

Over-population theories are not as simple as they might seem

When I was a graduate student in economics at the University of Chicago, the class was often confronted with some mathematical proposition and asked: "Is this an equation or an identity?"

It happened so often, in so many courses, that I found myself muttering: "Flip a coin." I did not see the point of the question.

In later years, I learned that this was one of the most important questions to ask, not only about economics, but also about politics, social issues and many other things that are not even expressed mathematically.

An equation is true only under certain conditions, while an identity is always true, just because of the way you define the terms. $3x + 6$ is an equation that is true only when x equals 2, but $2x + 2x = 4x$ is an identity that is true regardless of what x equals. Whether or not a statement is made in mathematical terms, it may be true either because it corresponds to some reality or just because of the way you define your terms. The reason this distinction is so important is that people are often convinced that they have said something that is true about the real world when, in fact, they have said nothing, but merely used words in such a way that the statement is true by definition.

Policies affecting millions of human beings can be based on a collection of words that mean nothing but imply something which is wholly unsubstantiated — and yet cannot be refuted because of the way words are defined. A classic example are policies designed to deal with "over-population."

Vast sums of money are poured out around the world to stop "over-popula-



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tion," and Draconian birth control policies have been imposed on women in India and China, all in the name of this word. What does it mean to say that a country is over-populated — and is it true in the real world or merely a matter of defining words?

Those who have seen hungry and poverty-stricken people in parts of the Third World may find it beyond any question that these countries are over-populated. Would these people not be better off if there were only half as many of them, so that they could have twice as much food per person and twice as much of other things?

It is certainly true that the same output divided by half as many people would mean twice as much real wealth per person. But that is an identity. It is true just because of the way we define the terms. It tells us nothing about the real world.

Worse yet, it may insinuate something that is not true. That is the underlying danger in tautologies that get mistaken for real statements about the real world.

When today's poverty-stricken countries in fact had half as many people, were those people better fed or otherwise more prosperous? Now we are talking about the real world, not about definitions. In the real world, most Third World countries were even poorer and even more subject to hunger and famine when their populations were half of what they are today.

Poverty and hunger are a real horror, whatever their causes. But launching a crusade based on verbal confusions is not going to help the victims, however much it may feel good to the crusaders.

Some of the most dire poverty and hunger in the world are in sub-Saharan Africa, where the population density is less than one-tenth of what it is in prosperous Japan. Other countries in dire poverty have higher population densities, but so do prosperous countries in Western Europe.

Since it is people who produce output, if poor countries had fewer people, they would produce less output, and there is no reason to arbitrarily assume that there would be more output per person. Exactly two centuries ago — in 1798 — Malthus succeeded in identifying poverty and over-population in the public mind, so that anyone denying over-population is regarded as denying poverty.

People are horrified when you question over-population dangers, because that suggests callousness about the hungry millions in the Third World. But if wrong theories were the answer to poverty, the Third World would be a Utopia by now.

Wealth is the answer to poverty — producing more. This may not be as emotionally satisfying, as intellectually exciting or as politically attractive as some other notions, but it is the only thing that has, in fact, produced prosperity in countries that were once as poor as the Third World still is.

Over-population theories will probably continue to flourish, because they remain as irrefutable as other statements that are "true" by definition.

World population to surge by 2050

Despite AIDS, Africa and Asia to lead growth

Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS — The world's population — already more than double what it was in 1950 — is projected to boom by another 3 billion in the next half-century, a new U.N. study says. And despite the staggering toll of AIDS, Africa and Asia are expected to dwarf Europe.

Today, there are some 6.1 billion people in the world. By 2050, that figure is anticipated to swell to 9.3 billion, with nearly nine of every 10 people living in a developing country — one out of six in India alone — according to the study to be released today by the U.N. Population Division.

And while AIDS is projected to kill hundreds of millions more in Africa, the number of people in the world's 48 poorest nations, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa, is expected to triple in the next 50 years, the study said.

Meanwhile, dropping birthrates make it imperative for Europe and Japan to rethink their immigration policies and adjust social services to accommodate a shrinking workforce and a growing elderly population, said Joseph Chamie, director of the U.N. Population Division.

"Some people think the world population problem is over," he said.

"No. This is a long-term issue and it's a very complex symphony — you have some countries declining, you have other countries growing rapidly, and you have some staying the

same. When you add those up, you have a very complex world."

The projections are a hint of what Chamie calls an upcoming "new order" — an older, larger, poorer world dependent upon migration to fill the gap between nations that cannot feed their people and wealthy countries seeking a labor force.

But Ben Wattenberg, a senior fellow at the conservative-leaning American Enterprise Institute, cautioned that the study's estimates could be "potentially misleading."

The fertility rate — the average number of children born to a woman during her childbearing years — is dropping faster and more consistently worldwide than the U.N. report suggests, making it likely that the 2050 population estimate is inflated, he said. "Their numbers are high — they should be lower."

The report said that taking into account improved economies as well as lower mortality and fertility rates, growth will be rapid in Africa, much of Asia and Latin America.

The United States, with a fresh influx of 1 million immigrants a year, will grow to nearly 400 million at mid-century from 283 million today, it said.

Europe, in contrast, will start seeing a decline as early as 2003 without migration. Ukraine's population is projected to drop nearly by 40 percent by 2050, Russia's by 29 percent, Italy's by a quarter.

Last year, the 15 European Union nations together recorded a natural population growth — births minus deaths — of 343,000. It took India just a week to match that.

On the Net

U.N. Population Division:
<http://www.un.org/esa/population/unpop.htm>

Fifty years ago, Europe claimed 22 percent of the world population, Africa just 8 percent.

In 50 years, Africa will have three times as many people as Europe, even though AIDS is anticipated to cut Africa's population growth by 15 percent by 2050.

"It's like a mortality avalanche from the HIV/AIDS epidemic," Chamie said. "Despite that, you see Africa going from about 800 million to 2 billion by 2050. Without AIDS, that figure would be 300 million higher," Chamie noted.

Meanwhile, the industrialized world — Europe, North America, Japan, Australia and New Zealand — will face an aging population. A fifth of Europe was age 60 or older in 1996; by 2050, that figure could jump to 37 percent, the report predicted.

Fewer workers will be bearing the burden of supporting its many elderly, an economic impact that Paul Hewitt of the Center for Strategic and International Studies said could prove "catastrophic" when many of the world's baby boomers begin retiring en masse.

"It's probably going to be the biggest crisis of the next 50 years," said Hewitt, project director for the center's Global Aging Initiative. "If we handle it wrong, we could end up with a 1930s-style depression."

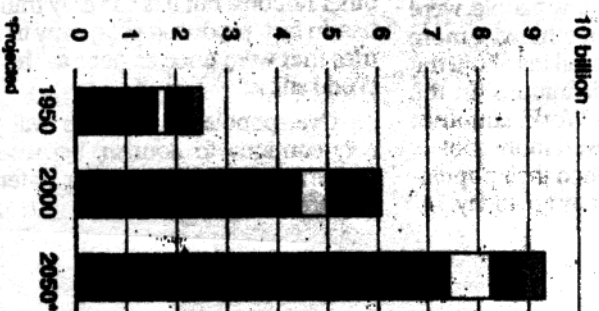
Countries must rethink pension, retirement, trade and immigration, he said.

Growing global population

A new study released by the U.N. Population Division projects the world's population of 6 billion to increase by another 3 billion by 2050. Asian and African populations will dwarf those of the West.

World populations, by region

- New Zealand and Australia
- North America
- Europe
- Latin America and Caribbean
- Asia
- Africa



SOURCE: U.N. POPULATION DIVISION AP GRAPHIC