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In the early 1970s, demographers spotted a new pattern human behavior that they had never seen before. In 1970, when Sweden, Finland, and Denmark conducted their annual tallies of births and deaths for the previous year, the numbers suggested that young adults were having so few children that they would not succeed in replacing their generation.

This finding contradicted all reigning theories of human population. Until then, demographers, as well as thinking people in general, had always believed that human beings would inevitably produce more than enough children to sustain the population—at least until plague, famine, or nuclear winter set in. It is an assumption that not only conformed to our long experience of a world growing evermore crowded but that also enjoyed the endorsement of such influential thinkers as Thomas Malthus and Charles Darwin.

At first, the exceptionally low birthrates that first appeared in Scandinavia were dismissed as anomaly or measurement error, yet by now the phenomenon has spread around the world. For more than a generation now, people living in well-fed, healthy, peaceful nations have been producing too few children to replace themselves. This is true even though dramatic improvements in infant and child mortality mean that far fewer children are needed today (only about 2.1 per woman in modern societies) to avoid long-term population loss. Today, birthrates have fallen below replacement levels in not only in every European country, but, in nations rich and poor around

the globe—from China, South Korea, Japan, Australia and Singapore, through Canada, Brazil, Chile, the Caribbean, Russia, and even in parts of the Middle East, including Lebanon, Tunisia, and Iran.

The spread of this phenomenon has profound implications for the future of humanity. For one it means that the rate of human population growth has already slowed to less than half what it was in the 1970s, while the populations of major countries such as Germany, Japan and Russia are already shrinking in absolute size. Just as profoundly, what growth of global population remains will come primarily from increases not in children, but in the numbers of old people.

This might seem impossible, but it is the world as we now find it. For example, the United Nations projects that over the rest of this century, the number of young children in the world will actually fall, while the number of people over age 65 will increase by 1.7 billion. One reason for this increase in elders is improving life expectancy. The other far more significant reason is the large bulge of persons born after the end of World War II in the West, and during the 1960s and 70s in much of the developing world. As members of these cohorts age they cause a population explosion among the once few numbers of elders, just as they once created a population explosion of youth.

So, yes, the world will continue to grow more crowded for the several more decades, but with old people. And because members of these generations collectively produced too few children to replace themselves, human population is on course to fall dramatically once these generations have passed. Indeed, if the phenomenon of falling birthrates continues to spread as it has during the last 40 years, it is entirely possible that human population will begin falling by mid-century as fast as it once rose if not faster.

The prospects for this scenario become more likely given other global trends. One is urbanization, which now leaves more than half the world's population living in cities where children are an expensive economic liability. Two other trends likely to continue driving down birthrates are expanded opportunities for women, and the increasing prevalence of pensions and other means of securing support in old age without the necessity of having children.

Another powerful factor appears to be the influence of television and other cultural media. Even in the remotest corners of the globe, when television is introduced, birthrates soon fall, for whatever reasons. Curiously, population control appears to play less of a role than most would think. India, for

example, embraced population control, even to the point of forced sterilization programs during the 1970s. Brazil's government meanwhile never went so far as promoting family planning. Yet, Brazil's birth rate nonetheless fell by half in one generation to well below replacement rates, and is today far lower than that of India.

Today, many developed countries are attempting to boost their birthrates by, for example, offering more generous family allowance and measure designed to ease the tensions between work and family life for young parents. So far, however, the measures have met with very limited success. In developed countries, there is an increase the numbers of women bearing children at older ages, but because they are typically waiting until their 30's or even 40s before attempting to start a family, family size remains small and childlessness common.

Boosting birthrates also seems to come at the expense of the traditional family. In the few developed countries that still have close to replacement levels of fertility, there has been an explosion of out-of-wedlock births and a sharp drop in the percentage of children living with married parents present. In Sweden, Norway, and France, out-of-wedlock births are the "new normal," with more than 50 percent of all children born without married parents.

Similarly in the United States, birthrates remain at or slightly below replacement levels, but many fewer children than in the past are being raised with both their fathers and mothers present in their lives. According to the latest available data, fully 41 percent of all births in the United States in 2008 were to unmarried women—a record high. Though many of these women may eventually marry, rates of divorce and separation are still rising among working-class Americans and remain high over all, leading to a continuing fall in the percentage of children raised in traditional families.

Meanwhile, not only is the single-parent family becoming the norm in developed countries, so is the single-child family. This in turns means that fewer and fewer children are biologically related to anyone but their parents, having no siblings, uncles, aunts, cousins, nieces, or nephews.

What the loss of the extended family will means for the fabric of human society going forward we can only speculate, but it would seem to imply increased dependence on the state, even as population aging makes it more difficult for government to finance pensions and other social benefits. It may also ultimately mean increased dependence on, and attraction to, other institutions, both traditional and new, that will fill the social, practical, and spiritual needs once provided to individuals by family life. Such institutions

are likely to include communities organized around shared religious belief as well as cults.

The role of religion in human affairs may well increase due to another strong demographic trend as well. Birthrates may be declining across the globe, but as Eric Kaufman points out in his important book, *Shall the Religious Inherit the Earth: Demography and Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, they are declining least among the religious. Indeed, the pattern of human fertility now fits snugly into this pattern: the least likely to procreate are those who profess no belief in God; those who describe themselves as agnostic or simply spiritual are only somewhat slightly less likely to be childless. Family size increases among practicing Unitarians, reform Jews, mainstream Protestants and “cafeteria” Catholics, but the birthrates found in these populations are still far below replacement levels. Only as we approach the realm of religious belief and practice marked by, for lack of a better word, “fundamentalism” do we find pockets of high fertility and consequent rapid population growth. This is equally true among those adhering to literal belief in the Bible, Torah, or Koran, whether in the United States, Europe, Israel or the Middle East.

All these trends will no doubt play out very differently in different countries and at different times. For example, there is considerable evidence from around the world that when birthrates first begin to fall in a nation, this is often beneficial to the economy in the short term. Many economists believe, for example, that falling birthrates made possible the great economic boom that occurred first in Japan, and then in many other Asian nations beginning in the 1960s. As the relative number of children declined, so did the burden of their dependency, thereby freeing up more resources for investment and adult consumption.

Yet even if declining fertility rates can bring a “demographic dividend,” that dividend eventually has to be repaid if the trend continues. At first there are fewer children to feed, clothe and educate, leaving more for adults to enjoy. But soon enough, if fertility continues to remain below replacement levels, there are fewer productive workers as well, while there are also more and more dependent elderly, whose per capita consumption is far above that of children. Japan saw its “economic miracle” end in the late 1980s just as its labor force stopped growing. China now faces an even steeper demographic challenge as its low birthrates transform the country into what Chinese demographers call a “4-2-1 Society,” in which one child is responsible for supporting two parents and four grandparents.

Abundant evidence also suggests that population aging eventually works to depress the rates of technological and organizational innovation. Cross-country comparisons strongly suggest, for example, that after the proportion of elders increases in a society beyond a certain point, the level of entrepreneurship and inventiveness decreases. Today's record high rates of youth unemployment and stagnating wages across Europe also demonstrate another reality: that just because the size of the labor force may be shrinking relative to the number of dependent elders does not mean that the remaining working-aged people will find jobs, much less earn sufficient after-tax income to raise a family.

Yet Europe may count itself lucky compared to many other aging parts of the world. Countries such as Spain, for example, at least had the opportunity to modernize before their populations began to age. By contrast, many developing countries, from Mexico to Iran, have seen much sharper decreases in birthrates, and are now aging at unprecedented rates before they have a chance to become even moderately rich.

Geo-political strategists are only beginning to absorb what all these unprecedented demographic changes may mean for the balance of power between nations. Some, such as Mark L. Haas, of Duquesne University, speak of a coming "geriatric peace." In a world of single-child families, he argues, popular resistance to military conscription should grow as tolerance of military casualties falls. The rising cost of pensions and health care should also make sustaining military buildups increasingly difficult for countries around the world. A society dominated by middle-aged and older citizens may also become more risk averse, more preoccupied with practical, domestic concerns like healthcare and retirement security, and less driven by adherence to violent ideologies. Japan is often held up as an example of a country that has grown more stable and peaceful as it has aged. Western Europe was wracked by domestic violence when its vaunted "Generation of '68" was still young, but as this postwar baby-boom generation aged and produced few children, the political and social agendas of Europe became far less radical.

But there are also important counterexamples. The populations of the Balkans were among the oldest on earth in the 1990s, for example, but that did not prevent years of genocidal violence. On paper, aging countries may have an objective need to embrace immigration, yet they seem also prone to becoming more xenophobic and hostile to multi-culturalism as their native-born population come to feel increasingly outbred and insecure. Examples of such backlash range from the rise of nationalistic, anti-immigrant forces in

both Europe and the United States, to spurts of individual violence, such as the mass murders committed in Norway last year by a deranged gunman animated by hostility to Muslim immigrants and supporters of multiculturalism. Fear of demographic decline has also fueled the resurgence of Hindu nationalism and ethnic violence in India, and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Turkey.

Aging countries that can no longer support large standing armies or navies may also be more prone to develop and use nuclear weapon or other high tech weapons. The extensive use of drones in Yemen and Pakistan by the United States reflects in part the reality that America no longer has the manpower resources it would need to pursue its aims in those countries by other means. Similarly China, a nation in which most parents have only one precious child, is unlikely to send large standing armies to invade its neighbors, but may for the same reason be tempted to pursue options such as missiles, drones, cyber attacks and other technologies not yet developed either to impose its will or defend itself.

Slower growing or declining human population also does not necessarily imply that competition for natural resources will diminish. Children may be becoming increasingly scarce but the population of automobiles on the planet is exploding. Indeed, the pattern of the last 40 years or so in Asia and the West suggests that as people have fewer children, each remaining adult consumes more of everything, to the point that total energy use and pollution increase. One contributing reason may be that singles and childless couples generally have more money and opportunity than do people bearing the responsibilities of family life to engage in world travel, eating out regularly, and other forms of high end consumption. Think of Japan's so-called "parasite singles"—childless, young adults notorious for their shopping sprees and jet travel, or the stereotype in the West that attaches to couples with two paychecks and no kids.

A rising proportion of childless households also affects the pattern of living arrangements in ways that can strain natural resources and harm the environment. Five childless singles living in separate housing units, each with its own washer and dryer, stove, refrigerator, etc., will tend to have a bigger environment footprint than a five-person family that lives under one roof, as will be confirmed by any "carbon footprint" calculator. Such factors help to explain why even in places like Japan and Germany where population is already decreasing in absolute size, increases in per capita consumption result in increasing total carbon emissions. In the long run, countries experiencing advanced population aging and decline may become so

economically depressed that their consumption falls dramatically, but the relationship between population size, natural resource use, and environmental degradation is by no means as straightforward as most people imagine.

Finally, there is one last demographic trend to consider in predicting the future course of geo-politics. This is the phenomenon of “echo booms.” Birthrates are falling everywhere, but there remain countries such as Pakistan and Yemen, and those across much of sub-Saharan Africa, where the percentage of the population of childbearing age is exceptionally high. This means that though each woman may on average have fewer children than her mother did, the absolute number of births is still rising, creating a tidal wave of youth. These countries also happen to be poor, and already highly unstable. For this reason Neil Howe and Richard Jackson of the Center for Strategic and International Studies warn that 2020s may be the period of “maximum demographic danger,” as the poorest, most troubled parts of the world continue to experience “youth bugles” even as much of the developed world’s population will be passing into advanced old age.

Never before in human history, with the possible exception of late antiquity, has humanity experienced such a dramatic confluence of unexpected and profound demographic trends. Demography is not destiny as is sometimes claimed, but the pattern of births and deaths is likely to define life in the 21st century in ways that will change the course of human race.