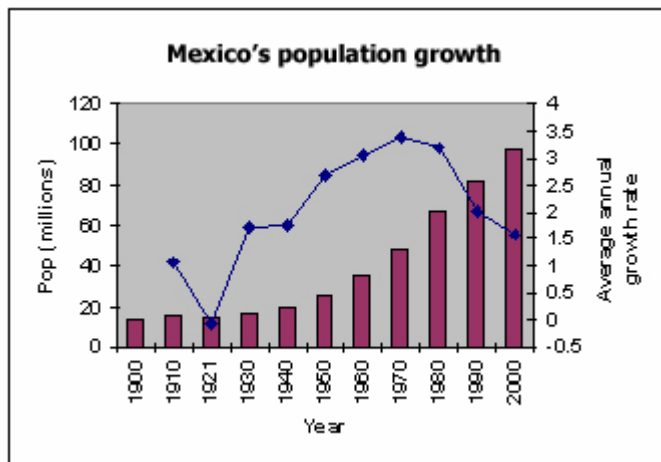


(taken from)
The Selfish Gene
by Richard Dawkins

Chapter 7 - Family Planning*

Incidentally, a thing that is sometimes not realized even by people who worry about population problems is that population growth depends on *when* people have children, as well as on how many they have. Since populations tend to increase by a certain proportion *per generation*, it follows that if you space the generations out more, the population will grow at a slower rate per year.... We have seen examples of the startling calculations that can be used to bring this home. For instance, the present [1976] population of Latin America is around 300 million, and already many of them are undernourished.

[The population of Mexico alone in 1980 was roughly 70 million, and as of 2000 is 103 million—a 68% increase in twenty years. The infant mortality rate as of year 2000 is 18.1 infant deaths per 1,000 persons. The birth rate is 19 child births per 1,000 persons. The death rate is 4.9 deaths per 1,000 persons. Life expectancy is 74.5 years. The total average population growth is 1%. Keeping current birth and death rates constant maintaining a 1% population growth, the population of Mexico will double every thirty years; that is, double every two generations (double from parent to grandchild).]



For a detailed analysis of population growth refer to “Population Problem” on my website.

...The names of some of these reasons [not to expect a constant population growth rate] are famine, plague, and war [or, emigration]; or, if we are lucky, birth control.[†] It is no use appealing to advances in agricultural science—‘green revolutions’ and the like. Increases in food production may temporarily alleviate the problem, but it is mathematically certain that they cannot be a long-term solution; indeed, like the medical advances that have precipitated the crisis, they may well make the problem worse, by speeding up the rate of the population expansion [by reducing infant mortality and death rates, e.g.]. It is a simple logical truth that, short of mass emigration into space, with rockets taking off at the rate of several million per second, uncontrolled birth-rates are bound to lead to horribly increased death-rates. It is hard to believe that this simple truth is not understood by those leaders who forbid their followers to use effective contraceptive methods. They express a preference

* Comments within [...] may not be Dawkin’s comments. They have been inserted to provide additional information, background information that has been omitted or references earlier paragraphs, or updated information. *The Selfish Gene* was originally published in 1976.

[†] Notice Mexico’s population growth rate, indicated by the blue line in the chart, is relatively constant between 1930 and 1940—the period including WWII (1935 – 1949, Mexico joined in 1941)—but oscillates in the period between 1900 to 1940 which was dominated by a long and bloody revolution beginning around 1880 and ending around 1934.

for 'natural' methods of population limitation, and a natural method is exactly what they are going to get. It is called starvation.

Wild animals almost never die of old age: starvation, disease, or predators catch up with them long before they become really senile. Until recently this was true of man too. Most animals die in childhood, many never get beyond the egg stage.... It is obvious that if a parent tries to spread her limited resources of food and effort among too many children, she will end up rearing fewer than if she had set out with more modest ambitions. She has to strike a balance between bearing and caring....

Individuals who have too many children are penalized, not because the whole population goes extinct, but simply because fewer of their children survive.... There is no need for altruistic restraint in the birth-rate, because there is no welfare state in nature. Any gene for overindulgence is promptly punished: the children containing that gene starve.... [We must also consider non-genetic factors such as belief systems that promote such practices.] What has happened in modern civilized man is that family sizes are no longer limited by the finite resources that the individual parents can provide. If a husband and wife have more children than they can feed, the state, which means the rest of the population, simply steps in and keeps the surplus children alive and healthy. There is, in fact, nothing to stop a couple with no material resources at all having and rearing precisely as many children as the woman can physically bear [see for example the cases of the Chernenko family with 17 children and the Duggar family with 16 children as of 2005]. But the welfare state is a very unnatural thing. In nature, parents who have more children than they can support do not have many grandchildren, and their genes are not passed on to future generations.... Since we humans do not want to return to the old selfish ways where we let the children of too-large families starve to death, we have abolished the family unit as a unit of economic self-sufficiency, and substituted the state. But the privilege of guaranteed support for children should not be abused.

Contraception is sometimes attacked as 'unnatural'. So it is, very unnatural. The trouble is, so is the welfare state. I think that most of us believe the welfare state is highly desirable. But you cannot have an unnatural welfare state, unless you also have unnatural birth control, otherwise the end result will be misery even greater than that which obtains in nature.[‡] The welfare state is perhaps the greatest altruistic system the animal kingdom has ever known. But any altruistic system is inherently unstable, because it is open to abuse by selfish individuals [e.g. the Duggars and Chernenkos], ready to exploit it. Individual humans who have more children than they are capable of rearing are probably too ignorant in most cases to be accused of conscious malevolent exploitation. Powerful institutions and leaders who deliberately encourage them to do so seem to me less free from suspicion.

From here, refer to articles on the ethics of birth control and sexual reproduction.

It should be evident from this reading that the ethics of birth control and sexual reproduction, famine, population growth, the role of the State, and the ethical consequences of one's belief systems as guides to behavior are all interrelated. It should also be evident that many ethical issues are a social and not a private matter that cross cultural boundaries; i.e., ethical subjectivism and ethical egoism, and cultural relativism are invalid normative theories.

[‡] Because of parts that have been omitted this sentence seems odd. What Dawkins' is saying is that both birth control and the welfare state are unnatural (see in-class materials on various definitions of "natural"). If one is to be tossed out for that reason alone, so then the other must be. However, he is saying more than that. Uncontrolled population growth will result in an every expanding welfare state that will ultimately bring harm to the whole society—what if every family reproduced like the Duggars and Chernenkos. Even the state has limited resources available and too-large families entail costs on other persons and families which subtract from the caring or bearing of their own children or kin. Therefore, controlled population growth is an imperative for all members of society. The next obvious question then is how to best control population growth? One obvious answer is birth control; specifically, contraceptive use.