

The Essential Eberstadt

Foreword to

Population, Poverty, Policy: Essential Essays from Nicholas Eberstedt, Vol. 1
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The papers collected in this volume recount a 40-year struggle between scholarship and illusion on matters of great importance. They do much more than that: They present a matchless course of instruction in the demographics of poverty and prosperity, hardship and health, and progress and decline, and they paint a vivid, pointillist portrait of the circumstances of modern humanity. But readers should be alert to the underlying drama and seek to learn from it, too.

Here Nick Eberstadt, armed only with data and patient study, debunks Al Gore, Jared Diamond, and Planned Parenthood on population growth and population control; then demolishes a phalanx of ideologues on world hunger and famine; then shreds Jeffrey Sachs and UN officialdom on economic growth and international aid programs. And then dares all of us to confront humanitarian catastrophes that many prefer to ignore, such as enforced immiseration in North Korea and the now-extensive global practice of selective abortion of females.

The reader may be tempted to judge these contests as one-sided. That, as our author would say, would be a fallacy of construction. On the page and at the podium, the essential Nick Eberstadt reigns supreme. His learning, mastery of data, and sophisticated interpretations will win over many skeptics and edify every careful student. The wider world, however, is governed by more than reason. Problems of mass poverty, depravation, and disease, viewed at a distance from societies grown rich and comfortable, stir our deepest emotions, as well they should. But they are also fertile ground for sentimental thinking and abstract moralizing—and for political ideologies and government projects that are highly resistant to logic and evidence.

There is much good news in this volume. Thought and action on problems of world poverty have become more practical and results-oriented in the decades since Eberstadt first entered the fray (and he is due a share of credit). The period of economic and political liberalization running from the late 1980s to the early 2000s produced stupendous improvements in economic welfare and health among the inhabitants of nations previously drenched in misery and not infrequently in blood—China, India, and others.

Nevertheless, wishful thinking and counterproductive programs continue to enjoy great prestige and ample funding, and many of Eberstadt's excellent recommendations have yet to be adopted. In recent years, many authoritarian, autarkic governments and

movements have sprung up, while America has lost confidence in itself as a liberalizing force. In this environment, progress has stopped and indeed regressed in many regions—notably within the “weak states” of sub-Saharan Africa and parts of East Asia and Latin America, within Russia and the Central European nations formerly ruled by the Soviet Union, and in the effectively stateless nation of Haiti.

So the arguments of this book still have much work to do. We can be grateful that its author is as energetic and persistent as ever, as his most recent essays demonstrate; this collection is just a first installment.

Nicholas Eberstadt majored in economics at Harvard College and earned his Ph.D. in political economy and government at the Kennedy School of Government. Along the way he determined to study questions of social welfare and public policy through the lens of demographics. This surprising choice is a key to the quality and influence of his work. Which takes a some explaining.

Demography is the measurement of the size of large populations, usually national populations, and their composition by age, sex, region, ethnicity, and other subgroups. At this basic level, demographics is not a social science at all but rather a practical art, concerned with the mechanics of counting noses, organizing the results, and calculating trends and comparisons. The tabulations serve many immediate purposes—designing election districts, distributing government funds, and guiding business investments and marketing programs.

But demography also serves an explanatory function. It aims to project future population trends and assess their implications for social welfare, economic growth, and politics within and among nations. On these matters it must borrow from economics, sociology, history, and other disciplines. It needs them to answer such questions as how higher incomes affect fertility and longevity, and how changes in population size and composition affect health, welfare, and economic performance.

Some of these questions can be addressed in a scientific spirit—theory, hypothesis, and empirical testing, leading to rejection or acceptance with more or less confidence for the time being. As a field, however, explanatory demography is loose, atheoretical, and open to improvisation. This is because it is universal and accessible—demographics is democratic in method as well as subject.

First, the size and composition of populations are the most elementary and universal of social data. They are of interest to numerous disciplines, each with its own methods and purposes. But the vast variety of human circumstance and endeavor limits the range of every disciplinary explanation and every attempt at scientific parsimony. No general proposition is more firmly established, for example, than that couples with higher incomes

tend to have fewer children. Yet even here there are numerous qualifications, elaborations, and uncertainties—Eberstadt would point us to wealthy Mormons with large families and poor Burmese with small families. It is true and illuminating that wealthy modern urban couples have higher opportunity costs and lower benefits of childrearing; but it is not the whole story.

Second, population numbers are uniquely accessible. They are official government statistics, reported as news; they quantify social developments that everyone knows something about through personal experience; they invite interpretation without need for specialized background or technical assumptions; and they seem to be associated in some way with a host of important issues—pollution, immigration, pensions, health care, crime, national defense, the electoral prospects of political parties. Explanatory demographics is therefore a popular sport open to every pundit, politician, promoter, and prophet of ruin or salvation. So we are awash in population propositions. Some of them are sensible and reasonable, but many, on examination, are partial and incomplete, or confuse cause for effect, or are self-contradictory. Worst of all, many are efforts to make policy causes seem apodictic—an imperative response to an inexorable trend rather than a debatable political choice.

I surmise from Eberstadt's writings that it was these qualities of universality and accessibility that attracted him to demographics. He wanted to work on the largest questions of human wellbeing and saw demography as a suitable canvas. But he was appalled by the chasm between the seriousness of the problems demographics revealed and the unseriousness of much that was being said and done about those problems. The field's unstructured, democratic character was an opportunity for a man of ambition. He would use his knowledge of economics, political science, and history to sort out truth, error, and claptrap, inject rigor into desultory debates, and point the way to better policies. He would employ direct appeals to fact, logic, and experience that required special talent to formulate but no special training to understand. In this manner, he would address himself not only to other academics but also to politicians and policy officials, journalists and activists, and the demographic worker bees who do the practical work of designing and conducting government censuses and surveys.

I have more to go on than his writings, because Eberstadt and I were colleagues at the American Enterprise Institute for twenty-five years. When I arrived as AEI's new president in 1986, the young researcher walked me through an intellectual to-do list, filling many pages of foolscap, that was astonishing in its range and audacity. He was intent on invading many territories that were uncharted and, it seemed to me at the time, unrelated—puzzlingly high infant mortality in the United States, preposterously high industrialization in sub-Saharan Africa, impossibly high economic growth in Communist nations.

Fortunately for both of us, I was too inexperienced to advise him to narrow his focus and be a good career specialist. I could only respond that his agenda would take decades to accomplish so he'd better get on with it; I was right, and that list is now the table of contents of this collection (at least in part—it will take a second volume to complete the list).

And over time, as our friendship and collaborations deepened, I saw firsthand his determination to penetrate to the realities behind the numbers in government reports and academic papers. Presiding at policy conferences in exotic foreign locales, I noticed that when the formal sessions were in recess most conferees turned to recreation and sightseeing (the leisure of the theory class). Not Eberstadt—who would instead disappear for long afternoons in obscure government office buildings with statisticians and census-takers and health experts, and long evenings in slum neighborhoods where few academics or bureaucrats would dare to tread.

My hypothesis about Eberstadt the interloper demographer is confirmed by the originality and excellence of the papers collected here, and by several striking features of his approach to understanding and persuasion:

- He employs simple logic to demolish many entrenched, lazy assumptions. That large numbers of people are poor does not mean that the large numbers cause the poverty. The “graying” of a population is much more a function of falling birthrates than of lengthening lifespans (arithmetic says so).
- He is cautious of broad generalizations but can construct powerful ones of his own. If rapid population growth causes poverty, how does one explain the twentieth century, which saw unprecedented concurrent increases in both population and in incomes and wealth? That century's population explosion occurred not because people began breeding like rabbits but rather because they stopped dying like flies. And the health improvements were notably egalitarian, dramatically reducing the differential lifespans of rich and poor.
- He would never say that demography is destiny, but he can show where it constrains destiny. Official Western estimates of steady economic growth in the Soviet bloc nations during the 1970s and 1980s were implausible given the steadily worsening health of their inhabitants. Communist regimes collapsed in nations with worsening health and mortality—and survived where mortality, at least, was improving. China's central problem today is that its population (unlike Japan's) is going to grow old before it grows rich; China's fertility collapse, and radical imbalance of males to females, makes the fashionable long-term extrapolation of its recent rapid economic growth unlikely in the extreme.

- He is unafraid of hard facts without confident explanations. In Russia and some other Soviet bloc nations, mortality, longevity, and other measures of health status significantly worsened after the fall of Communism. The deterioration was beyond that in any other time or place other than in times of war or plague. Eberstadt identified and documented this terrible development although he could not explain its cause, other than that the ravages of totalitarianism may have been worse than we knew.
- He insists on the importance of local culture and attitudes, political norms, and government structure—factors that have become off-limits to most demographers and development specialists, and that are largely (not entirely) unquantifiable. One of his most striking propositions (based on research by Lant Pritchett) is this: The best predictor of the fertility level in a population, which operates independently of the availability of birth-control technology, is the number of children its women say they would like to have. Another: The worst and most persistent conditions of poverty and deprivation are in nations whose governments are highly corrupt, incompetent, and incapable of providing basic levels of personal safety, never mind potable water.

Eberstadt teaches that, broadly speaking, economic development and poverty-reduction are functions of “Western values”—a modicum of economic liberty as a prerequisite to growth, a modicum of democracy to protect against state corruption and indifference to citizens’ welfare, and a modicum of optimism and progressive spirit to encourage individuals to act with a view toward the future. In his latest papers, he worries that these values are at risk in America itself because of the growth of a comprehensive welfare state. He is concerned about this because America is his country, but also for another reason. America’s foreign aid programs, he has long observed, promote unproductive government-directed development strategies that are the opposite of those it promotes at home and among its allies in the developed world. That inconsistency may now be ending—but not in the manner he would recommend.

There is a deceptively simple passage in the first paper in this collection that could have served as the epigraph for the entire volume: “Demography is the study of human numbers, but it is the human characteristics of those numbers that define world events.” I said at the outset that these papers tell of a struggle between scholarship and illusion. The reader may conclude that they tell of something more—of a victory of morally informed scholarship over materialist ideologies of every sort.