

Sigurd Skirbekk:

## **The Immigration Debate:**

### **A Question of Moral, Science, Ideology, Myth or Belief?**

#### *A. The Demographic Background for Immigration*

There are a number of reasons why studies of migration should be seen on a background of demographic developments. In terms of numbers, a country's population is determined by the sum of its births and immigration minus deaths and emigration. An overall computation can tell us something about ecological adjustments in relation to given territories with limited resources ( provided we take a population's consumption patterns into account. Common attitudes toward immigration can tell us something about the culture of argumentation in a country marked by New Liberal ideology.

At first glance, contemporary migration in Western countries could be regarded as a clever combination of self-help and help for others. An imported labor force can be seen as a domestic ploy to compensate for a failure in the national reproduction rate, while at the same time assisting a number of individuals who could help reduce the population surplus in the Third World. A change of perspective is needed to understand that migration cannot provide a decisive help to countries with high birthrates. Nor can immigration, on a realistic level, solve the problems connected to a shortage of specialized workers and to high welfare expenditure in Western countries with small families<sup>1</sup>.

The choice of perspective in public presentation is not the only thing of interest in this connection. The forms of argumentation ( and the methods for neutralizing the credibility of opposing arguments ( is in itself an interesting field of study. What one chooses to emphasize and de-emphasize tells us something about the principles of selection in the dominant culture of interpretation. There are psychologists who claim that studies of taboos are one of the most fruitful avenues for understanding a culture. The stronger the taboo, the greater the insight it may harbor. The heatedness of the immigration debate is an indication that we are dealing with positions rife with taboos, all of which may be an important commentary on our culture.

Before we say more about the debate itself and focus on the style of argumentation in the media, we should give a brief outline of the developments in population growth we are facing, as clearly as demographers have been able to ascertain it.

If we begin by looking at world population growth in modern times, the figures are quite dramatic from a historical standpoint. The number of human beings living on this planet is thought to have reached its first billion during the time of Napoleon, two hundred years ago. The two billion milestone was reached shortly before Hitler came to power, around 1930. The three billion figure was reached during the post-war 1950s. The four billion mark was reached during the period of liberation from colonialism during the 1970s. The five billion mark was passed when Soviet communism collapsed at the end of the 1980s.<sup>2</sup> The six billion mark was reached before the end of the 20th century. Population growth in the past century is due primarily to changes in survival rates in the poorest parts of the world. The so-called developing countries experienced an overall increase in population from about 1.3 to 4.1 billion people during the period from 1930 to 1990.<sup>3</sup> Actually, considering developing countries as a separate category is misleading. Birthrates vary greatly among the various countries of «the Third World».

Future estimates of population growth must be based on statistical computations of birthrates and the circumstances that influence them. Even though serious demographers vary in their predictions, these variations are not so pronounced as to cast doubt on their calculations. Based on figures released from the UN's demographic division in 1999, a mean estimate of worldwide population growth suggests

that a figure close to 9 billion people will be reached by 2050.<sup>4</sup> If birthrates were to continue at current levels ( and few believe they will ( the projection would be 14.9 billion people already by 2050, and 296 billion by 2150.

Based on these UN sources, middle estimates suggest that the population of North America will rise from 172million to 392 million people during the period 1950-2050. The figures for Latin America, based on the same estimates, are expected to rise from 167 million to 809 million. The greatest increases are expected to occur in Africa and Asia. Relatively speaking, the population of Africa is expected to rise the most, from 221 million in 1950 to some 1766 million by the middle of the 21st century. The rate increase in Africa is especially worrisome, because it is not expected to stabilize during the 21st century; on the contrary, it could even rise to three billion, according to some projections. All told, African fertility during the 1990s is estimated to have been 5.7 children per woman, on average.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, in absolute terms the population of Asia is expected to increase the most during the century; from about 1.4 billion in 1950 to 5.2 billion by 2050.

Asia's urban population is expected to double during the next 30 years, and Asia as a whole should account for over half of the world's population. This will lead to a number of domestic changes, such as a new and enormous concentration of people in the major cities. The Asian Development Bank estimates that the number of «mega-cities» with more than 10 million inhabitants will rise from nine to twenty by the year 2025. Half of these cities will have more than 20 million inhabitants. By 2025 it is estimated that more than 4 billion people will be living in urban clusters in the Third World, as opposed to barely 1.5 billion today. Mexico City is expected to grow to more than 24 million inhabitants, and Sao Paulo to more than 23 million.

The consequences of these developments will be an increase in overpopulation, with attendant social stress and, in all likelihood, weaker regional cultural ties than usual in traditional country towns. This development is bound to create an enormous pressure for emigration to areas with a relative shortage of people. As for the Mediterranean region, the population of Northern Africa is expected to rise by more than 100 million between 1990 and 2025,<sup>6</sup> while the birthrate in Southern European countries presently rests at between 60% and 70% of the reproduction rate. While Europe as a whole had twice as many people as Africa in 1950 (547 million to 224 million), the figures at the turn of the century are almost identical. But by 2050, Africa is expected to have 2,046 million people, as opposed to Europe's 638 million, according to what UN demographers have described as a moderate scenario <sup>7</sup>.

Another factor that will increase the pressure for emigration to Europe is the development of communications. Both technical means of transportation and audio-visual communication, which gives an idealized picture of circumstances in the North, will take on significance in this context. In addition, most potential target countries will have established immigrant environments that can absorb new immigrants.<sup>8</sup>

Demographers are predicting major differences in population growth in Asia. While China, on account of its birth control policies, can expect to see a «modest» rise from today's 1.2 billion people to approximately 1.5 billion in 2050 ( a rate that largely reflects age distribution and the fact that people are living longer ( the situation in other Asian countries will vary. Pakistan, one of China's neighbors, but a country with different cultural traditions, is expected to experience an altogether different population growth. A country 778,720 km in size, Pakistan had 74 million inhabitants in 1975, when the country got its present borders. This figure has doubled within a single generation, and is expected to settle somewhere between 340 and 350 million people by the year 2050.<sup>9</sup>

The net rate of emigration from Pakistan in the mid-1990s is estimated to have been 17 per 1000 inhabitants. With a manifold increase in population, one might expect that emigration would rise proportionately. However, emigration appears largely to be determined by domestic social tensions, which in turn are related to overpopulation. With the rise in overpopulation, we can expect a rise in the

emigration rate. A demographic and economic imbalance between different parts of the world will change the terms for migrations. According to some quantitative studies, the risk of conflicts between population groups will rise in tandem with the number and concentration of immigrants.[10](#)

In view of the expected rise in growth rates in countries with limited resources, there is a broad political consensus in the West that we bear some measure of responsibility for these countries. This responsibility has been seen as a moral obligation to provide emergency aid, medical and technical assistance, and financial development aid so that these countries can develop on their own terms. The philosophy behind this approach has been that as living standards rise, the wish to have many children will abate, and hopefully stabilize, by voluntary means, at a defensible level.

There are a number of reasons why these expectations can be regarded as dubious or unrealistic. In the first place, it is questionable whether the so-called «law of demographic transition» is a law that operates regardless of cultural context; in fact, many demographic researchers deny that it does. Furthermore, it does not seem ecologically realistic to count on living standards to halt the growth in population, especially if we assume that all people should have a consumer-oriented lifestyle according to the Western pattern.

Access to arable land worldwide is limited. According to some estimates, the earth's land-based ecosystems have had a production potential of 150 billion tons of organic material annually. Human beings have already destroyed approximately 12% of this resource potential, in addition to confiscating 27% for their own purposes. This means that a single species on this planet has granted itself the right of use to nearly 40% of the earth's production of organic material, leaving only 60% to the millions of other land-based species of plants and animals. Moreover, the 40% we have claimed for our own use is the easiest to exploit. It is far from clear that we will be able to make use of an additional 40%, even if we thought we were entitled to do so, and even if a doubling of world population might suggest that we should.[11](#) But access to resources is not the only limiting factor. Waste disposal will also require large areas of land, if it is to be carried out in a way that does not destroy vital ecosystems. According to one estimate, human beings would need five planets the size of our own, just to provide everyone alive today a standard of living in line with the that of the West.[12](#)

Whether these projections are completely reliable or not, it is certain that natural ecosystems put limits on our culturally legitimized right to self-realization. This means that ecological challenges will also challenge those cultures that have made economic growth and individual self-realization open-ended values.

The ecological challenges cannot be reduced to a mere increase in consumption in the well-developed countries or a mere population increase in the less developed countries. At the beginning of the 1990s, some population experts from the London School of Economics examined the ecological challenges of the «consumer societies» and the «birth societies» based on a 60/40 distribution. At the same time, they indicated that this was a hard thing to put into perspective, and that circumstances could change abruptly. In 1997, the London-based World Watch Institute cited the following countries as representing the greatest threat to ecological development: The United States, Russia, Japan, China, India, Brazil, Indonesia, and Germany. A large number of consumers and a high rate of consumption per person can both have serious consequences.[13](#)

#### References:

1 Jean-Pierre Gonot, Christopher Prinz and Nico Keilman: "Adjustment of Public pensions Schemes in Twelve Industrial Countries: possible Answers to Population Ageing", *European Journal of Population* 11: 371-398, 1995

2 Figures are not conclusive; nevertheless, we could mention that the *UN's Population Information Network (POPIN)* gives the following years for the passing of each billion: 1804, 1927, 1960, 1974,

1987. The same population agency, in 1993, gave this estimate of milestones for future increases from 6 to 11 billion people: 1998, 2009, 2021, 2035, 2054, 2093.

3 Bacci, Massimo Livi (1992): *A Concise History of World Population*. Blackwell, London; p 147. Cf. also UN, 1998, Revision of the World Population Estimate

4 Department of Economic and Social Affairs / Population Division, United Nations Secretariat: *World Population Projections to 2150*. (<http://www.undp.org/popin/popin.htm>).

5 UN's population division: Department for Economic and Social Information and Policy Analysis. *Press Release of Nov. 13, 1996*.

6 Paul Kennedy (1993): *Preparing for the Twenty First Century*; N.Y. Harper, cpt. 2.

7 UN *World Population Projections to 2150*. 1998, Tab. 2.

8. Feichtinger, Gustav and Gunther Steinmann (1992): *Immigration into Population with Below Replacement Level. The Case of Germany*. Springer, Vienna. Cf. also Feichtinger, G. (1979): *Demographische Analyse und populationsdynamische Modelle: Grundzuge der Bevölkerungsmathematik*, Springer, Vienna.

9 cp. <http://www.popin.org/pop1998/1.htm>

10 Quillian, Lincoln (1995): «Prejudice as a Response to Perceived Group Threat: Population Composition and Anti-Immigrant and Racial Prejudice in Europe». *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 60, Aug., pp 586-611. ( Quillian, Lincoln (1996): «Group Threat and Regional Change in Attitudes toward African-Americans», *American Journal of Sociology* 102, Nov., pp 816-860.

11 Cf. Peter M. Vitousek's article in the report Brown, Lester et.al. (1994): *State of the World 1994*, World Watch Institute, London. Both of these population projects settle on a an overall population of between 11.5 and 12 billion people by the year 2150.

12 Fugelli, Per (1994): «Jorda ( en pleietrengende pasient», *Appollon* No. 1, University of Oslo, pp 6-8. ( Daly, Herman and John Cobb, 1989, For the Common Good. Redirecting the Economy.

13 Cf. Cohen, Joel E. (1995): *How many people can the earth support?* Norton, NY.

[Back to main page](#)