

Philip Cafaro

*How Many is Too Many? The Progressive Argument for Reducing Immigration into the United States*

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When considering the resolution of global environmental problems, examining the question of global overpopulation has been particularly fraught. Books written in the late 1960s and early 1970s such as the Erlichs' *Population Bomb*, and E.F. Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* tried to mount the argument that the ur-problem of environmental destruction is too many humans.

However, such books failed to alter the tenor of the debate around the correct level of human population for a number of reasons. Firstly, the claims made by the authors were revealed to be overblown and false. The *Population Bomb* incorrectly asserted that in the next decade hundreds of millions of people were going to die due to mass starvation as resources became scarce. Secondly, the debate over appropriate population levels became caught up in a racism row that tarnished any fruitful discussions. Writers such as Garrett Hardin and his *Lifeboat Ethics* paper argued that if the species were to survive, 'swimmers' or poor nations, which at the time were primarily Asian or African states, needed to be sacrificed for the common good. This became a rationale to reduce immigration from those poorer nations to protect the rich 'lifeboat' of first world states.

This further muddied the overpopulation debate leading to accusations of racism in that attempts to reduce overpopulation were in reality programs designed to reduce non-white births. For many environmentalists the issue was deemed too sensitive given these accusations and the cause was subsumed into other battles around biodiversity loss and climate change. Wading into these historically murky waters is Philip Cafaro's book *How Many is Too Many: The Progressive Argument for Reducing Immigration into the United States*. Cafaro's main thesis is a simple but provocative one: that mass immigration should no longer be considered an unalloyed

‘good’ and should not be defended by the progressive movement. Rather progressives should be asking how many immigrants should the U.S. allow into its borders and who gets to be an immigrant into America? He proudly proclaims himself to be a political progressive with all that connotes.

While America has historically welcomed immigrants, Cafaro argues that given the environmental damage wreaked by humans, the time has come to end such programs. The author mounts his case utilising traditional progressive tropes: equality, questions around economic security, basic human rights and achieving societal environmental sustainability.

Using an eclectic mix of statistics and personal stories he attempts to show both the overarching parameters of the overpopulation/immigration debate within the U.S. and the human face of those individuals affected. He seeks to illuminate his overall contention by drawing on individual examples of how the immigration system affects both those born in America and those recently arrived. The book firstly presents a readable and admirably concise history of American immigration policy and highlights the deficiencies of the system.

The second part of the book focuses on the economic arguments surrounding immigration, where the author seeks to illuminate who are the winners and losers under the prevailing immigration system. Cafaro is careful to back up his point that the current immigration system is actively undermining the working and middle classes’ quality of life. However, Cafaro notes, there are also winners under the current immigration system: the wealthy, employers and business owners, and the immigrants themselves who enjoy greater economic opportunity and in many cases outcomes than they would have in their birth state.

Cafaro argues that the American obsession with constant economic growth is the real issue that must be addressed. America needs to start to work towards becoming a sustainable ‘steady state’ populace. Americans need to redefine their perceptions of the ‘good life’ to be less materialistic and not prioritise economic growth at all costs.

Thirdly, the author surveys the environmental damage caused by a large population

exacerbated by large-scale immigration programs. The need to house such increased populations has led to the phenomenon of urban sprawl as well as destroying native biodiversity that cannot co-exist with an encroachment on its habitat.

The author provides a brief overview of the main environmental problems taxing the U.S. including biodiversity loss, urban sprawl and air and water pollution. He notes how far the environmental movement has moved from the ideal in that: 'Any cause is a lost cause without population control' (p. 109). He provides an intriguing history of how environmental groups faced with population morphing into a debate on immigration rather than one of fertility, would see them become perceived as 'racially insensitive' and outside the progressive spectrum.

Lastly, the book suggests a variety of answers that line-up with traditional progressive goals. Cafaro's solutions are to refocus immigration enforcement towards those who hire illegal immigrants, including custodial sentences for those knowingly hiring such staff, rather than focusing on deporting illegal workers, but he does not reckon with the economic costs implicit in such a plan. He would prefer increased aid to states that send illegal immigrants and targeted amnesties for those already in-country.

Cafaro's central thesis is further undermined by a number of arguments he does not do justice to. Firstly, he does not consider the need for immigration to deal with the ageing population of the United States, which cohort will need such an influx to support them both financially through taxation and physically via the need for an expanded geriatric care industry.

Secondly, because his area of study here is inward-looking at the U.S. he does not take into consideration the role global outsourcing has played in lowering the U.S. living standard of low and middle class American workers. Further, while Cafaro favours higher benefits for the needy of all ages, to be paid for by significantly higher taxes on the affluent, he is silent on how to create the political climate for such complex economic change.

Thirdly, Cafaro does not grapple fully with the issue that even if the U.S. does reduce, or even slow down its population growth, that is not a sufficient outcome if the human

population continues to rise elsewhere on the planet. Cafaro acknowledges this point but attempts to deflect it by arguing he has a special connection to America's unique biodiversity and lands and so he chooses to focus on his nation. He argues that those who reject the focus on an individual state should still support reduced immigration since the vast majority of immigrants who move to the U.S. dramatically increase their ecological footprint due to their increased standard of living.

The world's population continues to climb at an alarming rate. It is necessary to have this conversation about what is the appropriate level of population and Cafaro's book is both a call to arms and a challenge to progressives to consider their reflexive positions on immigration as an unalloyed positive. However, if the global population crisis is to be dealt with it needs global solutions, not an emphasis on one state; for example, E.O. Wilson's book *Half Earth* posits another way to go, where humanity effectively withdraws from 50% of the world's land surface and the oceans in to our cities leaving space for other species to thrive. If our goal is to promote biodiversity protection and environmental sustainability, as a species we would be far better off focusing on solutions such as women's education, access to contraception and gender equality rather than concentrating on individual state immigration.

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