

# PIED PIPERS THROUGH TIME: NOTES OF A DEMOGRAPHIC INCONVENIENCE

Neil Cameron

*Throughout history, changes in different populations' growth rates have caused large swings in their economic and political fortunes. However clear their effects, the causes of these changes have often been hard to figure. Now, with the proliferation of pharmaceutical fixes for reproductive problems, population changes of almost every kind will be at the mercy of personal preferences.*

*Tout au long de l'histoire, des changements survenus dans le rythme de croissance de diverses populations ont infléchi le destin économique et politique de ces dernières. Si évidents qu'aient été les effets de ces changements, on a souvent mis beaucoup de temps à discerner leurs causes. Avec la multiplication des solutions pharmacologiques disponibles pour résoudre les problèmes reproductifs, les changements démographiques de tout ordre, ou presque, seront dorénavant soumis aux préférences de tout un chacun.*

One of James Thurber's grim little parables is about a man who interviews a lemming. The man tells the lemming that what most baffles the human race about lemmings is their practice of occasionally assembling in vast hordes, rushing to clifftops, and committing mass suicide. The lemming, surprised, responds that what lemmings find most baffling about human beings is why they do not do the same.

I was led to similar reflections one spring many years ago, in Calgary, where I lived as a child in the North Hill district. Just after sunset one warm evening, I was very surprised to spot not one, but three mice scamper across the road in front of our house, caught briefly in car headlights. I had an uneasy feeling I could hear a rustle of still more, scurrying around in the dark.

Looking out my bedroom window the following morning, I was met by an astonishing spectacle. There were mice, or what I took to be mice, *everywhere*. Dozens raced around our yard. The whole street was the same, and there were dead rodents all over the road, squashed by automobiles. On the radio, there were repeated messages from the city authorities to avoid panic. The North Hill had suddenly

been overrun by an infestation of voles, a mouse-like rodent that most Calgarians had not heard of before that day.

The City assured us the voles were not diseased, and that all possible steps were being taken to clear them away. The main public health concern was the accumulation of large piles of dead voles on every street corner. An ingenious extermination and collection strategy was launched: Children were offered a bounty, something like 25 cents per hundred dead voles turned in, and took up the hunting assignment with bloodthirsty enthusiasm, some accumulating small fortunes in the process. For neighbourhood cats as well, the doors of paradise were opened.

In only a few days, the invasion ended, and the bodies were swept away. The sickly-sweet odour from the piles of little corpses, triumphing over disinfectant sprays, lingered a few days longer, and then the whole episode was over. Dogs barked another week at phantom voles, but otherwise it was as if it had never happened. The city was stunned, awestruck, recalling the portents and plagues of Biblical prophecies. The city government first claimed that unusual flooding of the Bow River had driven the voles uphill. I was unconvinced: The river banks and their creatures were

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familiar turf to small boys. I had never met a single vole, whether engaged in Thurberian contemplation of the strange ways of humans or not.

A few days later, a more persuasive explanation was offered by a university biologist. Apparently, accidental changes in environmental conditions sometimes lead to exponential explosions of fertility and reproduction in certain varieties of rodents. Their resulting multiplication quickly uses up the food sources in their normal stamping grounds, and sends them on a frantic blind rush into unfamiliar territory. The more familiar massed lemmings were not deliberately committing suicide; like the voles, they were in a starving, headlong stampede, which eventually drove them to their watery graves.

Both the voles themselves and this explanation of their doom made a deep impression on me and began a lifelong curiosity about the effects of reproductive change on both animals and human beings. At university, however, I initially studied mathematics, and eventually took graduate studies in history. Unlike many of my contemporaries, I was not impressed by the pop sociobiology of the 1960s and 1970s, full of naked apes, baboonish sexual mores, and corporation executives rediscovered as hunting parties in search of meat. I had no difficulty believing that biological instincts accounted for a great deal of human behaviour, but the animal analogies seemed little more than that, not persuasive scientific demonstrations. Similarities in the behaviour of humans and primates seemed far less interesting than similarities among humans in various different historical situations.

I studied the history of science, which meant frequent immersion in debates about evolution. "Creationist" pseudoscience I found ridiculous, but the widespread unreflective acceptance of Darwinism itself seemed as much dogmatic as rational. Benjamin Disraeli, politically shrewd but scientifically indifferent, was also a jolt: He had dismissed evolution with the comment that he would rather be on the side of the angels than on the side of the apes. In the 19th century, Darwin's biological theory had been rapidly generalized and vulgarized into justifications of racism and imperialism, later incorporated into the ideology of Nazism. This was brutality in the exact sense, and was recognized early as such: By the 1890s, Thomas Henry Huxley, Darwin's most forceful contemporary champion, was himself alarmed by the use of "survival of the fittest" as a new moral license for everything from unscrupu-

lous business practices to ruthless territorial expansion. Huxley and later writers in similar vein argued that our humanity was shown precisely in our ability to use our reason to limit and control our more animal inclinations.

Still, history is full of biological influences that proved hard to keep under rational control. For example, human beings are quite different from nearly all animals, including apes, in being both fertile and capable of sexual arousal year round, rather than having fertility trigger arousal. This has made sexual mores a central religious and philosophical issue in all societies. Contraception and abortion, while known since antiquity, were mostly proscribed in pre-industrial societies. Fatal pregnancies, stillbirths, childhood diseases, and frequent epidemics meant that far more pregnancies were once required, just to keep tribes from dying off. Furthermore, until the late 19th century, even the most civilized parts of the world were primarily agricultural. Children were economic assets, labour supply, old age security, and tomorrow's soldiers.

Historians also saw the impact of more specific demographic changes. France and Germany from 1815 to 1945, for example, were shaped by different internal histories and three major wars. But a dominant factor was that the French, who had far outnumbered all other Western European peoples in the 18th century, stopped having so many children after the Napoleonic era, while the Germans had a running baby boom from the unification years to the fall of Hitler. The French baby deficit made the Third Republic an insecure society throughout its 70-year history. By the beginning of the 20th century, it meant that a predominantly middle-aged, elderly and incompletely industrialized France constantly confronted a Germany full of youthful energy and bad ideas. Scholars tried to explain *why* French reproduction was so slow, not entirely satisfactorily. The effects, however, were not in doubt.

The turn of the last century was marked not only by social Darwinism but by the rise of eugenics, invented by Darwin's brainy but unworldly cousin, Francis Galton. As fashionable then as environmentalism is now, this new doctrine mixed rational argument with tribal superstitions, and had a considerable vogue for another three decades. But it faded after the awful example of the Nazis.

But even bad eugenic ideas concern historians. The drive in the first third of the century to

legitimize and popularize contraception by Margaret Sanger and her fellow crusaders was explicitly intended to improve the human "stock." The crusade's success, however, came not because many people were much influenced by, or even aware of, eugenic arguments. It was because they were more and more coming to live in cities, where children were economic liabilities rather than assets. By the hungry 1930s, urban experience widely outweighed the demographic practices and beliefs of the older agricultural societies.

The post-1945 revulsion against racism, and the systematic use of strictly environmental explanation in most social sciences, increasingly made eugenics the ideology that dared not speak its name. Only the Nazis had attempted "positive eugenics," that is, both the attempted breeding of supposedly superior human beings and sterilization of the "unfit." Sterilization, however, at least of the mentally retarded, was practised in both the US and Canada for several years after the war, before it eventually came to be regarded with aversion. But in public debate, the baby impact issue was largely thrown out with the ideological bathwater. The threat of a worldwide population explosion was pushed by ecological doomsayers, mostly with tendentious reasoning. Other than that, members of what used to be called the sixties generation eventually learned to regard themselves as baby boomers, and one demographer, David Foot, has made himself a business guru by showing the implications of the young populations created by high birth rates and the aging ones created by low. But even Foot steers clear of eugenic prescriptions.

Living in Montreal as an English-speaking teacher of European history, I have been sometimes a sceptical observer, sometimes an aggrieved demographic inconvenience. Quebec has fascinated population theorists since the days of Bourbon New France. Its once staggering birthrate amazed Europeans: Arnold Toynbee declared that, at the end of history, there would be only two peoples left, the Chinese and the French Canadians. But this philoprogenitiveness started to decline long before the post-1960s collapse in influence of the Catholic clergy, whose priests were often assumed to be entirely responsible for the old high birth rates. Quebec became the most urbanized province in Canada in the 1920s, and despite the persistence of large families for three more decades, the overall birth rate gradually fell after World War II. Other Catholic societies, many with tribalist clergies who would

have been delighted to see their own flocks achieve comparable multiplication, had nothing like the 1850-1950 Quebec rates; only pre-famine Ireland did. The major factor that pushed up Quebec rates was very youthful marriages, which maximized fertility, but as with the very different story in metropolitan France, an entirely satisfactory explanation of the Quebec phenomenon is harder to reach than most people think.

From time to time, Quebec has provided subsidies to encourage childraising, but has little debated either their apparently limited effect or the other factors that also influence reproduction everywhere. First among these has been the rise of American-centred but eventually worldwide feminism. Feminism is the black mass of eugenics; in this case the dollop of rational argument was mixed with newer prejudices, eclectically imported from liberal individualism and radical egalitarianism. Unlike eugenics, however, feminism has been quickly incorporated into the popular mythology of democratic capitalism, which itself was steadily reducing the peacetime social utility of masculinity. Issues of rape, recreational sex, birth control, abortion, and the legitimizing of overt homosexuality have come to be recast entirely as a struggle between defenders of individual choice and retreating moral traditionalists. Eugenicists had virtually reduced marriages to reproduction factories, measurable for efficiency; feminists, exalting single careers, reduced them to slave plantations.

But birth rates are more than a minor consequence of individual choices, whether hedonistic or morally absolutist; they have large implications of their own. This is now dawning on Europeans, less accustomed than North Americans to population replacement through immigration. Before West Germany reunited with the East, it had negative population growth for a decade, and two million fewer people in 1990 than in 1980. Italy fears its population may soon only have ancestors as relatives. The contraceptive pill and legitimized abortion have led to birthrates insufficient to maintain domestic populations in over 40 per cent of the world's countries. Everywhere, early marriage has become less common with every passing year, and per capita abortions more frequent. Canada now has over 100,000 abortions a year; the highest level is in Quebec, at 30,000—no fewer than 38 for every hundred live births. The Western world has increasingly become a place in which young women in their most fertile years either do not bear children or abort them.

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Political assumptions have been consciously or unconsciously based on such trends for decades. Since the 1960s, Quebec nationalists have decried the high proportion of both native French Canadians and immigrants who have assimilated into the English-speaking population, although the fundamental problem was the end of cradle revenge. The rest of Canada, however, has shown no similar reaction. British-origin Canadians, and Protestants of all European backgrounds, could reasonably claim even greater apprehensions; it is they, not the French Canadians, who have had the largest decline in “demographic weight” in Canada in the last half century, and who can reasonably extrapolate future “disappearance.” But since Canadian political discourse treats only language as a legitimate tribal rallying point, and not the religion or ethnicity of the largest tribes, Quebec’s rulers, once recasting identity as a language issue, have had the field all to themselves in arguing that they are entitled to counter declining reproduction with state power. Even so, if the French Canadian birthrate remains at its present low level, even the assimilation of a broader “new francophone” component will only slow the decline.

The steady advance of pharmaceutically modified sex has now brought an ironic consequence. Call the oral contraceptive Pill Number One. Abortion may soon be made still easier by Pill Number Two: RU-486, or a later version of it. The influence of these pills cannot be simply counterbalanced by immigration, unless the latter is converted into nothing less than a peaceful foreign invasion. However, Pill Number Three, the fertility drug, is having a startling effect; it not only works, but is immensely increasing the number of multiple births. And in June of this year, Dutch scientists announced a successful Pill Number Four: a menopausal delay drug, making it possible for women to greatly extend their childbearing years.

It seems unlikely that really large numbers of older women will leap at the chance of becoming pregnant. Pill Four’s more important potentiality is that it ends the urgency that descends on most childless women, and many mothers as well, as they near forty: a *final* either/or choice is seen as arriving, or already past. Pill Three has already been reducing this urgency, but mostly for childless married women growing anxious to conceive. Its implications are only beginning to dawn on single women. While it may increase

average family size, it little affects the larger phenomenon of low total reproduction caused by later marriage. Furthermore, young women deciding they are finally ready for marriage and motherhood are not necessarily equally ready to find themselves with triplets. Pill Four offers “planned parenthood” in the exact sense. In combination with Pill Three, it *might* completely reverse the entire demographic trend of the last half century, confounding feminists, moral traditionalists, and language nationalists alike.

This July, British scientists came up with a Pill Five, a male oral contraceptive. It may influence sexual behaviour, but would seem unlikely to further depress reproduction rates. Pills Three and Four still matter more, although neither the biologists nor the social scientists have any real idea what present generations, much less future ones, will do with them. Collective choices will be the unknown consequences of a mysterious mix of “hardwired” biological drives, cultural traditions, and economic conditions. Personally, I think the world would be a better place if “lifestyle” abortions came to be regarded with as much aversion as ideological breeding and sterilization, and all the pills were used with some restraint, but I don’t see my own preferences as particularly likely trends.

One thing that clearly does follow from the very existence of the newer pills is a redefinition of what is meant by “choice.” Over the last half century, more and more people, even in French Quebec, came to regard overall population change as being essentially unconnected to their own lives. But as the more recent technology makes reproductive possibility even higher than the first pill made it lower, *all* self-conscious human groups, whether defined by ethnicity, language, religion, or Internet service provider, will be forced to recognize that their future growth or decline will largely depend on whether their members choose high or low reproduction. It will also become harder for any of these groups, including Quebec nationalists, to justify forced assimilation through coercive legislation. Borrowing an expression from Lenin, economists sometimes describe consumers as voting with their feet. The men and women of this century will also vote with an even more significant part of their anatomy. Thurber’s lemming would be envious.

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