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Book Review: Collision Course: Endless Growth on a Finite Planet by of Kerryn Higgs

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The tone is breezy and personal; the historical perspective is refreshing, entertaining, and enlightening. The book is a welcome addition to the non-technical literature on long-run economic growth prospects.—L. MacK.

KERRYN HIGGS

*Collision Course: Endless Growth on a Finite Planet*


According to Kerryn Higgs, the MIT scientists producing *The Limits to Growth* (1972) accurately foresaw the fast-approaching “collision” between global economic growth and finite natural resources. Their work was attacked, largely by economists, not because of any flaw in their science but simply because they questioned the possibility of endless economic growth, the cornerstone of twentieth-century capitalism’s effort to convince all of the beneficence of the free enterprise system. In Parts I to III the author rewinds twentieth-century history three times to explain how it came to be that policymakers, and to a large extent the general public, chose to ignore the sober warnings of objective scientists and to embrace the improbable claims of those contending that a finite planet could provide the infinite resources that endless economic growth entails, as well as the bottomless “sink” needed to deal with its waste products. Part I sets the stage with an account of “the history and science of growth” up to the publication of *The Limits to Growth*. Higgs places Garrett Hardin (“Tragedy of the Commons”) and Paul Ehrlich (*Population Bomb*) outside the mainstream of ecologically enlightened critics of economic growth, observing that traditional peoples managed their commons very wisely and that Hardin’s lifeboat ethics and Ehrlich’s calls for coercive sterilization represented a philosophy of needless cruelty. She calls the largely overlooked mid-century works of Fairfield Osborn and William Vogt prescient in their focus on the excessive environmental cost of economic growth, although she admits that their simplistic Malthusianism blamed the poor for their own poverty. She sees Malthus as a defender of elite interests who constructed a false “population growth” rationale for poverty and dismisses Marx for not accurately assessing the limits of his “endless economic growth” communist solution to poverty. Part II traces how capitalists constructed “consumerism” early in the twentieth century to ensure that enough demand existed to fuel continuous economic growth. After World War II the First World’s “development project” for the less developed world helped spread global consumerism, and its late-century neoliberal policy recommendations further solidified universal growth prescriptions. Part III, also from the starting point of the early twentieth century, examines the emergence of the corporation and later the transnational corporation as economic and political entities. As the century progressed, transnational corporations exercised increasing control over many governments and international institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF, always expounding an agenda of endless economic growth. Higgs notes that in the twenty-first century the World Trade Organization’s judgments on appropriate environmental standards can overturn those of any country. In a brief Part IV, Higgs compares the world’s current conditions to those predicted forty years earlier in *The Limits to Growth* and finds a close correspondence. In this provocative critique
of the endless growth agenda, the author does sidestep some population issues. She avoids, for example, discussing any role economic growth might have played in bringing about widespread fertility decline.—D.H.

**Paul Morland**  
*Demographic Engineering: Population Strategies in Ethnic Conflict*  

The questions underlying this book are: “How have groups in conflict sought to enhance their position through...manipulating demography to their advantage?” And with what effect on outcomes? The groups of concern are nations and ethnic groups. “Demographic engineering” can be hard or soft. Hard engineering, whether driven by government or through the agency of civil society, entails manipulation of fertility, mortality, or migration to alter the demographic balance among groups. At an extreme it includes forced migration and genocide. Soft engineering uses nondemographic means to achieve those same demographic ends, again by either government or civil society. Examples of nondemographic means are boundary changes or shifts in census categories that affect the relative size or strength of particular ethnic groups, and “politically-driven measures taken to change the allegiance and identity of a population within a territory.” These considerations generate simple two-way typologies (by subject and agent) of hard and soft engineering and permit the classification of the few past studies of the topic to be found in the sparse literature on political demography. The bulk of Paul Morland’s book comprises four case studies of ethnic conflict where demography has been in play. The first is the several decades of struggle between the Sinhalese and Tamils in Sri Lanka, ending with the “triumph of the Sinhalese ethnic state.” “Both the conflict itself and its outcome are the products of demographic engineering, hard and soft, as each side has striven, with differing success, to recruit numbers to its narrative and symbols.” The second case study is Northern Ireland, where (partly engineered) changes in the demographic balance between Catholics and Protestants is seen as having made for the eventual political compromise. Third is Israel and Palestine, in a chapter subtitled “from ingathering the exiles to competitive breeding.” And fourth is the United States, considering boundary-setting after the Mexican War, discriminatory immigration policy after World War I, the “Back to Africa” movement after Abolition, and the widening of the country’s “core ethnic” by successive incorporation of ethnic minorities, blacks excepted. The diversity of cases is seen as working against developing a theory of demographic engineering. Bibliography, index.—G.McN.

**Naohiro Ogawa and Iqbal H. Shah (eds.)**  
*Low Fertility and Reproductive Health in East Asia*  

East Asia’s fertility is among the lowest in the world, with several countries in the region having TFRs below 1.3 births per woman. The persistence of low fertility is largely responsible for rapid population aging and population declines, which in turn