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***Futurist Book Group Discussion***

# *Fewer*

**By Ben J. Wattenberg**
**Ivan R. Dee, ISBN I-56663-606-X**

*Synopsis of the February 2005 Futurist Book Group meeting; summarized by Ken Harris*

On February 2, the Futurist Book Group discussed ***Fewer: How the New Demography of Depopulation Will Shape Our Future*** by Ben J. Wattenberg. The basic notion of the new demography, and central point of the book, is that the world's population will grow in the first half of this century much more slowly than thought possible until the last few years to about 8 billion and then start declining. This will be unprecedented in human experience; world population has grown steadily for hundreds of years.

Population will grow only to 8 billion because of demographic momentum caused by the total fertility rate (TFR) (i.e., the number of children per woman) of a generation ago being much larger than it is today. The author does not speak of a world total fertility rate, but of TFRs varying by country. Every country's TFR has come down dramatically. TFRs in many countries, especially in the developed world, are already below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman. If today's TFRs had prevailed a generation ago, world depopulation would have progressed much farther than it has to date.

The demographic outlooks for what Wattenberg calls the "modern nations" differ greatly. The US, with its TFR only slightly below replacement level, will gain 100 million people by mid-century while Europe will lose about that number. The Russian population has already started to decline and the Japanese population will start to decline very soon. The US will have this demographic advantage largely because it is very friendly to immigration, whereas the nations of Europe and Japan are far less accepting of immigration. It would take immigration on a massive, politically unacceptable scale to reverse the incipient decline in Europe's population.

The US may benefit less in the future from Mexican emigration as Mexico's TFR has fallen and Mexican per capita income has increased, so the incentive of Mexicans to emigrate to the US is likely to decline.

China and India will continue to grow, although at decreasing rates and with gender imbalance. The US at mid-century will have the third largest population, but will be way behind India and China. Less-developed countries (LDCs), particularly China and India, are enjoying a demographic dividend of having lots of young people of working age and fewer young children and old people for whom to provide services.

This is a very pro-US book. Wattenberg feels good about a growing US setting an example of a vibrant free society in a stagnant world. He discusses at some length Paul Kennedy's 1980s thesis that the US would eventually decline as a world power and Kennedy's later realization that this would not happen because the US birthrate went from European levels in the 70's to just below replacement level currently.

A geopolitical consequence of the new demography is that Europe will have less relative power and the US will be easily able to maintain high levels of military power.

An economic consequence of the new demography, Wattenberg argues, is ultimate convergence of the economies of the currently modern nations and the current LDCs. He concludes that this convergence will take place because in recent years economic growth rates have been faster than in the LDCs than in the modern nations. However, he neglects the potential of the superior technology, and hence productivity, of the modern nations for helping them maintain their economic advantage over the LDCs despite their more rapidly aging societies.

Wattenberg lists rather than discusses the factors that have caused TFRs to decline – education, urbanization, and economic opportunities for women outside the home. These factors are often cited. To this usual list, he adds improved contraception, abortion, acceptance of the homosexual lifestyle, and divorce. Moreover, he points out that "pro-natalist" government policies have not been particularly successful. A possible weak point of the book is failure to consider the possibility that the decline of TFRs will reverse. However, Wattenberg is probably right in his belief that even if TFRs start to go up again, demographic momentum will still cause a declining world population.

Although he at least lists technologies such as contraception that have caused TFRs to decline, Wattenberg pays little regard to technologies that could stem the tide of depopulation. He says advances in technology are helping infertile couples to become fertile but says the numbers are too small to be significant as yet, but he does not discuss the possibility of increases in population resulting from life extension technologies.

***Future Takes*** readers, who have some acquaintance with current demographic trends, will not be surprised at the basic notion of depopulation, especially in regard to EU nations, Russia and Japan. They may, however, regard the book as excessively nationalistic and thus too optimistic about the future of the United States.