

# NUMBERS COUNT

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## **A Question of Numbers: High Migration, Low Fertility and the Politics of National Identity**

Michael S. Teitelbaum & Jay Winter

New York: Hill and Wang, 1998

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*Reviewed by Nelson Rosit*

**M**ichael Teitelbaum, co-author of *A Question of Numbers*, knows the score. He has taught demography at two prestigious universities, has written several books on the subject, and was co-chairman of the 1996 U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform. He knows that over the last thirty-five years a “radical, in some ways unprecedented” demographic change has occurred in the developed world (i.e. Western nations). A sharp decline in fertility of white populations has coincided with the arrival of large numbers of non-white guest workers, immigrants, and asylum seekers. Teitelbaum, along with co-author and historian Jay Winter, is apprehensive about these developments. Not that he necessarily sees a problem with falling white birthrates and massive non-white immigration. No, it is the potential for a white backlash that seems to worry him the most. With scholarly detachment the authors assert that it is not the numbers themselves that can cause problems, rather it is the incorrect interpretation of these numbers by opportunistic demagogues that can lead to social disruption.

Despite the authors’ liberal bias, *A Question of Numbers* addresses several important issues and provides some much needed information (though ironically, few numbers). The first two thirds of the book consists of chapters on individual countries. This format shows that, despite national variations, the motif of *low fertility* and *high immigration* runs throughout the Western world. Yes, impoverished Russia is plagued by widespread illegal immigration, and formerly fecund Italy has one of the lowest birthrates in the world. The chapter on Romania tells the startling story of how the newly installed Ceausescu government, worried by the country’s low birthrate, outlawed most contraceptives and severely limited abortions. The result: “In 1966-67 Romania experienced what is surely the greatest fertility increase in a large population in recorded history—

100% in one year, from 1.80 to 3.66." It would seem that even low fertility populations have the potential for dramatically increasing their birthrate, though few would find Romania's old communist dictatorship an attractive model to emulate.

Among the telling points the book makes is on the role of global capitalism's insatiable demand for more and cheaper labor in promoting immigration. The *gastarbeiter* in Germany and the migrant farm workers in America are examples. While conceding capitalism's tremendous potential for stimulating material development, this economic system is able to bend and mold every cultural value and social institution to its own needs. In this reviewer's opinion its role in precipitating the present demographic disaster needs to be explored further.

Another issue discussed is the so-called direct link between the "Holocaust" (the authors explain why the term is inappropriate), the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees, and the large number of asylum seekers in Western countries today. The UN convention has seriously limited the freedom of action of supposedly sovereign nation signatories in dealing with these uninvited guests.

Why has the feared political challenge to ethnic change not taken place? The authors touch briefly on the career of Enoch Powell, a Conservative MP who, beginning in 1968, spoke out against large scale immigration to Britain. [See the articles elsewhere in this issue by Turner and Brand—editor.] Powell was shunned by his party because the Conservatives "were unwilling to tolerate a populist campaign from their right-wing." The party "had no tolerance for extremist views or for the divisions they would bring." To put it another way, the Conservatives lacked the intestinal fortitude to conserve their own ethnic heritage.

In the United States a majority of the electorate wants immigration restricted, yet the political establishment, both left and right, favors large scale immigration.

The American New Right has taken up themes of what we might term "conservative libertarianism" and "cornucopianism," according to which government action to impede any of the forces of the free market (including migration) is suspect. American liberalism on the other hand—with a deep preoccupation with American racial conflicts—is heavily influenced by the ideologies of civil libertarianism and civil rights.

In other words, the American political spectrum runs from right-wing liberalism to left-wing liberalism. A classic example of this was the 1984 presidential election which pitted the right-wing liberal, Ronald Reagan, against the left-wing liberal, Walter Mondale. Along with limited ideological choice, U.S. politics is increasingly dominated by special interests. "We can see, then, that the American political system has recently been more responsive to the groups desiring increased immigration than to the wishes of broader, yet less organized groups of citizens who want to reduce it."

Surely the demographic revolution which began during the last third of the twentieth century will be *the* domestic and foreign policy issue confronting the West in the twenty first century. Several factors insure this. Although massive numbers of Third World people are on the move today the potential numbers in the future are far great still. The gap in birthrate and economic development between the richest and poorest

countries is widening. Many African countries have a lower per capita income today than in 1980. And, the authors point out, even in developing countries that are doing relatively well there will be a lag of decades, even longer, between the beginning of sustained economic development and a reduction in fertility. In addition, history has shown that governmental action using the carrot, rather than Ceausescu's stick, has failed to significantly raise the birthrates in Western nations.

Throughout the book the authors reiterate how politically combustible these demographic developments are. In the foreword they write of "problematic" and "sensitive" issues. In chapter two they note the "political explosiveness of population questions" in Europe. In the chapter on Britain they warn of "the potential for severe political and social conflict," while in America majority vs. minority "conflict is bound to intensify." Given how gingerly they handle the issue of demographic change, it is not surprising that Teitelbaum and Winter are hesitant to make population projections and speculate about future developments. However, in the conclusion they do make a couple of tentative predictions:

The most plausible future level of fertility in industrial countries is moderately below replacement... While we can predict that international migration will increase we cannot guess the actual magnitude of it.

They go on to write that:

[g]iven the political volatility of the issue, long-term projections about the future ethnic or linguistic composition of national populations are conjectural at best. Commentators need to exercise more than the usual reserve... in this difficult, politically explosive area of speculation.

It is in keeping with the authors' primary concern of containing a white backlash that they refuse to posit future demographic scenarios. However, between the lines they imply that with continued below-replacement birthrates and increased non-white immigration the future existence of white nations is in doubt. But do not say it too loudly. You might upset the "silent majority."

In their introduction the authors promise a "dispassionate, knowledgeable discussion" of demographic change. They were only half truthful. They can discuss the prospect of radical ethnic change within Western nations dispassionately. However, the possibility of white citizens defending their national and ethnic identity seems to fill Teitelbaum and Winter with dread.

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