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DEMOGRAPHIC WINTER: THE CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF RAPIDLY DECLINING BIRTH RATES†

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Introduction

Population decline (also known as demographic winter) is very much a reality. But I'd like you to think about it initially in the context of a work of fiction.

In 1992, the British mystery writer P.D. James wrote a haunting novel called "The Children of Men" (that Hollywood made into a terrible movie, but never mind that).

The novel is set in Britain in the year 2021 -- 25 years after the last child on earth is born, due to a worldwide plague of infertility.

James poses an intriguing question: What would it be like to live in a world that had no future? Try to imagine a world where, for more than a decade, no one had heard a child laugh (other than on old television shows) or saw children at play -- a world where frustrated maternal love is lavished on expensive dolls, a world with baptism ceremonies for kittens, a world where mass suicides are arranged for the elderly (because there's no one to care for them), a world where people are quickly losing interest in sex because sex no longer has an ultimate meaning, a world where fatalism, boredom and ennui are universal.

The novel contains many poignant scenes. But one in particular stands out. The narrator describes old people sitting in a church listening to recordings of a boy's choir, made perhaps 20 years earlier, with tears streaming down their withered cheeks.

All over the world, life is imitating art. P.D. James' frightening vision of a world without children is becoming a reality -- not quickly, but so gradually that only demographers and a few others are able to discern it. Philip Longman, who is a demographer and the author of "The Empty Cradle: How Falling Birthrates Threaten World Prosperity," observes: "The ongoing global decline in human birthrates is the single most powerful force affecting the fate of nations and the future of society in the 21st century."

Birth Rates

In weighing the fate of humanity, one number is crucial -- 2.1. That's the number of children the average woman must have during her lifetime just to achieve population stability or equilibrium -- where you're not losing people by attrition.

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Why 2.1? Because a woman has to replace herself. Then she has to replace her partner. Then, because some children die before reaching their own childbearing years, there has to be a bit more -- hence the extra one-tenth. A fertility rate of more than 2.1 means population growth. Less than 2.1 equals population decline.

As Longman notes, today, we are witnessing a worldwide fall in fertility rates unprecedented in human history.

There are now 59 nations -- with 44% of the world's population -- that have below-replacement fertility rates.

Like a car in neutral, moving forward by its own momentum, for the time being, the world's population is still growing. For the time being.

Would you be surprised to learn that while the world's population increases, the number of children -- a sure sign of the future -- is declining? Worldwide, there are 6 million fewer children (6 years of age and younger) today than there were in 1990. This is the first tremor of what soon will be an earthquake.

In Europe, the number of children under 5 has fallen by a staggering 36% since 1960. The United Nations projects that, if current trends continue, by 2050 the world will hold 248 million fewer children under 5 than it does today.

Those 248 million children will never reach maturity (because they won't exist) and will never have children of their own. That means that even if the next generation reproduces at a greater rate than their parents -- we're still heading for a demographic train-wreck.

Declining fertility rates is a worldwide phenomenon. In the 1970s, the average woman in developing countries had almost 6 children. Today, the overall fertility rate in those countries is barely 4.

In terms of population replacement, Europe is going out of business. Of the 10 nations with the lowest fertility rates worldwide, 9 are in Europe. No European nation has anything approaching a replacement-level birthrate.

Overall, the European fertility rate is 1.3. (Remember, a fertility rate of 2.1 is needed just to maintain stability -- no growth and no decline). Italy's fertility rate is 1.2 -- meaning that in the not-too-distant future, absent immigration, Italy will lose almost half of its people in every generation.

The average Italian child born today won't have brothers or sisters. Most also won't have cousins, aunts or uncles. Demographic winter is a lonely, as well as a chilly, place.

By and large, those inhabitants of Germany, Belgium and France who are having large families are immigrants from the Third World -- mostly Muslims. Europe once was called Christendom. The call that Europeans of the future will heed won't be church bells, but the muezzin's call to prayer from the neighborhood mosque. Even now, there are more mosques than churches in southern France.

In half-a-century or less, Europe will be populated by strangers -- who will wander by the continent's cathedrals, museums, statues and battlefield monuments wondering what it all meant.

Russia

This catastrophe in the making can be most clearly seen in Russia. What Lenin, Stalin and Hitler failed to accomplish, the Russian people are doing to themselves. You might call it auto-genocide.

In Russia, the fertility rate is 1.17 (down from 2.4 in 1990, a decline of over 50%). Russia is losing three-quarters of a million people a year. Its current population of 145 million is expected to be reduced by a third by 2050. In Russia today, almost as many children are aborted as are born alive (1.5 million to 1.6 million).

The Russian people occupy 17 million sq. km, the largest land mass on earth. By comparison, the United States has 9.6 million sq. km. and a population of 303 million -- in other words, a little less than half of Russia's land mass and more than twice its population.

Where will the Russia of 2050 find the soldiers to guard its frontiers? Where will it find the workers to operate its factories and mines, to grow its crops and run its hospitals and schools?

Russia is pressed from the South by Islam and from the East by China. (Chinese settlers are currently colonizing Siberia.) If it exists at all, expect the Russia of the future to be significantly downsized.

Even Vladimir Putin sees the handwriting on the wall of the nursery. The Russian Federation is paying families a bonus of 250,000 rubles (the equivalent of \$9,200) for a second child and for each child thereafter -- in a nation where the average monthly wage is \$330.

In the Russian region of Ulyanovsk, 550 miles East of Moscow, September 12th is Day of Conception. Families that have children 9 months later on Russia's National Day can win anything from cash prizes to cars and refrigerators.

Admittedly, this is an interesting idea. But will paying people to have children really work? I suspect not -- though governments everywhere can and should make it easier for families to raise children, out of self-interest if not fairness.

Is there a connection between economics and procreation? In Western Europe, a good economy has led to fewer children. And in Russia, a bleak economy has led to fewer children. The road out of demographic winter isn't paved with dollars -- or rubles.

Outside of Europe, the picture isn't quite as bleak. But demographic decline is still evident. In India -- fabled for its teeming masses (think of Calcutta) -- the birthrate is only 2.5. South Korea, China, Japan, Thailand, Taiwan, Vietnam and Sri Lanka all have sub-replacement fertility -- this in a region where baby booms were once the norm. At 0.91, Hong Kong may have achieved the world's lowest birthrate.

Many of these countries are referred to as 4-2-1 societies. In the future, 4 grandparents and 2 parents will be supported by one child.

There are many long-term consequences of demographic decline -- none of them good.

Wolfgang Lutz of Austria's International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis maintains, "While the 20th century was the century of population growth, we can already say from a demographic perspective that the 21st century will go into the history books as the century of aging."

By the middle of this century, 16% of the world's population will be over 65. In many nations, they will account for one-third of the total population. By 2040, there will be 400 million elderly Chinese. The question demographers ask is: Will China get rich before it gets old?

In industrialized nations, fewer and fewer workers will support pensions for more and more elderly. This will begin by severely straining national budgets, be followed by young workers repudiating social obligations, and end in the rationing of medical services and state-sponsored euthanasia.

Russia won't be the only nation trying to fill jobs with a rapidly shrinking workforce. Thanks to its one-child-per-family policy, China will have a labor shortage, sooner rather than later. The European Union estimates that it will have a shortfall of 20 million workers by 2030.

Population decline means economic decline.

Industrialized nations will be sorely tempted to import a Third World labor force -- thus trading their national identity to maintain their living standards for a few years more. These immigrants will work for pay -- but will they fight for money. If they do, remember, it was mercenary armies that contributed to the downfall of the Roman Empire.

There must be a silver-lining here somewhere. With fewer people, surely the environment will be better off -- or will it? With severely strained public budgets, developed nations will no longer be willing to shoulder the costs of cleaning up pollution or cutting carbon-dioxide emissions.

The crisis that confronts us is not only daunting, but multifaceted. The foregoing is an overview.

Is there a solution to population decline? Before we can answer that question, we first must ask another: How did we get here?

Contributing Factors

Demographic winter isn't happening in a vacuum. The factors that drive declining fertility rates are economic, cultural, political and spiritual. Since the last is the most important, we'll consider it last. Among the other trends commonly mentioned are:

- Birth Control and abortion -- Today, just under half the world's population uses some form of birth control. Worldwide, there were 42 million abortions in 2003. That means that each year, medical science, law and society conspire to destroy the equivalent of the population of Italy. Internationally, feminists work feverishly to force abortion on the dwindling number of countries where it's still illegal. In most developed nations, abortion is not only legal, but -- for the poor -- paid for by the state. Is there another instance of a people subsidizing their own destruction?
- Urbanization -- For the first time in history, we're on the threshold of a world in which half of us will be city-dwellers. Raising children in high-rise apartments is much harder than raising them on a farm or in a village.
- Delayed marriage -- Both men and women are delaying the average age of marriage. More women are in the labor force. (The hand that formerly rocked the cradle is now ringing the cash register or writing advertising copy.) Men and women both are staying in school longer, delaying family formation. After 35, it becomes progressively harder for women to conceive. Late marriage is a prescription for one-child families or childlessness.
- The entertainment media -- Hollywood propagates a live-for-the-moment ethic and an ego-driven existence. The number of movies that portray large families (today, more than three children) can almost be counted on the fingers of one hand. Hollywood tells us that satisfaction comes from careers, "relationships," travel, challenges met and overcome -- but not from having children.

- The decline of marriage -- Marriage is fading while cohabitation is increasingly popular. (In Scandinavia, almost as many couples are living together as married.) Cohabitation is not conducive to procreation or childrearing. Besides abortion, in the name of equality, the European Union goes to great lengths to promote "homosexual marriage." In this regard, I use the term "marriage" advisably. It makes sense that the EU would facilitate the one union that can not conceivably produce children.

In seeking to explain demographic winter, the factor most neglected is also the most significant. Demographic decline is a natural consequence of the loss of faith.

Europe has weekly church attendance of 5%, while in the United States, 42% attend religious services weekly. The U.S. has a fertility rate of around 2 -- just about replacement level. As noted earlier, Europe's fertility rate is 1.3, well below sustainability.

In America, there are wide variations by state. Mormon Utah has a fertility rate of 2.6, while 55% attend religious services weekly. New York State has a fertility rate of 1.86, and weekly church attendance of only 33%. New Hampshire and the District of Columbia are on the low end of the spectrum -- both in terms of fertility (1.7 and 1.5 respectively) and church attendance (33% and 24%). None of this should be surprising.

Harvard historian Steve Ozment, author of "A Mighty Fortress: A New History of The German People," writes of contemporary Germans: "One might have expected that Germans, who have been historically Europe's most theologically literate people, would have rediscovered and remembered the lessons and resources of their own Catholic and Protestant heritage in coming to terms with European Islam.... This is especially true in light of Christianity's vital historical contributions to European law, culture and polity...."

Instead, says Ozment, with notable exceptions, "Germans today have hardened their agnosticism and atheism against established religion, apparently believing, counter-intuitively, that the sermons of Luther and Bonhoeffer are a less mighty fortress against Germany's gnawing problems (low native birth rates and a bleak existentialism) than the old tin drums of Gunther Grass and Jurgen Habermas."

Concluding Comments

Traditional believers -- be they Catholic, Jewish, Protestant, evangelical or charismatic -- see a world that is not centered on the individual. They believe in commitments, otherwise known as commandments. They willingly embrace a life filled with obligations -- to past and future, to progenitors and posterity, to humanity and Heaven.

And they have faith -- in their families, in their future and in their God. Fertility rates can be explained by a simple formula: Those who have faith in the future have children. Those who don't -- don't.

Recall the first commandment in the Bible: "Be fruitful and multiple and replenish the Earth." This is not an instruction to Adam and Eve alone, but a universal imperative. For those who are physically able to fulfill the commandment, it is not optional.

God is just. In Leviticus, after giving His law to the Children of Israel, as set forth in Deut. 30:19, God tells them: "I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you. I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live."

You choose life, you get life -- including descendants. You choose death -- in the form of population control, contraception, abortion, homosexuality, secularism, consumerism, unthinking environmentalism, selfishness and a live-for-the-moment ethic -- and you get death, including no descendants.

The ultimate answer to demographic winter -- if there is one -- is contained in this room and in this building -- and in churches, chapels, cathedrals and synagogues around the world.

In 2004, I was in Mexico City for World Congress of Families III and had the opportunity to see the ancient pyramids located about 30 miles outside the city.

The place is called Teotihuacan. Roughly 1,500 years ago, it was the greatest city in the Western Hemisphere. Spread over 5,000 acres, it had 125,000 inhabitants, making it the 6th largest city in the world at that time.

Teotihuacan had sophisticated irrigation, apartment complexes, art and learning, as well as magnificent pyramids -- only a third smaller than those of Giza.

Who built this civilization? No one knows. What happened to them? Archeologists can only speculate. When the Aztecs arrived, Teotihuacan had been deserted for hundreds of years.

Some believe this wondrous city was destroyed by barbarian invaders -- others think it succumbed to drought, epidemic or civil war.

Or maybe -- just maybe -- its inhabitants got tired of living. Maybe they stopped having children. Maybe they stopped believing in the future.

Hundreds of years hence, will others visit the ruins of our cities and wonder what happened to us?