

Monday December 28th 2009

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Letters

On fertility, Colombia, climate change, food, the Berlin Wall, zombies, enterprise

Nov 19th 2009

From *The Economist* print edition

Population booms, and busts

SIR – Although much of the developing world now benefits from declining fertility (“Go forth and multiply a lot less”, October 31st), the demographic prospects for sub-Saharan Africa are grim. Its average fertility is more than double that of Asia and Latin America and its population is expected to grow by one billion over the next half century. Pervasive poverty causes parents to want more than two children, but unplanned childbearing is also high as many women lack access to and information about contraceptives. The number of people in some countries will triple.

Voluntary family-planning programmes have been successful in addressing this unmet need in other regions, but they have been neglected in Africa. Reinvigorating such programmes would lower fertility and boost economic development, but this will take political will and investment.

John Bongaarts
 Vice-president
 Population Council
 New York

SIR – It was inevitable that you would refer to Thomas Malthus. But Adam Smith, a less gloomy 18th-century economist, provided another thesis, perhaps unscientific, to explain why richer populations trend toward fewer children. In “The Wealth of Nations”, Smith noted:

Poverty, though it no doubt discourages, does not always prevent marriage. It seems even to be favourable to generation. A half-starved Highland woman frequently bears more than twenty children, while a pampered fine lady is often incapable of bearing any, and is generally exhausted by two or three. Barrenness, so frequent among women of fashion, is very rare among those of inferior station. Luxury in the fair sex, while it inflames perhaps the passion for enjoyment, seems always to weaken, and frequently to destroy altogether, the powers of generation.

Micheal Danagher
 Seoul

SIR – In the Philippines, an alliance of the Catholic church and self-serving politicians has prevented the introduction of an effective programme of family planning. New laws are currently blocked in the Filipino Congress. The cruel reality is that the middle class goes to mass piously on Sundays and then does what

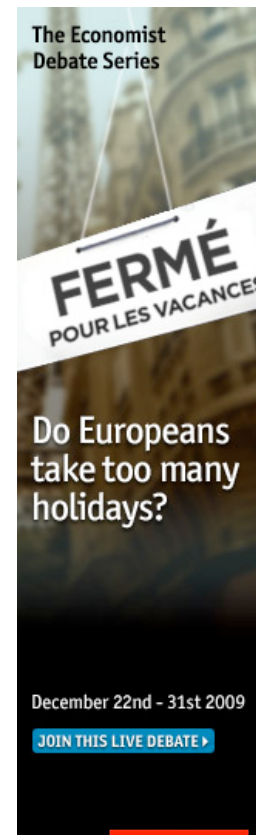
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middle classes do everywhere, namely ignore the teachings of the church and use the means of contraception that are available to them. The Filipino poor, who are denied such means, are stuck in poverty and the Philippines remains the most unequal country in Asia.

David Camroux
Senior lecturer
Sciences Po
Paris

* SIR – Foreign aid budgets for family planning have been drastically cut over the past 15 years. In Kenya, for example, as a result of diminished financial support for family planning and increasing fertility, the country's projected population in 2050 is set to reach 83m, from 54m. A jump in population of this magnitude will pose huge problems for feeding people, for preserving a rich biodiversity and for securing good government.

It is imperative that family planning is moved higher up the international agenda.

Eliya Msiyaphazi Zulu
Director
African Institute for Development Policy
Nairobi

* SIR – The evidence shows that the availability of family planning is a far stronger determinant of fertility than wealth. Take Bangladesh, a country mired in poverty yet with a fertility rate only slightly higher than America thanks to a progressive family-planning policy. And in Iran, public policy and investment in family-planning services made the difference between rising fertility between 1979 and 1984 and falling fertility thereafter, not the rise in national incomes, nor female education. Similarly, in Zambia the economy has grown by an average 5% a year since 2001 while the fertility rate has also risen from 5.9 to 6.2.

Dana Hovig
Chief executive
Marie Stopes International
London

Colombia's peace process

SIR – Regarding your article on Colombia's paramilitaries ("Militias march again", October 31st), you were wrong to assert that "President Álvaro Uribe has treated the two sides differently, waging war on the FARC with some success... while offering a 'justice and peace' process to the paramilitaries." On the contrary, we have offered and provided all illegal armed groups with equivalent opportunities to engage in this process. Since 2002 the government has held eight negotiation sessions with the ELN guerrilla group and presented four proposals for a humanitarian exchange of those kidnapped by the FARC. Unfortunately, all those efforts have been rejected by both guerrilla groups.

You also erroneously reported a "worrying resurgence in violence" in the past four years. Yet between 2002 and 2008 the annual homicide rate decreased by 44%, the number of victims of massacres by 75% and kidnappings by 89%. Murders of indigenous people have fallen by 66%, those of union members by 80% and of journalists by 100%. Data up to September 2009 show a further reduction in most indicators of violence.

Finally, you implied that the former paramilitaries have created "new private armies". In fact, what Colombia has seen is an emergence of criminal bands dedicated to petty crime and drug-trafficking. These criminal bands are without ideology or political agenda and do not form part of any insurgent movement.

Mauricio Rodríguez Múnera
Ambassador for Colombia
London

Shades of green

SIR – Your article about public opinion and global warming noted how the issue of man-made climate change is becoming divisive in America ("(Not yet) marching as to war", November 7th). You correctly observed how political consensus can be very difficult to achieve when both sides of a debate regard the other as not just mistaken, but bad. I wonder, then, what possessed you to pepper your article with repeated juxtapositions of those very sides of the debate? On one side you placed the enlightened, who seek a "greener, better world", and on the other you put the sceptics, and those "too poor to care". Perhaps you should consider taking your own advice on the proper way to engage in social discourse.

Todd Weiler

The
Economist

London, Canada

The magic ingredient

* SIR – Your leader on regulating health food argued that “if food companies want to claim that their products have health benefits, they must provide solid evidence” (“*The proof of the pudding*”, October 31st). Most food products claiming functional health-benefits fail in the market and they do so, not because of tough regulatory barriers, but because of poor business strategy and inept communications with consumers. Sceptical, market-savvy shoppers can spot a dog when they see one.

Those food companies that succeed do so because consumers understand and see the relevance of the health benefits promised and, on trying the product, are satisfied that the promise was delivered. Consumers need to feel or see the difference and be reassured that, if they don’t see any benefits, they can get their money back (as is the case with the very successful Danone Activia probiotic yogurt—“Feel the difference in 14 days or your money back”).

Of course, health benefits should be based on scientific evidence and such claims should be regulated. But don’t underestimate the ability of canny consumers to identify misleading hyperbolic health claims and dismiss them accordingly.

David Hughes
Emeritus professor of food marketing
Imperial College
London

Behind the wall

SIR – It is remarkable that you could produce so many articles on the fall of the Berlin Wall, with only the barest of references to Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher (“*A globe redrawn*”, November 7th). From your articles it would seem that the fall was inevitable, and the hero of the hour was Mikhail Gorbachev, simply because he did not send in troops to bayonet Berliners. The fall of communism was not considered inevitable at the time. Economics indeed played a part, but contrary to your tale, the collapse of the wall was helped along by fielding Pershing missiles, despite European opposition, and pursuing Star Wars. This broke the Soviets.

Two political leaders refused to believe that half of Europe should remain enslaved to ensure the comfort of the other. They saw evil and confronted it. They deserved more than the passing mention you gave them.

Steven Mains
Tampa, Florida

SIR – Prompted by the 20th anniversary of the fall of the wall, I decided to look again at the weird assortment of papers the Stasi collected on me during my time at the British embassy in East Berlin during the 1980s. Among my personal letters, the secret police copied one from *The Economist* about the renewal of my subscription. The discovery that I was a regular reader of such a disreputable journal while claiming to be the embassy’s commercial secretary was probably regarded as part of my “cover”. It gave me much pleasure to discover from the Stasi file that officers had convinced themselves I was a spy—under the codename “Vogel”—and one worth devoting precious resources to in three years of pointless special surveillance.

Eric Callway
London

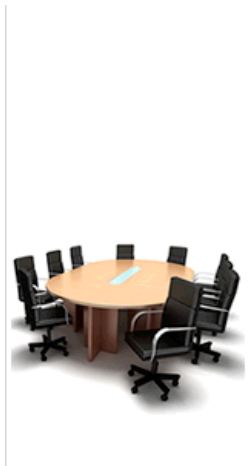
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* SIR – The weapon you chose with which Europe’s competition regulator could hit zombie banks over the head was inappropriate (“*The living dead*”, November 7th). A blunt object, such as the frying pan you said Neelie Kroes should wield, would only knock down a zombie. Unless you have tremendous strength, nine times out of ten the zombie will pick itself up and attack with renewed vigour, infecting everyone in its destructive path. To make sure that a zombie stays down you need something that can pierce or impale its head. If you really want to go after those zombie banks, a pitchfork would work just fine.

Esko Saura
Helsinki

Riposteship

SIR – What is this thing called “entrepreneurship” that I now read about frequently (*Schumpeter*, October 31st)? Does this horrible mangling of French and English roots represent some new human attribute that has evolved in the past five years, or is it in fact a less elegant word for good old “enterprise”? Somehow,




talk of "the spirit of free entrepreneurship", or exploring new frontiers on the *USS Entrepreneurship*, doesn't exactly set the pulse racing.

Colin Lynch
Cairns, Australia

* Letter appears online only

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