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Where Are Europe's Babies?

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“You can’t have a country where everybody lives in a nursing home....” The statement, shockingly obvious as it may be, was offered by Carl Haub of the Population Reference Bureau. He was speaking of Europe’s looming demographic disaster. As *The New York Times Magazine* reports this week, many Europeans are now asking, “Where are the babies?”

The cover story is by Russell Shorto, who contributes some of the most interesting pieces run in the magazine each year. As he makes clear in this article, the radical decline in birthrates will bring equally radical social challenges.

As Shorto explains:

In the 1990’, European demographers began noticing a downward trend in population across the Continent and behind it a sharply falling birthrate. Non-number-crunchers largely ignored the information until a 2002 study by Italian, German and Spanish social scientists focused the data and gave policy makers across the European Union something to ponder. The figure of 2.1 is widely considered to be the “replacement rate” — the average number of births per woman that will maintain a country’s current population level. At various times in modern history — during war or famine — birthrates have fallen below the replacement rate, to “low” or “very low” levels. But Hans-Peter Kohler, Josi½ Antonio Ortega and Francesco Billari — the authors of the 2002 report — saw something new in the data. For the first time on record, birthrates in southern and Eastern Europe had dropped below 1.3. For the demographers, this number had a special mathematical portent. At that rate, a country’s population would be cut in half in 45 years, creating a falling-off-a-cliff effect from which it would be nearly impossible to recover. Kohler and his colleagues invented an ominous new term for the phenomenon: “lowest-low fertility.”

This “lowest-low fertility” is disastrous in terms of economic, social, and political life. Europe’s increasingly empty playgrounds and primary schools point to the looming reality — a precipitously falling population. Add to this the fact that the population is also aging — and fast.

More:

To many, “lowest low” is hard evidence of imminent disaster of unprecedented proportions. “The ability to plan the decision to have a child is of course a big success for society, and for women in particular,” Letizia Mencarini, a professor of demography at the University of Turin, told me. “But if you would read the documents of demographers 20 years ago, you would see that nobody foresaw that the fertility rate would go so low. In the 1960s, the overall fertility rate in Italy was around two children per couple. Now it is about 1.3, and for some towns in Italy it is less than 1. This is considered pathological.”

This population time bomb will reshape the world map. Global birthrates are falling, but some nations will clearly gain an advantage. As Shorto reports, for example, Spain will have relatively few young adults in just a few years, while India will have multiple millions. India, already emerging as a global powerhouse in technology and services, stands to gain even more.

The future favors the young, and Europe’s major nations are headed toward graying populations. Strangely, the problem is more acute in the nations of southern Europe than in the north. Throughout the continent, the problems of

demographic imbalance will tax resources and public life. What happens when those in retirement draw more than the economy will produce?

Some try to argue that these challenges will not spell disaster, but, as the comment by Carl Haub indicates, these arguments now strain credibility.

There are countless issues connected to these questions, but in the end, this represents a spiritual problem. Some try to explain the drop in birthrates by pointing to economic factors and the high cost of living. Economic factors play a part, no doubt, but families found ways to sustain themselves with children through far harder times than these.

This pattern seems to reflect, at least in part, a sense of cultural and spiritual exhaustion. Has Europe grown weary as a civilization. It would seem hard to deny that this must be linked to the rapid secularization of Europe.

At the very least, some in Europe now see babies and children as a hobby rather than a national priority. That path leads to a most depressing conclusion. As Carl Haub so eloquently explains, "You can't have a country where everybody lives in a nursing home."

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