A New Look at the Immigration Debate

by Leon F. Bouvier, Ph.D

Re-Charting America’s Future
Roy Beck
Social Contract Press
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Environmental journalist Roy Beck has produced a truly worthwhile gem of a book for anyone wishing to learn more about population growth and immigration or for anyone planning to debate the issues. As is stated on the cover, his are “responses to arguments against stabilizing U.S. population and limiting immigration.” Thus, Beck makes it clear that he is aligned with those Americans who favor a limit to both population growth and immigration.

But the author is eminently fair. It would have been relatively easy for him to set up “straw men” and thereby easily destroy opposing arguments. Rather, Beck states these opposing positions in an objective manner. He then proceeds to calmly point out how incorrect they are and, in the process, often citing important sources to bolster his position.

The author tackles a variety of controversial topics such as the politics of religion and population growth and family planning as well as politics that lie behind the failure of some in the environmental movement to confront population growth and immigration as contributors to environmental degradation. This is especially relevant today as the anti-environmental movement grows since the November elections.

For anyone wanting to learn more about the problems associated with population growth and immigration, Re-Charting America’s Future is must reading. The book looks at all the relevant aspects of these problems and explains in plain English exactly what the problems are. The book truly answers “everything anyone ever wanted to know” about population growth and immigration.

For anyone anxious to debate these issues, again this book is a must. In each of the seventeen chapters, Beck first lays out the basic opposing arguments in an extremely fair manner. He then argues against the basic premise of that argument before proceeding to more detailed opposing views. These are followed by relatively brief replies and then by more detailed arguments, richly footnoted, opposing the generally cornucopian adversary positions.

His chapter on religion serves as an excellent example of the Beck approach. He begins by citing the often repeated statement that “Population issues are too sensitive to handle because Faith groups are offended.” But Beck points out that most religious groups recognize that the task of taking care of God’s natural creation “is undermined by population growth.” He then goes into more detail looking first at the claim that “the Catholic church opposes family planning and population stabilization.” In his reply, Beck quotes the U.S. Bishops who in 1991, “spoke glowingly of education, good nutrition and health care for women and children that promise to improve family welfare and contribute to stabilizing population.” In this chapter and others, Beck then addresses other so-called claims and shows convincingly that they are incorrect.
He provides answers to the hackneyed arguments that we've all heard many times: “Population can grow forever with no ill effects” or “the demographic transition means worldwide population growth will level off naturally.”

Full chapters are devoted to answering each of the following arguments:

1) We don’t need to stabilize U.S. population because...
   - There is plenty of room
   - We can cut consumption
   - Technology and the free market will save us
   - Stabilization equals stagnation
   - What matters is world population

2) We shouldn’t limit immigration because...
   - We depend on foreign workers
   - We need diversity
   - We have international obligations to the poor
   - We must honor our tradition

Beck does an especially admirable job of linking immigration with population growth whenever appropriate. He correctly points out that as long as immigration remains at current levels, reductions in fertility would never suffice to put an end to population growth in the United States. Likewise, of course, even massive reductions in immigration would not result in an end to population growth if fertility remained at current levels.

It is important to bear in mind that this is not a white-wash job absolving all restrictionists, whether of population growth or of immigration. Chapter 13 is entitled Fear of Name Calling. The general claim cited by Beck is that “It is frightening to agree to limit immigration because some limitationists are bigoted.” Beck clearly admits that “there are self-serving people with ugly motives on both sides of the immigration issue, as there are highly-principled people; like other issues, this one needs to be decided on its merits, not by name-calling.” He continues: “There are undoubtedly bigots who want immigration stopped for racial reasons...But opposition to racial bigotry should not blind us to the facts. There are limits to population size, in a theater or in a state, in a phone booth or on the planet.” It is critically important that people realize that one does not have to be a bigot to be a restrictionist.

Beck then proceeds to examine in some detail five separate claims noting, among other things, that racial minorities in the United States are as opposed to massive immigration as is the majority.

Roy Beck has done all Americans (as well as others) a tremendous favor in preparing this book. Now, for the first time, it is possible for a layperson, concerned with the issues of population growth and immigration, to turn to an honest analysis of these all-important topics and find clear, lucid, and fair-minded answers. As a tool for anyone engaged in speaking, writing, or debating, Beck has made an indispensable contribution — a fine set of rebuttal arguments all presented honestly, fairly, and usefully in well under 200 pages.

Dr. Bouvier is adjunct Professor of Demography at Tulane University School of Public Health and Senior Fellow at the Center for Immigration studies. He is co-author (with Lindsey Grant) of: How Many Americans? Population, Immigration and the Environment (Sierra Club Books).

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