bomb*, Ehrlich's 1968 bestseller, had argued that the staggering growth of the human species threatened to jeopardize life on Earth. Simon insisted that, contrary to Ehrlich's predictions, humanity would not self-destruct by overusing the planet's resources. Instead, Simon believed that humans would innovate their way out of scarcity. Human ingenuity, Simon wrote, was "the ultimate resource."

Their wager was specifically about the changes in the prices of a suite of commodities over a ten-year period, but it represented much more. The infamous bet was a battle between two larger camps: the catastrophists, who thought

that humans were breeding themselves into extinction, and the cornucopians, who believed markets and new technologies would work together to lower prices no matter how big the population became. Ehrlich ultimately lost that bet at a time when global economic conditions favored Simon's optimistic view of the functioning of markets. Countries also avoided catastrophe as the soaring growth of the world's population in the twentieth century did not lead to mass famine but to growing prosperity and rising standards of living.

Nearly half a century later, this debate persists in a new form. Many environmentalists still share Ehrlich's original concern and worry that population growth and consumption continue to vastly outpace the planet's ability to cope with unrelenting extraction and pollution.

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The challenge to that view, however, comes from a different place today. The problem, a new kind of catastrophist insists, is not too many people but too few. Although the last century saw an astounding six billion people added to the total world population, today two out of three people live in countries that have fertility rates below the replacement level—the rate of births per woman required to sustain natural population growth. The average number of children born per woman has been falling so rapidly that the UN Population Division estimates that 63 countries or territories have already hit their peak population size. Although the overall human population may eventually rise to around ten billion by about 2060 or 2080 (according to various estimates), it will fall thereafter—and precipitously, with each generation smaller than the last.

Simon's cornucopian vision, with all its faith in ingenuity, was fueled by a seemingly endless supply of new people, bringing fresh minds and innovative ideas. Although they share much of Simon's worldview, the economists Dean Spears and Michael Geruso have seen their faith eroded by steep plunges in fertility rates around the world. In *After the Spike: Population, Progress, and the Case for People*, they show that the world is at a critical juncture: down one path, humanity could experience a stunning and stunting depopulation; alternatively, societies could find a way to stabilize population levels by encouraging people to have more children. Only this latter route will allow societies to maintain and strengthen the sources of their flourishing.

At a time when much pronatalist rhetoric veers into xenophobia and

misogyny, Spears and Geruso offer a welcome intervention. They acknowledge the reality of climate change and the centrality of individual rights even as they stress that depopulation is a real problem and a threat to human well-being. They hold these seemingly opposed thoughts side by side. As they write: "It would be *better* if the world did not depopulate. Nobody should be *forced* or *required* to have a baby (or not to have a baby)." (italics in the original)

The authors privilege a moral argument over an economic one, insisting that a world with more people is in and of itself a better one. But that emphasis provides only a weak guide for action. Simon argued decades ago for continued population growth because he thought such growth meant that more human beings could lead productive and meaningful lives. Spears and Geruso concur. But instead of rehashing that utilitarian reasoning, they could have provided a map to guide societies down what they consider the better path of population stabilization, which would require people to have more babies than they are having now.

That inability to offer a more concrete way forward may stem from the broad scale of the authors' vision. They choose to meet environmentalists at the planetary level, worrying about the carrying capacity of Earth. Spears and Geruso insist that depopulation is an issue relevant not just to particular countries or cultures but to all. That focus on humanity as a whole, however, ends up erasing borders, differences, nuances, and contexts, and leaves readers who are convinced by their argument that depopulation is bad without an actionable research and policy agenda.

But these issues are not productively discussed at the planetary level because there's no planetary policy-making. People may be persuaded that a stable world population is in their rational self-interest. But it is an altogether different proposition for people to decide that it is in their rational self-interest to produce children themselves. That tension is hard to resolve, but resolving it is essential. Spears and Geruso are wrong when they write, "The question of *what to do, together* about worldwide depopulation is not the question of choosing *your family size*." (italics in the original) That can't be, because such individual choices—in the aggregate—inevitably drive global population trends. In fact, the authors contradict themselves when they say that "we cannot agree that whatever each individual chooses, given the world as it is, must be the first and last word on what would make for a better future."

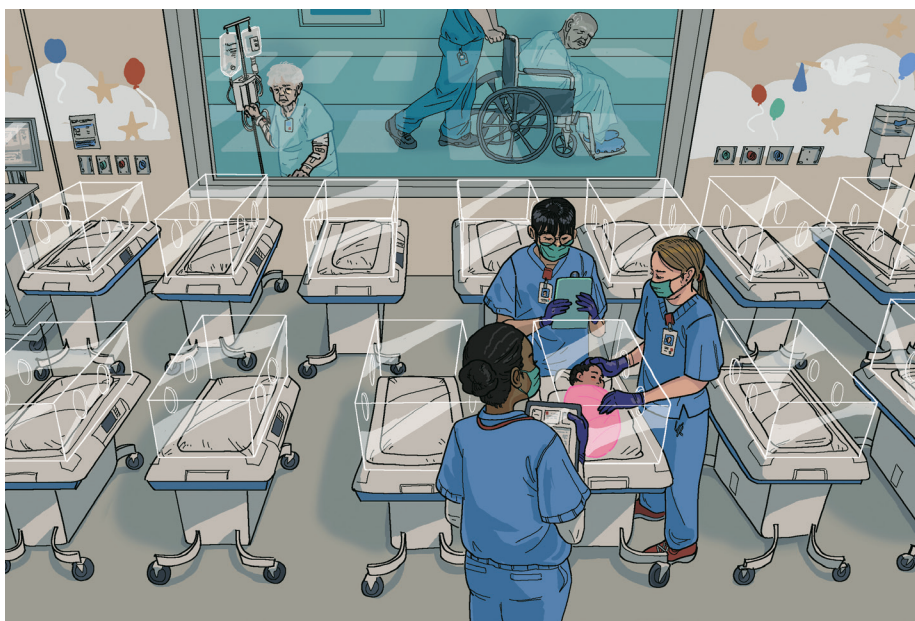
Today's highly charged conversations about low fertility need to be clearer about how to move from the aggregate and conceptual to the individual and practical, particularly when it comes to how countries make it easier for people to choose larger families. The authors' struggle mirrors a broader challenge that leaders now face. Policymakers who want to avoid freedom-limiting measures in boosting fertility rates must develop a framework that affirms both individual autonomy and the societal value of family life. Otherwise, they will leave natalist, "pro-family" agendas to be defined disproportionately by those who are willing to subordinate the rights of individuals to the imperative of producing more babies.

THE CASE FOR PEOPLE

When it comes to depopulation, the alarm bells are ringing around the world. In the United States, the tech tycoon Elon Musk and U.S. Vice President JD Vance, among other high-profile figures, have warned that declining birthrates could spell catastrophe. Such concerns tend to be either economic in focus (forecasting stark drops in growth and productivity as populations age and shrink) or nativist (fearing that national identities will erode as populations dwindle and countries seek immigrants to make up for shrinking workforces).

Although they are economists, Spears and Geruso strike a more philosophical chord. They place ethics at the center of the book: "Does it matter, is it better," they ask, "if more good lives get to be lived, rather than fewer?" They fear the impending depopulation and want societies to push toward the stabilization of human populations. A stable population, they argue, would give humanity the best possible chance at a thriving future.

The authors have clearly considered most of the arguments against their natalist positions, and much of the book is devoted to debunking common objections to the call for more babies. For example, unlike catastrophists on the political right, Spears and Geruso recognize the urgency of climate change and are willing to engage with the argument made by some environmentalists that a declining population may be a boon to the planet. They show how past environmental crises, such as ozone layer depletion and acid rain, have dissipated even as populations have risen. Since 2013, for instance, China has addressed its



awful air pollution problem even as its population has grown.

Climate change is a larger systemic crisis than narrower problems such as acid rain and unhealthy air, but the authors argue that the choices of individuals and the policies of governments and businesses can help reduce emissions even as people around the world seek higher material living standards. Moreover, they insist, depopulation would hardly be a panacea for the environment; in fact, it might make things worse by slashing the human resources—the sharp minds—societies need for the cleanup. They acknowledge that, hypothetically, halving the human population would result in an immediate reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, but they rightly dismiss that notion as unproductive because it is neither feasible nor preferable. In fact, with fertility rates already below replacement level in so many places, simply reducing the number of future babies is not going

to solve climate change. Depopulation is coming, but it won't arrive in time to heal the environment.

More important, a future with fewer people would be fundamentally poorer in the broadest sense. In making the case for more people, Spears and Geruso, as Simon before them, draw on the utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) to argue that if the ultimate good is the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people, then the more humans there are, the more happiness there will be in the world. In their view, population growth—and with it more people, minds, and ideas—fuels progress, innovation, and ultimately well-being, propelling inventions from the plow to ChatGPT. According to their logic, depopulation would be inimical to human flourishing and progress in part because it makes innovation less likely.

The book promises that an abundant future is possible—a savvy framing, because some environmentalists often

claim that the path to well-being runs through abstemiousness, a message that does not tend to resonate with broad swaths of society. Larger populations lead to prosperity because fixed costs go down when they can be spread across more people, the economic consequence of greater scale. Recognizing the human drive to consume, Spears and Geruso show that when people want what others also want—whether ramen or a better bicycle—those shared desires help incentivize the faster and cheaper production of such goods. So, they say, if people want nice things now and even nicer ones in the future, they should have children to ensure the future advantages of scale.

A MAP TO NOWHERE

Spears and Geruso effectively describe the problem of depopulation, but they do not offer a grand theory of why people are having fewer children—a state of affairs attributed variously to rising education levels, the ubiquity of smartphones, the decline of religion, and other social and material causes. Instead, they admit that nobody knows how to reverse the crash in fertility rates. But for populations to stabilize, they acknowledge, people will have to produce more children than current trends suggest they are willing to.

Some depopulation alarmists, especially on the right, blame the fertility crash on the social changes brought on by feminism and the liberal emphasis on individual fulfillment. In this view, the only way to boost birth rates is to return to patriarchal structures, in which women focus on child-rearing and home-making while men act as their families' sole breadwinners. That is anathema to

Spears and Geruso. Unlike many participants in this conversation, they believe in the importance of ensuring individual rights as well as the need to boost fertility rates. Their intervention marks a refreshing break from the vitriol and negativity permeating natalist discourse today. They recognize the complexity of the problem, that having children is at once a profoundly personal choice and one with larger societal consequences.

But Spears and Geruso miss the opportunity to guide those they convince toward solutions that would preserve rights while supporting families. With perhaps too much humility and too little curiosity, they insist that nobody yet knows how to stabilize the world population but that it would be worth trying to reach that goal. That's fine, but scholars can ask better questions and set a solid research agenda that would help push societies toward stabilization.

Here are just a few examples of what such an agenda could include. Researchers know that the expense of raising a family is a downward pressure on fertility rates, so they should ask why housing costs have skyrocketed as a proportion of income in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere. Regulations for childcare, particularly in the United States, could be responsible for an undersupply of daycare facilities. The adoption of new norms for both maternity and paternity leave remains fitful, so researchers could probe how work cultures disincentivize taking leave—and therefore having children. The policies that may help raise birthrates should not, in the short term at least, be evaluated purely in terms of their effect on fertility levels but in the ways they, for instance, ease financial burdens for families, improve

educational and health outcomes, and make it easier for people to reconcile the demands of work and family.

Spears and Geruso concede that dismal attitudes about the present and the future deter some people from wanting to have children. Modern life, with its ceaseless churn and relentless pace, may make people less likely to pursue parenthood. If that's the case, then it's conceivable that what needs to be addressed is actually the societal imperative for constant growth and innovation, which can lead to atomization, competition, and exhaustion.

At the core of the fertility debate is a set of fundamental questions: Does the state have the right to interfere in the bedroom? Do citizens have an obligation to reproduce for the greater good? And is it ever ethical to incentivize or discourage births in the pursuit of an "ideal population"? *After the Spike* skirts these questions, even as the authors clearly recognize that their logic could be weaponized to justify all sorts of practices, including those that roll back individual rights by restricting access to contraception or by limiting education about reproduction and childbirth.

There's a cautionary tale in the book, one that is personal to Geruso. As he tells it, the restrictive abortion laws in Texas discouraged him and his wife from continuing to try for a baby after a miscarriage because they were not confident that she could get the health care she would need if something went wrong. This jarring anecdote encodes the dilemma the authors can't quite overcome.

Dissecting private reproductive choices through a collective lens, as the authors do, comes with a high risk of

moralizing fertility. Rather than treating fertility as a demographic fact or reproduction as a private choice, it becomes a virtuous act, with “good” citizens being those who exercise their responsibility to reproduce in a manner beneficial for the state. Spears and Geruso do not take seriously enough how their argument may be weaponized by those who seek policy change, but they should. Unless societies can chart a path between recognizing human freedom and acknowledging the peril of depopulation, the conversation about low fertility will be, at best, unproductive and, at worst, actively dangerous for individual rights.

These are not just theoretical exercises; they are the subject of policies such as China’s drive to encourage women to marry and have children after decades of the imposition of its one-child policy and, similarly in the United States, the proposals that U.S. lawmakers are entertaining about “birth bonuses,” or direct cash payments to parents who have children. At the state level in the United States, policies regarding reproduction are indeed shaping people’s lives; around 121 million Americans—about 35 percent of the population—reside in states where access to contraceptives is actively restricted, according to research by the Population Reference Bureau.

THE COSTS OF PANIC

The physicist John Holdren, one of Ehrlich’s close friends and collaborators, at one point joined the bet against Simon, insisting that human societies were pushing dangerously close to their natural bounds. But even he acknowledged, “If I’m wrong, people will still be better fed, better housed, and happier.” In other words, fervor about population

control and the fear of ecological limits, however misplaced, can spur worthwhile action. For the most part, in the wake of the ferocious overpopulation panic in the 1960s and 1970s, the world has become better off in a number of ways. In the interest of lowering fertility rates, policymakers and funders rallied to provide better access to reproductive health and family planning, which empowered women around the world to pursue education and employment.

And yet many policies aimed at curbing population growth were destructive. Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi went a good deal further in the 1970s, forcibly sterilizing some women and men. In Peru, under President Alberto Fujimori, some 300,000 women were forcibly sterilized in the 1990s. The combination of the preference for sons in Chinese culture and the one-child mandate has produced severe distortions in the country’s ratio of men to women that will be evident even decades from now.

Just like its twentieth-century inverse, the depopulation panic could produce decidedly regressive outcomes. Of course, some leaders could try to create incentives for child-rearing that make housing more affordable, encourage greater gender equality, and better support families. But some governments could work to undo access to contraception, dismantle what little care infrastructure exists, and push women out of the workforce and into the home. Alarmism could breed alarming policies. As a result, it matters intensely how policymakers and researchers frame questions about low fertility rates and depopulation. They are not witnesses to history, but participants in it. How they proceed is crucial. 🌐