

Comment on Jose Brunner's Liberal Laws v. the Law of Large Numbers

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In his stimulating article "Liberal Laws v. the Law of Large Numbers, or Why Demography Arouses Anxiety" Jose Brunner juxtaposes liberalism and demography as two substantially different mind-sets. The difference between the two, Brunner insightfully demonstrates, does not lie in the all too familiar and ready-made opposition of autonomy to heteronomy, individualism to collectivism, and deontology to consequentialism. Brunner reminds us how at least within the Anglo-American tradition liberals and demographers are equally interested, albeit each in their own way, with consequences and aggregate effects, and neither fits comfortably into the Kantian contrast of autonomy and heteronomy.

Brunner locates the distinction between demography and liberalism not in conflicting values but rather in conflicting worldviews (or perhaps more accurately metaphysics). Whereas liberals believe that giving individuals the capacity to choose and conduct their lives according to their own free-will and self-interest will lead through the intervention of an "invisible hand" to a better world for society as a whole, demographers, in general, share the opposite mind-set. They believe that allowing individuals to lead their lives freely, will not simply undermine the welfare of society as a whole, but may in the long run destroy society itself. If the liberal mind-set paints an optimistic future of progress, harmony and human development, then demographers envision a bleak future of conflict, contradiction and decline.

Brunner neatly sums up his argument in the following way: "Adam Smith liberals theorists seem to assume that in aggregate the unintended consequences of individual choices are beneficial to all and lead to a self-sustaining social system, which may at most need tinkering at the margins. Demographers routinely take the opposite stance. They suggest that in aggregate, autonomous decisions taken by rational individuals and protected by liberal rights may well undermine the very social values that these decisions embody, threaten the life-style that is expressed in them, and bring about the decline of the nation or society that allows them."

The distinction between the liberal and demographic mind-set can be demonstrated in a variety of sites. Brunner offers one quite complex case study, to which I will return later. For now, I'd like to offer a somewhat more straight-forward example, the case of the Ultra-Orthodox community in Israel. Israeli demographers have pointed out the high birth-rates of ultra-Orthodox in Israel. Some have viewed this rate as posing a potential threat in the long run to the stability of the secular state. For many, this threat is far from being hypothetical. The demographic effects have already manifested themselves in Jerusalem, where for the first time in the history of the State of Israel, its capital is governed by an ultra-Orthodox mayor (similar prophecies have recently been voiced with respect to an Arab

mayor in 2040). Many liberals, on the other hand, are less concerned. Some, as Brunner's model would predict, believe that the invisible hand of the market will eventually solve this demographic problem. As long as the state won't spoil things by offering welfare incentives, the ultra-Orthodox community will eventually have to change its reproductive habits. The already high rates of poverty the community is facing will become unbearable. While this stabilizing process may take some time, liberals are not too worried. As Jerusalem becomes more and more religious, its liberals have found refuge in Tel Aviv.

Before I turn to the second part of the article and to the details of the case study, I would like to make a few further observations and raise some questions.

First, when Brunner points out to the fact that demographers commonly offer doomsday prophecies, it seems clear that he is limiting the discussion to demographic diagnosis rather than prognosis. With respect to the prognosis demographers are often extremely optimistic about future developments. Closing borders, cutting social benefits, and distributing free contraceptives, are only a few very optimistic solutions that demographic experts have at their disposal. In fact, the two sides of demography, a pessimistic diagnosis and optimistic prognosis are complimentary, the more severe the diagnosis the more the need to follow the prognosis.

Second, even with respect to diagnosis, the picture that the paper portrays is not fully convincing. One may wonder whether demography as a science and a mind-set is preordained to raise anxiety and despair, and conversely whether it is truly necessary for all liberals to believe in a better future. If the paper views these correlations as necessary ones, then the question formulated in the subtitle, "Why Demography arouses anxiety," remains to a large degree unanswered.

A possible reconstruction of the argument, albeit a more modest one, would deny any attempt to identify an essentialist "demographer" and "liberal" position and limit the argument to identifying not two contrasting positions but rather two competing dispositions, which form a historically contingent pedigree, rather than a logical and essentialist one.

Indeed, the argument seems much more convincing if limited to the historical origins and predispositions of both liberalism and demography and avoids claims regarding their inevitable scientific logic. It is at the inception of these two modes of thinking, in the writings of Adam Smith and Thomas Malthus that one may find the clearest contrast between the two mind-sets. What characterizes these early moments of liberalism and demography is the relative transparency of their metaphysical underpinnings. Smith and Malthus share a similar belief in the notion of human destiny, one which though formulated in the language of science, does not attempt to hide its metaphysical grounding. More contemporary liberals and demographers are no longer aware of the metaphysical assumptions underlying their disciplines. This may mean that they are even more under the spell of

metaphysics than their predecessors, but alternatively it may allow members of both camps to depart from the specific convictions of their predecessors and diverge from the particular alignment of liberalism with harmony and demography with conflict and despair.

It is within this context of questioning that we may now turn to discuss the specific example that the paper itself addresses. To demonstrate his point, Brunner does not turn to a case study that would allow a straight forward application of his thesis, of the kind I drew on in my earlier remarks. Although Brunner does not explicitly say as much, far from being an application the second part of the paper is in fact an attempt to challenge or at least problematize some of the broad conclusions suggested in the first part. The complex demographic dilemma the paper turns to regards the tension between liberalism and demography in contemporary Germany. Demographic experts have shown that the birth rates in Germany have decreased to 1.3 or 1.4 children, which suggests that each generation is between a fourth and a third smaller than the previous one.

The application of the papers framework to this case may seem at first straight-forward. Precisely the life-style and values, which liberals support, are the ones which demographers believe will lead to a catastrophe. "The equality between the sexes," Brunner explains, "and increasingly individualistic values, [] are said to have led Germans - and in this context, particularly German women - to choose careers and non-traditional intimate relationships over childrearing, while legal contraception and abortion enable them to realize those choices."

In fact, however, the picture becomes more complex. While demographers do paint a pessimistic picture, the surprising fact is that their prophecies are not matched with equally optimistic prognoses and are not taken seriously by policy-makers.

Brunner offers four different explanations, historical, moral, political and economic, for what this exceptional response to a demographic problem. First, for known historical reasons, discussing positive eugenics is still taboo in Germany. Second, politically, the demographic threat to Germany does not come as an external threat of invasion, but rather as an internal threat of implosion, one which is harder to fight. Third, the demographic challenge facing Germany today leads to a different set of psychological concerns. Where demographic threats usually come from outside and create fear and aggravation, Germans today are facing anxiety from disintegration leading into paralysis. Finally, the solution for Germany's internal demographic problems are much more costly, since they demand to invest tax money in promoting birth-rates, rather than the ordinary cut of tax money (as in the case of the ultra-Orthodox threat).

I agree with the paper, that the case of German's demographic problem is somewhat unique, but I wonder whether the reasons are the ones given by

the paper, and whether the paper, in the final analysis, is not begging the question. Why is it that the demographic problem in Germany is formulated as an internal rather than an external problem? Is it simply because the numbers suggest it is? Would it not be possible to argue that the real threat to Germany is not simply the low birth-rate of Germans but rather the combination of these demographic facts together with the growing number of Muslim immigration? Is it possible then that demographers in Germany have become affected in the very conceptualization of the demographic problem by liberal assumptions? What does this fact do to the initial attempt to contrast the two mindsets?

Finally, the paper concludes by suggesting that the demographic paralysis in Germany perhaps may be solved if policy makers adopt a radically liberal solution to the problem. Since the source of the problem is not external, and limiting rights cannot serve as a solution, the possible solution to the problem may lie in expanding rather than limiting rights and in particular offering rights to foreign residents, broadening social rights, such as free child care, which may create incentives for increased birth rates, and thus solve the demographic problem.

Brunner's optimistic conclusion leaves the reader wondering whether in the final round of the paper he has decided to take sides in the demography - liberal debate and adopt the soothing caress of the invisible hand. This is clearly one possible reading of the paper, but I'd like to offer another one.

What is common to liberals and demographers alike and is perhaps more important than what sets them apart is the science of "futurology". As Hanna Arendt noted once, all modern sciences of futurology predict the past only on the basis of extrapolations from the present state of affairs. In this sense, "futurologists" have little to do with the future and are in fact captured within the confinement of the present.

Brunner's concluding remarks may be read as an attempt to take the future more seriously, in a way that does not strap the future to the bounds of the past. The paper may be asking us to go beyond both liberalism and demography and imagine the future not as the logical evolution of the present, but rather as the possibility of identifying in the future truly new possibilities that break with the past, or in Benjamin's famous image, call upon us to prepare for a messianic moment.