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The Population Implosion of the Developed World: Changing Attitudes Toward Immigration to Support Aging Societies

LESLIE E. SCHAFFER*

INTRODUCTION

The first attempts to count the number of people in society were initiated during the Roman Empire. People were counted in order to assess taxes due to the Empire. Although the census today is still used in some respects to estimate tax base, counting people has become an important tool used to predict the economic welfare of societies specifically and of the world generally. Ensuring an adequate workforce to promote economic growth, while attempting to control demographic factors to prevent overpopulation, has sparked a debate over the future of population growth. Diminishing fertility in developed countries and increasing fertility in developing nations has led to conflicting viewpoints on changes in global population.

Within the context of recruiting immigrants to supplement shortages in labor supply, these theories have important implications for immigration policies of the nations of the world. If the developed countries of the world are experiencing a “birth dearth” that will prevent successive generations from supporting the elderly, many argue that immigrants must become a major resource to fill the gaps that will occur in the native workforces of these industrialized nations. However, the global thrust of population studies still maintains that population worldwide is increasing too rapidly. Groups dedicated to controlling migration are committed to tightening restrictions on economic migrants in order to maintain stable societal populations in the industrialized world. These conflicting viewpoints set the stage where countries must determine immigration policy, in part, to meet demand for labor that cannot be met through domestic means.

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This Trend Paper will show how population theory affects and is played out through immigration policy globally. Part I will explore developments in population assessment theory. It will depict the context of current population theory that accounts for regional implosions in the developed world and the continued increases in population in developing countries. Part II will focus on how these theories are implemented; population theory is played out through examination of how labor demand is filled by foreign workers. Also, looking at the long-term effects of using foreign labor will reemphasize the focus on strict immigration laws in countries of the developed world.

Immigration policy is intimately linked generally with population growth and specifically with labor demand. A short-term increase in demand for foreign labor (due to decreasing fertility) may spur countries to make compensatory changes in their immigration policy. However, long-term social, economic, and political concerns should be taken into account when addressing labor shortages. The countries of the world will achieve efficient and humane immigration policies that will lead to global economic and social improvements only by analyzing population fluctuations in the context of both short and long-term effects.

I. TOWARD A THEORY OF POPULATION ASSESSMENT: DEVELOPMENT OF FACTORS CONSIDERED

The conflicting assessments of future population growth and decline signal that studying the future of the world's population is a complex process with many variables. In the past two centuries, a few theories have significantly affected the way people study trends in population growth and decline. By understanding the factors upon which these theorists have focused, a comprehension of the modern demographic studies can be achieved. From the beginning of the Industrial Revolution to the present, the study of changes in demographics have been important to observing and safeguarding economic growth in the industrial nations of the world.

A. Malthusian Theory

In 1798, Thomas Malthus published *An Essay on the Principle of Population as it Affects the Future Improvement of Society*.¹ Malthus's article

1. ISREAL O. ORUBULOYE & J.F. OLORUNFEMI, INTRODUCTION TO POPULATION ANALYSIS 12 (1986).

discussed his study of the “effects of a rapidly growing population on . . . limited resources, particularly land and food production.”² Generally, Malthus postulated that the growth of population is constrained by the productivity of an area; where means of subsistence are on the rise, population will likewise increase.³

Part of Malthus’s concept of demography included an idea that a population explosion would occur in Great Britain.⁴ He was convinced that British fertility rates would continue to rise, even as economic production capabilities tapered. Although many Malthusian concepts have been integrated into later population theories, his prediction of an unsustainable population explosion has not come to pass.

The effects of the Industrial Revolution did spur many changes in lifestyle that could lead one to hypothesize incredible population growth. Advances in medicine and general improvements in sanitation during the nineteenth century permitted the rapid decline of mortality rates in Europe.⁵ What Malthus did not foresee was the social and economic progress that would accompany the aforementioned improvements in the quality of life.⁶

These improvements allowed population growth to become more efficient.⁷ Women no longer had to give birth to as many children to ensure the survival of their offspring to adulthood.⁸ Also, economic factors prompted couples to choose to bear fewer children. As people moved into cities, the cost of child rearing rose. “Children became autonomous wage earners . . . later . . . and required greater ‘investments,’ . . . in terms of health care and education. . . .”⁹ These costs caused individuals to reduce the number of children born in families, allowing for a decline in fertility that, in part, paralleled the decline in mortality during the nineteenth century.¹⁰ These changes prompted a new demographic theory that incorporated parts of the Malthusian Theory into its initial stage of population growth.

2. *Id.* at 13.

3. *Id.*

4. Matt Ridley, *The Real Global Threat: Population Implosion*, SUNDAY TELEGRAPH, Nov. 9, 1997, at 37, available in 1997 WL 2351821.

5. See MASSIMO LIVI-BACCI, A CONCISE HISTORY OF WORLD POPULATION 108 (Carl Ipsen trans., 1992).

6. *Id.* at 111.

7. *Id.* at 100.

8. See *id.* at 101.

9. *Id.* at 105.

10. *Id.* at 101-02.

B. Demographic Transition Theory

“Demographic transition” describes a complicated progress of “passage from disorder to order and from waste to economy” vis-à-vis population growth.¹¹ As mortality declined and certainty that children would survive increased, couples were more economical in child rearing. Demographic Transition Theory (DTT) takes into account many social and economic variables to explain changes in population within societies.¹²

During the first phase of demographic transition, both birth and death rates are high, resulting in a low or nonexistent natural increase in population.¹³ In Europe, this took place before the advent of the Industrial Revolution.¹⁴ Some developing countries, that today do not benefit from many aspects of technology, remain in this level of transition.¹⁵

Next, as technology spreads and a country becomes more industrialized, the mortality rate begins to decrease, while the birth rate remains high.¹⁶ This period and the next correspond to the times observed by Malthus. Because of the disjunction between mortality and fertility rates, a temporary, yet slow increase in population occurs, and may seem to herald an upcoming explosion.

The third phase in DTT incorporates the efficient decisions of couples to reduce family size. The fertility rate begins to drop, yet, as quality of life dramatically increases, a corresponding drop in death rates results in a rapid increase in population.¹⁷

As the workforce increases in numbers, resources seem more scarce and prices are driven up as wages fall. Generally, people have fewer children because they would be unable to support a large family and maintain their lifestyle.¹⁸ During this fourth phase, birth and death rates parallel each other, resulting in a very low natural increase in population.¹⁹

Finally, in the declining phase of DTT, the mortality rate overtakes the fertility rate and results in a decrease in natural population. The growth of

11. *Id.* at 101.

12. ORUBULOYE & OLORUNFEMI, *supra* note 1, at 13.

13. *Id.* at 14.

14. *Id.*

15. In present day developing countries, “rapid mortality decline is often not accompanied by similar declines in fertility.” LIVI-BACCI, *supra* note 5, at 101.

16. ORUBULOYE & OLORUNFEMI, *supra* note 1, at 14.

17. *Id.*

18. BEN J. WATTENBERG, *THE BIRTH DEARTH* 15 (1987).

19. ORUBULOYE & OLORUNFEMI, *supra* note 1, at 14.

individualism and control of family size by contraception, significantly diminishes family size, which typifies this period.²⁰

The framework of DTT helps to explain the concerns of those worried about a population implosion that will soon begin to affect many developed countries. However, effects of war versus peacetime prosperity, which generally promotes increased production and improvement in medical technology, must be placed within this general concept of population theory.²¹

It is important to note the inherently society-specific nature of DTT. The theory tracks variables within single or similarly situated countries. Although individual nations may follow this continuum to a greater or lesser degree, it does not reflect global changes in population. More modern theories attempt to assess demographic changes as they relate to the world's overall capability of sustaining global population.

C. Modern Global Population Theory

Contemporary theories that assess changes in the world population emphasize continued high rates of population growth in developing countries and a tapering of world food production. This leads to the conclusion that current levels of population growth will not be sustained by the amount of food production possible in the global community. "The food supply situation in many . . . developing countries today confirms the relevance of Malthus'[s] fear about the danger of uncontrolled population [growth]."²²

During the Cold War, the world saw a dramatic increase in food production. In the period spanning the end of World War II to the beginning of this decade, grain production increased more than two and one-half times.²³ Similarly, fish production increased almost five times within that same period.²⁴ As a result, hunger and malnutrition worldwide were combated to a degree never seen previously.²⁵ From the mid-1980s through the beginning of the 1990s, grain and fish production have fallen.²⁶ Also, increased industrialization has resulted in heavy losses in cropland capabilities, further diminishing the

20. *Id.* at 15.

21. *See id.* at 14.

22. *Id.* at 15.

23. LESTER R. BROWN & HAL KANE, *FULL HOUSE: REASSESSING THE EARTH'S POPULATION CARRYING CAPACITY* 21-22 (1994).

24. *Id.* at 22.

25. *Id.*

26. *Id.* at 22-23.

world food supply.²⁷

In 1993, members of more than fifty national science academies came together in New Delhi, India, to confront “the population issue.” The findings of the conference were spurred by estimates that the world is projected to add between three and one-half and four billion people during the period of 1990-2030.²⁸ The resulting statement of the conference “urged the world to move toward zero population growth during the lifetimes of [children born today].”²⁹

Much more recently, the United Nations held a meeting to discuss a “new population problem:” falling numbers of people.³⁰ In many developed countries, the fertility rate has declined to a point below levels necessary to sustain a stable population.³¹ Such rates threaten to “cause temporary but major disruptions in the age structure of a nation’s population.”³² At such low levels of population replacement, “a nation would finally unbreed itself into actual extinction.”³³

Both views of the debate on population growth have taken up the issue of global migration as it affects the stability of modern demographics. While groups such as Zero Population Growth (ZPG), that aim at slowing population growth worldwide, have advocated limiting immigration within a “larger framework of a U.S. population policy,”³⁴ other commentators insist that falling birth rates in Western countries will force nations to “accept immigrants or stagnate.”³⁵ Actions taken recently in several countries show that relaxing economic migration policies, specifically to fill job gaps in developed societies, is a new global trend in immigration.

II. MIGRATION AT THE END OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: A SEARCH FOR BALANCE

The fall of the Soviet Union heralded the closing of the Cold War era’s

27. *Id.* at 27.

28. *Id.* at 31.

29. *Id.*

30. Ridley, *supra* note 4, at 37.

31. *Id.*

32. WILLIAM G. HOLLINGSWORTH, *ENDING THE EXPLOSION* 213 (1996).

33. *Id.* at 217 n. 13. Although many European countries have fallen below the level necessary to sustain coming generations through natural population growth, immigration levels have supplied the necessary boost in order that societies remain stable. Ridley, *supra* note 4, at 37.

34. Zero Population Growth, *Zero Population Growth Statement on Immigration*, U.S. NEWSWIRE, Nov. 3, 1997, available in 1997 WL 13914194.

35. Ridley, *supra* note 4, at 37.

focus upon polarization and has moved the global community into a new concentration on “new patterns and structures of migration flows.”³⁶ Although major unskilled labor migration occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, “current widening gaps between rich and poor countries have increased movements from developing to developed countries.”³⁷

Fearing unbridled population growth that would plunge developed nations into economic turmoil, many countries have responded to the great potential for international population movements with regulations tightly “constraining and channeling migration.”³⁸ At the same time, other developed countries are seriously considering loosening immigration restrictions to compensate for naturally falling population levels.

This part of the Trend Paper will examine how decreases in population generally and shortages in labor supply specifically are affecting immigration in several countries. This phenomenon can be observed at different levels and from various angles. First, examples of how some countries’ immigration levels have been affected by changes in demographics provide general proof of how immigration and population predictions are linked. Second, recent immigration in Florida and immigration policy problems in Malaysia illustrate and provide a context for the short and long-term considerations that underlie efforts to bring immigrants to developed countries to supply desperately needed labor.

A. Loosening Migration Control: Policy Perspectives

Many developed countries of the world are experiencing declines in fertility. Continued advances in medical technology are allowing populations to live longer, resulting in the “ageing” of certain societies.³⁹ As a shortage in the labor supply threatens continued economic growth in these countries, business leaders and policymakers look for immigrants to fill the gaps and lend economic stability to the future. By looking at three countries where population concerns have sparked discussions over immigration policy, one can see some of the links that connect demographic studies and the population theories (discussed in Part I) to the loosening of immigration policies.

36. POPULATION MIGRATION AND THE CHANGING WORLD ORDER 4 (W.T.S. Gould & A. M. Findlay eds., 1994).

37. *Id.* at 5.

38. *Id.* at 278.

39. This phenomenon occurs as the median age of the population increases over time, reflecting a decrease in younger people available in the workforce to support the older members of society.

In Australia, the median age of the population is predicted to rise from thirty-four to forty-four within the next fifty years.⁴⁰ According to an Australian business leader, a new “immigration program could ensure a constant influx of younger workers to share the tax burden.”⁴¹ Also, some businesses perceive that working to increase immigration will “boost domestic demand, expand the economy, [and] increase jobs [while] addressing the ageing of [the] population.”⁴²

Immigration policy in New Zealand is also under fire due to new population predictions that estimate that some parts of the country will experience drastic population drops in the next twenty-five years.⁴³ One member of Parliament wants to institute “incentives or quotas to bring immigrants [to the province]” in order to stabilize the public service industry, which is suffering from current population loss.⁴⁴ In addition, a population conference was organized by New Zealand’s Immigration Minister last fall to address such population concerns in the country.⁴⁵

Whereas New Zealand and Australia are discussing possible changes in immigration laws to supplement demands for labor, Canada has, in recent years, experienced a notable increase in immigration. Between 1991 and 1996, the country’s immigration figures rose fourteen and one-half percent.⁴⁶ The increase in immigrants “has been more than three times greater than the growth of the native Canadian population since 1991.”⁴⁷ Although people of European descent account for the largest immigrant group in Canada, the immigration figures from the beginning of this decade show a shift in these statistics; about “57 percent of the immigrants who arrived in Canada between 1991 and 1996” were from Asia.⁴⁸

40. *More Migrants Key to Growth, Says Boral Boss*, AAP NEWSFEED, Oct. 22, 1997, available in LEXIS, World Library, Allwld File.

41. *Id.* (quoting Tony Berg, a managing director of Boral Limited, a large building materials corporation).

42. *Id.*

43. Paul Focamp, *Population Forecast Should be Taken Seriously*, SOUTHLAND TIMES (New Zealand), Nov. 8, 1997, at 10, available in LEXIS, World Library, Allwld File.

44. *Id.*

45. *Id.*

46. *Immigration to Canada Up Nearly 15 Percent in Five Years*, AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE, Nov. 4, 1997, available in LEXIS, World Library, Allwld File.

47. *Id.*

48. *Id.* Most of the immigrants came from Hong Kong, China, India, the Philippines and Sri Lanka, reflecting the movement from developing to developed countries. *Id.*

B. Foreign Labor: Looking at Short and Long-Term Effects

Although the preceding section illustrated some examples of how countries are dealing with population declines through decisions made or considered at the policy level, government actors are often the last to react to such shortages. The ebb and flow of demand for labor supply within developed countries plays a large role in the reality of immigration flows.⁴⁹ Industry leaders are often the first to recognize significant job gaps and move to fill them. As the private sector moves to fill positions, industry treats foreign labor sources as a temporary fix for the shortage. However, in view of modern demographic theory, it is argued that the declines in the fertility rates of developed countries is a progressive phenomenon that should be dealt with as a long-term concern.

This part of the Paper will contrast the short and long-term effects of using foreign labor to replace domestic sources. First, for example, in the United States, Florida reveals how a perceived short-term gap is being filled. Then, a glimpse of policy and practice in Malaysia will illuminate some of the economic, social, and political effects that result from relying on foreign labor in the long-term.

1. Filling the Short-Term Job Gap: Immigration Practice in Florida

Tourism is a huge industry in Florida. Every year, people flock to its beaches and amusement parks. Many people also choose to relocate and make their homes in Florida. However, because many of those who reside there are retirees, the labor demand for service workers in the tourism industry in Florida is much higher than its supply.⁵⁰

In Orlando, where the unemployment rate is a mere three percent, student workers and those retirees who return to the workforce “are snapped up instantly.”⁵¹ As a result, service industries, including many hotels, are turning to foreign labor sources in order to “plug[] the gap.”⁵² When viewed as a short-term solution, attracting immigrant workers can “help[] overcome shortages,

49. See Kostas A. Poulakidas, Note, *Welfare Reform and Immigration: Attempting to Find a Domestic Answer to a Global Question*, 6 IND. J. GLOBAL LEGAL STUD. 283, 286 (1998).

50. Dennis Blank, *East Europeans Fill Job Gap in Florida*, N.Y. TIMES, Nov. 8, 1997, at D3.

51. *Id.*

52. *Id.* Many of the immigrants recruited to work in Florida come from Russia, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Lithuania. *Id.*

lower labour costs, and maintain export competitiveness.”⁵³

Florida Coastal Maintenance, a contractor from Venice, Florida, recruits foreign workers by “placing advertisements in European newspapers,” as well as publications “in [domestic] papers read by recent immigrants.”⁵⁴ Many immigrants then move to Florida after being granted American work permits, while others illegally enter in search of work.

Presently, the service industry in Florida enjoys many benefits attached to employing immigrants who are living in the United States with one-year work permits.⁵⁵ As a result of employing people from countries where jobs pay significantly less, hotels in Florida “are able to meet some of their needs for low-skilled employment without having to increase wages and benefits as much as might otherwise be required to lure American workers from other jobs.”⁵⁶

However, many hotels are “focusing more attention on retention” of workers to eliminate the difficulties of recruiting new laborers.⁵⁷ Benefit plans and bonuses are two ways that hotels are trying to keep the workers they now employ. This new focus on retaining foreign laborers changes the reality of a short-term labor supply plug into a long-term commitment. As the following section discusses, encouraging permanent immigration for these workers may lead to some social, political, and economic effects which may be negative in the long run.

2. Long-Term Concerns: A Look at Immigration in Malaysia

Although business and industry leaders, as well as policymakers, see loosening immigration restrictions as a boost for local and national economies, these views may be shortsighted in that they look only at short-term effects of a temporary plan to plug current gaps in labor demand and supply. When immigrants are needed to fill positions resulting from a long-term decline in natural population within a country or region, the gap in labor supply must also be seen in a long-term context.

According to the population theories discussed in Part I, the gap that

53. Patrick Pillai, *Rethink Foreign Labour Policies*, NEW STRAITS TIMES (Malaysia), Nov. 11, 1997, (Issues), at 11, available in LEXIS, World Library, Allwld File.

54. Blank, *supra* note 50, at D3.

55. However, these permits are often extended for one to two more years before many immigrant workers return home. *Id.*

56. *Id.*

57. *Id.* (quoting Rosa Pettus, a human resources director at a Florida hotel).

immigrants must fill is more permanent in nature than addressing a temporary decline in fertility. Looking at the new focus on "retention" of employees in the hotel industry in Florida also suggests that attracting immigrants to work in developed countries is becoming a long-term endeavor, rather than a search for a temporary fix for demand in specific industries.

Malaysia has recently relied heavily on immigrants to supplement its labor demand. However, as the following discussion will illustrate, the long-term effects of importing foreign labor are often fraught with negative impacts. These effects and impacts should be taken into consideration so that countries of the world can craft humane immigration policies that are healthy, both economically and socially.

High rates of economic growth in Malaysia "have, over the last decade, contributed to rapid employment growth."⁵⁸ Even considering the participation of women and retirees in the labor force, there are still more jobs than the domestic labor supply can provide. "Foreign labour . . . is the easiest and cheapest option for employers since it offers access to an unlimited low-cost pool of workers."⁵⁹

Foreign labor makes up a very significant part of the workforce in Malaysia. According to figures estimated by the Malaysian government, "foreigners comprise anything ranging from 12 to 25 percent of the total labour force."⁶⁰ With economic growth spreading to more remote parts of the country, Malaysia's immediate demand for foreign labor is likely to continue.⁶¹ In addition, "Malaysia is surrounded by labour-surplus nations . . . where labour-export is part . . . of national planning," ensuring that these demands can be met.⁶²

In the short-term, a reliance on immigrants to fill labor shortages has helped to keep the Malaysian economy booming.⁶³ However, as the economic future of the country continues to expand, the long-term effects on the economy, as well as political and social impacts, should be addressed.

Economically, "a long-term dependence on foreign labor is likely to lock the country into labour-intensive, low-wage activity and impede restructuring

58. Pillai, *supra* note 53, at 11.

59. *Id.*

60. *Id.* A report from Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim "estimated 1.7 million foreign workers, of whom 700,000 were undocumented." *Id.* The fluctuation in estimation of total percentage of the total workforce are due to possible inaccuracies in immigration status and illegal flow. *See id.*

61. *Id.*

62. *Id.*

63. *Id.*; *see supra* note 53 and accompanying text.

toward higher technology, skills, and productivity.”⁶⁴ Preventing advances in technology and productivity, in turn, may lead to an economic slowdown.

Such a turnaround is likely to lead to negative social and political impacts for both the immigrants and Malays alike. Politically, economic slowdowns create tension between natives and immigrant populations.⁶⁵ Socially, new ethnic groups comprised primarily of immigrants “could . . . transform Malaysia’s demographic, social[,] and political landscape.”⁶⁶ Finally, an immigrant “underclass” may emerge that is made up of those who do not share full civil and political rights.⁶⁷

In order to curb Malaysia’s reliance on cheap foreign labor, a new, clearer immigration policy is needed. “Past policies have been rather fluid, and appear to be reactions to shortages rather than long-term responses to labour needs.”⁶⁸ Business and industry leaders should work closely with public sector actors to reduce foreign over-dependence in the market. Florida can learn a lesson from Malaysia. Florida business and industry leaders should work together with state officials in order to ensure policies statewide that will protect civil rights of new immigrants while safeguarding its continued economic growth.

Although Malaysia and the United States have not reached stages of DTT, where fertility rates have progressively declined over a long period of time, the populations of Florida and Malaysia have proven unable to support growing labor demands. Although fluid immigration policies may work well for the short-term, economic facts urge policymakers to look at long-term effects of importing a substantial amount of its labor supply.

CONCLUSION

Promoting immigration to developed countries may be the best way of ensuring a stable workforce in nations where fertility levels are on the decline. Looking at short-term labor to fulfill these needs, however, does not account for the long-term nature of the population decline in these countries. Population theory has come a long way since Malthus. As more variables have been incorporated into DTT, a more complete picture of global population changes

64. *Id.*; see *supra* note 53 and accompanying text. Attracting foreign labor as the cheapest alternative in Florida may have some of the same long-term effects as those in Malaysia.

65. *Id.*

66. *Id.*

67. *Id.*

68. *Id.*

has emerged. By taking note of the fertility predictions for developed countries, policymakers are empowered to ensure better economic stability through the use of foreign labor. However, they should be mindful of the negative economic and political consequences of over-reliance on foreign sources by crafting policies that seek long-term, instead of “plug the gap” solutions.

