BOOK REVIEW

"Demographic Vitality" or Overpopulation?

Dave Simcox
NPG Special Advisor

Book Review: Joel Kotkin, *The Next Hundred Million: America in 2050.* New York: Penguin Press, 2010, 320 pages

Urbanologist Joel Kotkin, author of "The Next Hundred Million," like the late pro-populationist Julian Simon, is a consummate optimist. His book is a hymn of praise for America's "demographic vitality" and diversity, qualities that will supposedly ensure its future superiority among its presumably declining world rivals, Europe, China, Japan, which are facing mass ageing and even population recession**.**

Those Americans alarmed about the parlous balance between population and resources may be attracted to the book by its title, as I was. They would read it expecting some enlightenment about the consumption and environmental reforms an already overpopulated U.S. will need to preserve social peace and an adequate standard of living with as many as 460 million people by 2050.

This book is not for them. Kotkin doesn't spend much time on the concerns of those he calls the "*declinists.*" He acknowledges there may be scarcities but substitutes dogma and optimism for analysis: he believes that the creativity, energy and innovativeness of a growing population enriched by youth and diversity will provide unspecified answers.

It is puzzling that Kotkin expects only 100 million additional Americans between 2010 and 2050. The current Census low-immigration scenario projects an added 113 million, while the entirely plausible high-immigration estimate takes us from our present 309 million to 458 million by mid-century. Nearly eighty percent of that increase will be directly or indirectly due to immigration. For Kotkin, these higher numbers would be a cause not for concern but rejoicing – an even more gratifying expression of America's "demographic vitality" and its superior appeal to the world's migrants.

Kotkin finds an almost mystical, redeeming quality in high immigration. Immigrants bring vitality, industry, family values, religious piety, entrepreneurial drive, lessons of tolerance, and an enriching multicultural leavening (not to mention new and more savory cuisines). And best of all, unlike the decadent Europeans and many Americans, they believe in having lots of children. If he feels there should be any limits at all on immigration, he doesn't mention them.

Like many proponents of high immigration and population growth, Kotkin engages in a weird circular reasoning: The U.S. needs immigrants to fill all the jobs robust economic development will produce; but it must have strong economic development to provide jobs for all the immigrants that are coming if it is to avoid social problems.

So, we must have immigrants to grow – but we must grow to accommodate our immigrants. I first heard a variation of this argument from American garment and textile lobbyists in the 1980s seeking tariff protection for their industries: America needs to protect jobs in these industries as vital entry-level employment for many of the immigrants that are to come. That immigration can be regulated or stopped entirely to suit economic and social conditions seems unthinkable to Kotkin.

Much of Kotkin's enchantment with population and economic growth for the U.S. represents the familiar American creed that "bigger is better." But a good deal of that outlook stems from the author's peculiar perception of our planet as primarily an arena for economic, demographic and technical competition among nations.

The developed nations are the elite competitors in a sort of planetary National Football League. And he frets that the U.S. might not gain the greatest population growth, the best trade and investment performances, the best technology, and the greatest share of the world's migrants – preferably those in academe and business deem the "best and brightest" but also masses of the less skilled for jobs supposedly abandoned by American workers. Preservation of the environment and resources, bolstering the world's food supply, and maintaining a prudent balance between these exigencies and population win no points in his competitive universe.

A main concern of Kotkin, as a futurologist and planning expert, is how this added population will distribute itself and how its increasing diversity, greater family orientation and strong sense of place will evoke big changes in housing, workplaces, transportation and land use. While

acknowledging greater scarcity of fossil fuels, he foresees communities that foster working at or near home, along with fuel-stingy cars, as cutting the high energy consumption of our commuter way of life.

His vision of America's loss of land to future sprawl is dystopian. Kotkin thinks that the arriving generations of new Americans will shun the inner cities and will be no more accepting of higher housing density than our present population. Kotkin himself scoffs at fears of loss of America's wide-open spaces, claiming that only "five percent" of the American land mass is urbanized. Does he regard the tens of millions of acres of that open space now occupied by forests as a land bank for our future suburbanization?

Open space and the pseudo-rural appeal of the free-standing, large-lot suburban house, the author believes, are deeply entrenched in the American dream. So, most of the increased population will shun the cities, unlike immigrants of old, and flock to the suburbs and to a newly developed "archipelago of exurban villages" offering rich community life, open space with urban amenities, and opportunities to work where you live.

These archipelagic exurban towns would be separated by greenbelts from each other and from the suburbs and cities they had left behind. But one fears from experience that these idyllic exurbs would soon become the retreats of America's elite and, like "second homes" tend to proliferate in scenic, but environmentally fragile areas in mountains, forests and near waterways.

Far more native born and newcomers alike will join in what he foresees as a burgeoning trend to live in presently small cities of the "Heartland," the vast and lightly populated region between the Mississippi and the Rocky Mountains. Examples now are high-growth cities such as Houston, and Austin, and in the future smaller population-seeking, "business-friendly" towns such as Dubuque, Sioux Falls and Des Moines in Iowa, and Bismarck and Fargo, in the Dakotas.

Future Americans, he believes, will prefer such family-friendly communities on the plains to ocean views and beaches. His concept for the "Heartland" is as a "sponge" to soak up future population growth. He himself acknowledges that his perception of future land use will mean more sprawl, but offers no remedy or alternative other than an exhortation for better planning. What can you do? Americans just like it that way.

Kotkin's vision of even greater suburban and exurban expansion raises grave questions about economically sound use of land in a food-short world, about protection of species, watersheds and forests, and about increased automobile dependency and its burden on scarce energy. With a teeming America becoming a net importer of food, he favors pushing much of the population growth into our most productive lands in the "Heartland." While he sees our farmland as all but inexhaustible, he ignores the impending climate changes and rising fuel and fertilizer costs that could radically cut U.S. farm yields.

America's prime farmland is now being lost to urbanization at close to a million acres a year, a yearly loss rate that is up from 750,000 acres in the 1980s. Notwithstanding American farmers' prospects of lower yields, at this rate another 36 million acres of prime agricultural land will have been urbanized by 2050, some 14 percent of today's total inventory. With the (less likely) low-immigration population growth projected by Census, each American's share of prime agricultural land will have fallen from .88 acres now to .54 acres by 2050. At the projected high-immigration 2050 population, per capita farmland for 458 million Americans will be less than one-half acre.

Kotkin's book is sobering because it could well turn out just this way: an America of more that 420 million and still growing, with the growth machine trumpeting it as a success story whatever the environmental and resource costs.

But Americans have a choice. Census projections tell us that by adopting a policy now of zero net immigration, 1.2 million births a year would be avoided by 2030, and we would reach 2050 with about 323 million people. At that time the current and prospective population momentum would have been overcome, and population recession will be well underway to a more environmentally sustainable future.

The extra 100 million (and more) Americans in which Joel Kotkin rejoices is not our fate, but ours to choose.

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