

# Demographic Bulimia

BY SHALINI RANDERIA

*Like the unattainable ideal weight of our individual bodies in the modern age, no national body appears to reach or maintain an ideal population size. I am puzzled by a perception of the world as both under-populated (in Europe) and over-populated (in Asia or Africa), says IWM Rector Shalini Randeria.*

Growing up in New Delhi in the 1970s I was subjected to Indian governmental propaganda on billboards that cautioned at every traffic light, "Stop. Wait before having your next child! After the third never again!". Or given a more cheerful message, "A small family is a happy family". Imagine my surprise as a doctoral student in Heidelberg in the mid-1980s at the attempt of the German government to convince its citizens that, "*Kinder bringen mehr Freude ins Leben*" ("Children bring more joy to life") and "*Kinder machen glücklicher als Geld*" ("Children make one happier than money"). In India couples with such "backward" views were being told at the time by the Ministry of Family Planning, which paid premiums for sterilisation, that, "One is fun".

"Demographic bulimia" is Hans Magnus Enzensberger's term for this schizophrenic adherence to two contradictory sets of ideas on, and objectives of, population control in our "global village" in which the boat is seen as being too full but as not having enough Europeans in it. That differential rates of population growth in the global North and South pose a problem for Europe was precisely the view put forward in the well-known manifesto, *Weil das Land sich ändern muß* (1992) co-authored among others by Helmut Schmidt, the former German Chancellor and Gräfin Dönhoff, a leading liberal. Its first chapter titled "So that the Germans do not die out" warned that fertility rates were declining rapidly and the country's population was aging at an alarming rate. Urgent counter-measures by the state were, therefore, needed to stabilize the population, mitigate the demographic threat to Germany as well as to prevent the proportion of Europeans in the world population from being halved by 2020 or 2030. These pro-natalist recommendations were being made in the very same year as feminists the world over were campaigning in the run up to the UN World Conference on Population and Development in Cairo for the recognition of the freedom of women and men to decide on the number of their children free from interference by their governments. The final Cairo Conference Declaration (1994) not only secured these reproductive rights and freedom but also enjoined governments to abolish all demographic targets and incentives to either reduce or raise women's fertility.

The normalization of family size in modern Western societies to a two-child norm of so-called replacement level fertility, which has



been more or less successfully diffused globally since 1945, obscures the fact that fertility and reproduction are always inherently political. By linking the size and composition of the body politic to body politics, the politics of procreation is inextricably entangled in questions of nationalism, migration, citizenship and gender relations. Thus the seeming facticity of demographic numbers

became an important issue on several continents at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He shows how eugenics and population control were linked historically through shared intellectual origins and embraced several constituencies: social hygienists, opponents of immigration, pro-natalists and neo-Malthusians, all of whom shared the aim of scientifically reforming and biologically im-

proving society. With eugenic agendas intertwined with discourses of population control, the differential fertility rates of majority communities as compared to ethnic and religious minorities, or migrants, have been politicized for over a century. State policies to raise the fertility of the majority community, or reduce that of minority groups, have always been entangled with ethno-nationalist agendas to preserve the purity of the nation. Arjun Appadurai's apt phrase "the fear of small numbers" alerts us to one cause of the growing rage and resentment against minorities, who are a constant reminder of the failure of the modern national project with its fantasy of ethno-religious-linguistic homogeneity. It is this anxiety of an apparent loss of national identity, or racial purity, that right wing populists have instrumentalized politically with respect to electoral arithmetic. In the USA, for instance, the majoritarian

fear of being outnumbered is turned against Blacks and Hispanics, just as in India it is used to target Muslims. Fears of de-population are neither new nor confined to small eastern European societies today faced with massive out-migration together with a fall in birth rates. The French fear of dying out, and losing the demographic race to the Germans, has been a constant source of mor-

er dynamic construct, which could incorporate "compatible" Italian or Polish blood to sustain and even to regenerate it. Depopulation was described as the "plague of the white race" in the face of the "Yellow Peril" of fast breeding Asians, who were seen as dangerous as evident by the Boxer rebellion, the Russo-Japanese war and by the establishment of the Congress Party in India to struggle against British colonial rule.

*Who is regarded as belonging to the nation, whose fertility is seen to pose a threat to it, are a matter of politics and the demographic imagination.*

hides the normativity that underlies state interventions to differentially reduce or increase the fertility of certain groups of women in every society. Fertility, mortality and mobility are always stratified along class, ethnic, and religious lines with respect to bio-political questions of who lives, dies and reproduces, within a given territory. Demographic designs thus never simply concern the quantity but always also the desired quality of the population that should constitute a particular nation-state. The Chinese government, for example, was explicit about its aim of raising the quality of its population and not only reducing its size when it launched its one-child policy.

#### Fears of de-population

In his magisterial history of world-wide population control titled *Fatal Misconceptions*, Matthew Connolly traces how the quality of the popu-

lating society. With eugenic agendas intertwined with discourses of population control, the differential fertility rates of majority communities as compared to ethnic and religious minorities, or migrants, have been politicized for over a century. State policies to raise the fertility of the majority community, or reduce that of minority groups, have always been entangled with ethno-nationalist agendas to preserve the purity of the nation. Arjun Appadurai's apt phrase "the fear of small numbers" alerts us to one cause of the growing rage and resentment against minorities, who are a constant reminder of the failure of the modern national project with its fantasy of ethno-religious-linguistic homogeneity. It is this anxiety of an apparent loss of national identity, or racial purity, that right wing populists have instrumentalized politically with respect to electoral arithmetic. In the USA, for instance, the majoritarian

panic since well over a hundred years. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the so-called "immigrant question" in France was formulated with respect to labour shortage as well as the reproductive value of potential foreigners. Demographers and politicians across the entire political spectrum supported immigration of men from so-called "demographically prolific nations" like Italy, Spain and Poland, who were considered hard-working, assimilable, and able to produce indisputably French offspring. Immigrants from these Catholic countries were said to embody traditional values, patriarchal authority, maternal virtue and selfless parenthood unlike individualistic French men and especially women, who in their hedonistic pursuit of pleasure were neglecting their duty to procreate in national interest. The "French race", whose very future was considered to be at stake, was in these discourses a rath-

#### "Kinder statt Inder"

Fast forward to Germany in 2000. Interestingly, the dilemma of the "cultural" assimilability of certain immigrants, whose skilled labour is required for economic reasons, seems to continue unchanged. Chancellor Schröder launched a Green Card initiative to increase the global competitiveness of the country by attracting highly qualified IT specialists from India. They however, preferred USA or Canada as destinations, where naturalisation was easier, salaries higher and the English language along with a large Indian diaspora provided a familiar environment. Yet the reaction of Jürgen Rüttgers of the CDU to this policy to attract highly skilled immigrants was telling. He argued that "Our children (should be) at the computers instead of the Indians". Faced by a barrage of criticism, he retracted the statement but not before right wing propaganda coined the memorable, if ambiguous, slogan "*Kinder statt Inder*" ("Children instead of Indians"), which juxtaposed migration with procreation, as an exhortation to Germans to invest in their own children and make Indian migrants superfluous.

Several countries in Eastern Europe, among them Bulgaria, Croa-

tia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Rumania, Serbia and Ukraine are expected to experience population losses of 15% or more between 2015 and 2050. However, such seemingly neutral statistical calculations of population size overlook the fact that there is no natural continuity in the composition of the population of any of these countries, which has varied widely across the generations as borders have been redrawn, and people moved, forcibly or voluntarily. Who is regarded as belonging to the nation, whose fertility is seen to pose a threat to it, are thus a matter of politics and the demographic imagination. The new language of *demographic security* based on the political rhetoric of the impending “destruction of the gene pool” seeks to legitimize calls for pro-natalist population measures, and anti-migration policies, which would guarantee the purity of the nation. Though varied in content and implementation, these policies aim to promote the generation of the “demand” for more children, strengthen the institution of “the family” and “traditional” values by “protecting motherhood” in terms reminiscent of late 19<sup>th</sup> century France. The current backlash against reproductive rights, women’s empowerment and even gender studies in Eastern Europe need to be situated in this larger context.

But current pro-natalist appeals are by no means limited to Eastern Europe. Concerned about the country’s low birth rate Danish policy makers have started to offer sex education classes in schools focused on procreation rather than contraception. A Danish travel agency even launched a campaign called „Do it for Denmark!”. Claiming that Danes had 46% more sex while on holiday, it encouraged couples to take more frequent holidays, which would boost the travel business along with the country’s population. It may come as a surprise today that European colonial powers had also tried to stimulate population growth in the colonies in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is only after decolonization in the mid-1940s that former colonies came to be regarded as overpopulated. As long as Asian and African societies were a source of cheap labor that posed little threat of immigration to Europe, they were objects of pro-natalist colonial interventions. The German government was just as concerned about unduly low birth rates in today’s Tanzania as was the British administration in India about peasant households not reproducing enough. Although he did not say how he intended to go about doing it for Great Britain, Sir Richard Temple, the British governor of Bombay (1877–79), gave assurances to his superiors in London that he would do everything in his power “to increase the number of his Majesty’s subjects in India.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cited in S. Chandrasekhar, *Population and Planned Parenthood in India*, (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) London 1961, 93.

**Shalini Randeria** is the Rector of the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM) in Vienna and Professor of Social Anthropology and Sociology at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (IHEID) in Geneva. Since March 2017 she is the Director of the Hirschman Centre on Democracy at the IHEID.

# Will the Population become Redundant?

BY ROBERT SKIDELSKY

*Robotization has revived old fears about mass redundancy but also inspired visions of a symbiosis between humans and machines. Delivering this year’s Patočka Memorial Lecture, Lord Robert Skidelsky surveyed both the pessimistic and optimistic traditions of economic thought on mechanization, drawing conclusions for future policymaking.*

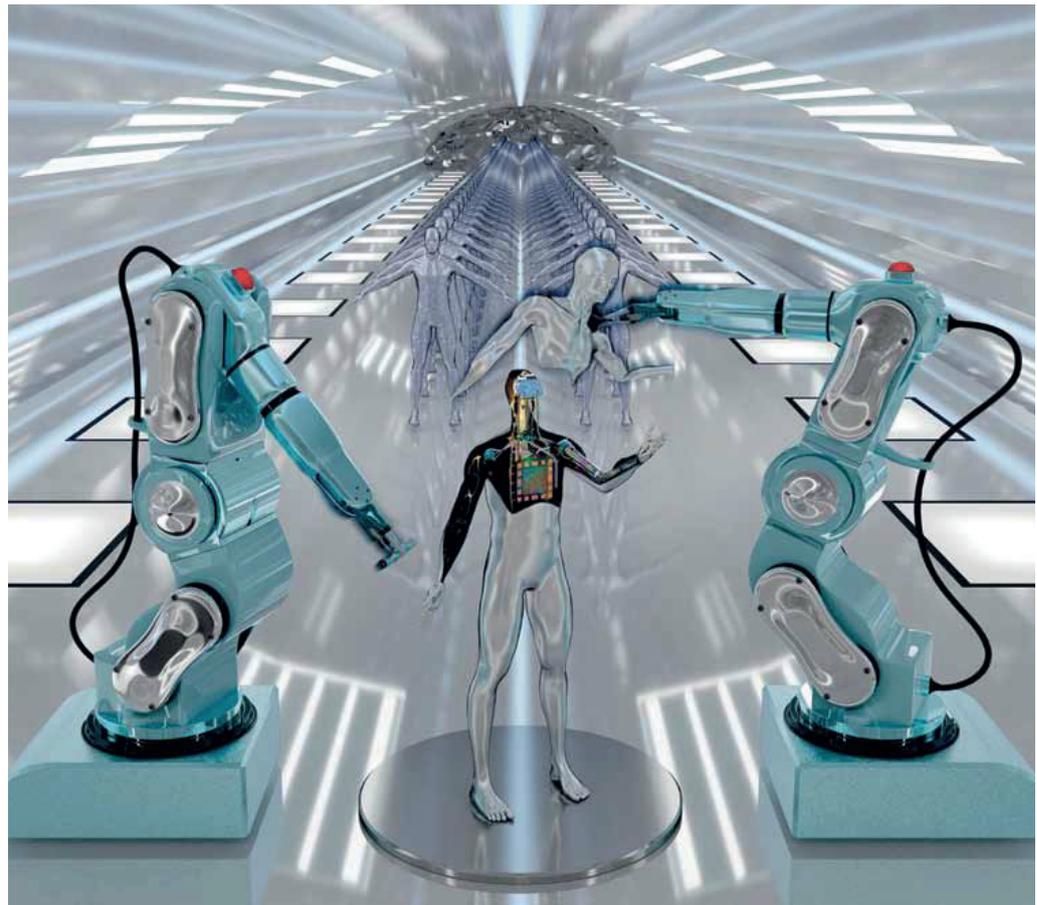


Illustration: Science Photo Library / photostock.com

**A**s society, wrote Jan Patočka, is decadent if it encourages a decadent life, ‘a life addicted to what is inhuman by its very nature.’<sup>1</sup> It is in this spirit that I want to explore the impact of technology on the human condition, and especially on work. Is technology making the human race redundant materially and spiritually—both as producers of wealth and producers of meaning?

Ever since machinery became an active part of industrial production, redundancy has been seen either as a promise or a threat. The former has been the dominant discourse in economics, with redundancy seen as a transitional problem, confined to particular groups of workers, like the handloom weavers of early 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain. Over time, part of the displaced workforce would be absorbed in new jobs, part of it in the greater leisure made possible by improved productivity.

However, the fear of the permanent redundancy of a large fraction of the workforce—that is, its forced removal from gainful employment—has never been absent. The reason is that the loss of human jobs to machines is palpable and immediate, whereas the gain is indirect and delayed: an immediate threat versus a long-term promise.

The fear of redundancy has two roots. The first is people’s fear that machines will rob them of their livelihood; the second that it will rob them of their purpose in life. Sociologists stress the importance of work in giving meaning to a person’s existence. Economists, on the other hand, see work as purely instrumental, a means for buying things people want. If it can be done by machines, so much the better—it may free up people for more valuable pursuits.

It is not surprising that fear of redundancy surfaces whenever there is a burst of technological innova-

tion. We are living through such a period now with the spread of automation. The headlines tell us that robots are gobbling up human jobs at an unprecedented rate—that up to 30% of today’s work will be automated within twenty or so years. And the jobs themselves are becoming ever more precarious. So the old question is being posed ever more urgently: are machines a threat or a promise?

## Mechanization and the economists

The productive unit in the pre-modern economy was the household not the factory: work and life were not yet separated. The medieval economy comprised farms and ‘manufactories’ in small towns which were little larger than villages. The professions had their origin in the urban guilds of skilled workers. Yet everyone was skilled in the sense that their work

involved knowledge of all stages of production, not just tiny bits of it, as in Adam Smith’s pin factory. Temporary and permanent redundancy of the population there certainly was—but this was caused by harvest failures, wars, or plagues, not by competition from machines.

With the Enlightenment, the idea of work came to be associated not with the husbanding of nature, but with ‘overcoming’ it, the human project which has dominated western history ever since. It was human participation in this project, made possible by science, which was supposed to set the whole of humanity free, and not just that small minority of the wealthy and powerful. This was the democratic promise of work.

The particular form of progress which excited the 18<sup>th</sup> century imagination was the growth of wealth. ‘The end of production is consumption’ wrote Adam Smith. The more goods there were, the happier we