

Declining Birthrates and Aging Societies

I. Introduction

Let me begin by describing how I got interested in the topic of declining birthrates and aging societies. In 1969, as I was organizing the Hastings Center—a research center focused on ethical issues of medicine and biology-- I was invited to spend a year at The Population Council working on the ethical problems in trying to lower the high birthrates of that era. The Council was one of the world's leading research center on population and family planning. Its main focus was on high birthrates in developing countries but there were also, at that time, many who worried about them in developed countries.

My job was to determine what means of lowering birthrates would be ethically acceptable. But one day a question came into my head: what would happen if birthrates became too low? I put that question to the President of the Council, a distinguished social scientist, Bernard Berelson. He was the one who had the idea of inviting me to work at the Council, a most unusual and innovative idea in those days, when bioethics hardly existed. He simply waved his arms and said he had no time to think about birthrates that might be too low. That was little more than a strange, speculative possibility.

After working on population issues for another decade or so, particularly for the United Nations Fund for Population Activities, I moved on to other issues, and particularly to the problems of aging societies. But I gave no thought at all to the connection between aging societies and birthrates. That connection never occurred to me. Then, about two years ago, I began noticing articles and books on the declining birthrates in Europe and how that decline would increase the number and proportion of the elderly in a society, exacerbating social security and health care for the old. In

short, my old interest in population and my more recent interesting in aging had come together.

There was another reason as well for my interest in birthrates. My wife and I have six children, and many people over the years have commented to us that it must have been our Catholic background that explained our behavior. But it was not that simple. My father's Catholic family consisted of 11 children, nine of whom married--but had only 7 children in all. It turned out they had married during our great depression of the 1930s. The generation before them had very large families, 6-10 children, but my father's generation did not. How they did it is, to this day, unknown. It was not a topic that children interrogated their parents about in those days—though even as a child I noticed that my parents had separate bedrooms. It never occurred to me to ask why.

My wife and I, by contrast, married in 1954, a time of great prosperity and very high birthrates. It was the era of what are now called the baby boomers, children born between 1947 and 1964. It also turned out that my wife, who was born in 1933, was part of a group of women that year who had an average of 3.8 children for that year, the largest in the 20th century. After the baby boom childbearing era passed—in the mid-1960s--birthrates started to decline again. Four of our six children are married, but they have only had a total of 5 children among them. They loved being part of a large family, but have shown no interest at all in having one of their own. Nor do any of their friends.

The problem of declining birthrates and aging Societies may be understood as two separate issues or one combined issue. While there are different policy needs and approaches for each of them, in the long run, they should be understood as intimately related.

--low birthrates in a country will increase the number and proportion of the elderly, and in the process will change what is called the dependency ratio, with a smaller number of young people to support a growing number of old people

--the growing proportion of elderly in a society will mean a decline in the proportion of young people of procreative age, and more resources going to old rather than young, making life for the younger harder. In Spain, as in other countries, there is a gradual increase in support of the old and a relative decline in support of children. There is a vicious circle in declining birthrates—declining birthrates lead to even more of a decline: there will be fewer women to have children.

II. Historical Background

Let me say something about the historical background of these developments.

Beginning in approximately 1900 birthrates in developed countries, with an average of 6-8 children per woman, began to decline—and they did so well before the advent of modern contraception and legal abortion. This trend was called the “first demographic transition.” By 1970s, most developed countries had reached the steady-state replacement level, which requires an average of 2.1 children per woman.

Meanwhile, though not the story I will tell here, birth rates in developing countries were dropping as well, in part because of a strong international movement to introduce family planning and population limitation programs, many of them initiated by the :Population Council.. By the 1980s, the international interest in limiting birthrates shifted to a focus on the education and welfare of women rather than family planning programs as a more likely way to influence birthrates. Birthrates everywhere tend to decline as the education for women increases, and that has happened in poor as well as affluent countries. Birthrates in developing countries have for the most part fallen from 7-8 children per woman to 3-4, a remarkable change, and it seems still underway.

Beginning in 1970s, what is called the “second demographic transition” began to occur, that of a decline in birthrates below the replacement level, with a range of 1.9 in France (now increased to 2.1), 1.5 in Sweden, and 1.2-1.4 in a number of southern European countries. Together with Japan, the world’s lowest birthrates are found in Italy, Greece, and Portugal, and Spain.

Why 1970? My guess is that the 1960s and 1970s showed a great rise in number of working women, the liberalization of laws and practices on abortion and contraception, and rapidly increasing affluence and standards of living. As with the improvement of education for women, birthrates also decline with a rise in affluence. No one of those variables explains the change; it was, it appears, all of them together. It a demographic but also a cultural and economic transition. But keep in mind that this development was a continuation of the first demographic transition, which had begun earlier. Except for the upsurge of births in the 1940s, 50s, and early 60s, the trend since 1900 had everywhere been downward. Few observers even in the 1960s, however, foresaw the second transition. continuing downward beyond the 2.1 replacement rate for a steady-state population growth.

III. Childbearing and Aging: Defining the Issues

The main issues of childbearing and Aging are, I believe, religious, cultural, and economic.

For most of earlier human history, the family was the main provider of security and survival. Children were necessary for the economy of the family and, with high child mortality rates, it was necessary to procreate many children in order that a few of them would survive; and there was no way to control the number of children aside from usually dangerous methods of contraception and abortion. Children were also understood to be responsible for the care of the elderly, who could not look to any other

source of care.. In short, in addition to the absence of effective means of limiting procreation, there was every social and incentive to have children; and, save for high maternal mortality rates, few incentives to limit their number.

It took massive changes on many fronts—better health for babies and mothers, improved education for women and the opening of job opportunities as well, an extended period of young adulthood, delaying procreation, and the emergence of a culture that made marriage and childbearing just one more option in living a life, and one that many young people do not choose.

The issues are religious because the western religions he always given a high place to marriage, the bearing of children, and to the responsibility of the young to care for the old. What are we to make of that tradition? Had religion—and I have in mind here mainly Christianity—simply become fatalistic because, in earlier and primarily agricultural times, there was really no other option for young people. One thing, I believe, is clear: the Church has not well adapted to these changing views of procreation and marriage, usually treated as moral decline and not, as I believe, a function of a variety of social and economic changes, only part of which reflects a decline in the influence of the Church and traditional moral values (though there is surely some of that).

The issues are cultural because different developed countries have different attitudes toward the comparative roles of the family, of women (and particularly working women), and the state in support of families and aging. Northern European countries, with strong welfare state values, reflect a bias toward government support of families and procreation, while the southern countries have looked toward the family to take care of welfare needs, including the care of children.

The issues are economic because of strong evidence that the economics of family formation and childbearing, as well as policies concerning the elderly, are powerful forces in shaping social policy and cultural values. It is now well understood (or at least believed) by those young people of procreative age that raising a child is much more costly than it was for their parent's much less grandparents generation. They need more education, unemployment is a threat and jobs, even once had, can be precarious; life-time work for one company has all but disappeared. As a result, children hang on to their parents longer—they are harder to get out of the house—and those children are more nervous about their future economic prospects even when that happens.

Bearing a child is always, even for the confident and well off, a gamble. Our President John F. Kennedy once said that "children are a hostage to fortune," Many young people, adding up the benefits and the burdens, are by intimidated by the burdens and more weakly attracted by the benefits. So, they delay procreation until their late 20s and 30s. Yet however many children they have—often only one and less frequently two—public opinion surveys invariably show that they would, if the could, have more. But as any parent knows it is a big jump from one child to two and a real leap from two to three. When I tell young people I have six, an unimaginably high number, they look at me as if I had just arrived from Mars

While I have come to think that economic forces and conditions are the most important variables affecting the bearing of children, there seems little doubt that they are (1) enhanced by the rise of urban societies and modern industrial life, supplanting the earlier agricultural societies: by the necessity of much more education than was once necessary: by the changing role of women, and by shifting values about the living of a life. Recall that it was Catholicism, with its support of the celibate life of priests and

nuns, that was the pioneer of living a life that was not centered on procreation and the family. Many modern people no longer place family life at the top of their list as the most important social institution

IV. Some Spanish Data It is Spain so much as Spain offers a very good case study of low birthrates; and I have come to think that what will work to raise birthrates in one country will probably work well in others—assuming there is a political will to do so. While of course Spain has its own general cultural and political values, as well as important regional differences, it shares with other southern European countries some common and decisive values leading to low birthrates. The most important cultural value has, I believe, been a continuing reliance on the family, not on government, to provide economic and social support of family life, a development in contrast to northern European countries that have given government a strong role in supporting welfare. The most important political factor has been weak policies for the support of working mothers, most noticeable when, beginning in the 1970s, the number and proportion of working mothers was rapidly increasing and birthrates had just begun to rapidly decline. That was an important omission because, as birthrates decline so also do the number of women who could, in the future, have become mothers.

At the same time, again in common with other southern European countries, retirement and pension policies for the elderly became increasingly generous, with a low retirement age and close to 100% of economic support after retirement, the most generous in Europe. Here is some important information.

--the Spanish fertility rate is 1.2 (2.1 necessary for population replacement)

--mean age at marriage is 27, and at first birth is 29, a considerable increase over the past 30 years.

--the unemployment rate is about 10%

- over 50% of women work full time, and that number is increasing
- the 2d demographic transition in Spain: a radical reduction in 3d and subsequent children, and a great reduction in a 2d children
- high unemployment rate for those under 30
- tendency of young people to continue to live with parents, often into their late 20s
- lower rates of cohabitation and non-marital childbearing than northern Europe—a higher birthrate in Sweden than in Spain is partly attributable to the greater acceptance of children born to unmarried women or born in situations of cohabitation
- but for immigration, birthrates would be still lower
- in the year 2020, the population of those under 15 is projected to be half of what it was in 1970, but the percentage of those over 65 will be double what it was 50 years ago—moreover, the small projected percentage of childbearing women in 2020 has potential to lead to even lower birthrates, even as the number of elderly continue to rise.

V. Reasons for Low Birthrate

Economic/Cultural/Religious—Note easy to Tease Out Their Different Impacts

- high unemployment rates and high housing costs: difficult to afford marriage and childbearing
- shortage of part-time work in Spain for young and for working mothers
- lack of good economic support for working mothers and for child care
- better educational and career opportunities for mothers, and that almost everywhere leads to fewer children

- women forced to choose between full-time work and having children
- reform efforts at regional level inconsistent
- reaction against conservative church and earlier conservative political regimes, which aimed to keep women at home and in childbearing role.
- Franco and Hitler were great supporters of increased birthrates, but mainly for nationalistic and military purposes.
- availability of abortion and contraception
- rising divorce rates

In sum, it is a variety of factors working together that create the problem.

***** In my view, the economic forces are the most important but are reinforced by the cultural values. Spain seems to me to combine both liberal and conservative values. Taken together, they have not been conducive to childbearing: The liberal values of modern society favor small families and working women, as well as resistance to religious influences; the conservative values of Spanish culture, looking to family rather than government for support of marriage and childbearing, work against childbearing also

VI. Necessary Reforms

Spanish needs are common to all developed countries;

Childbearing

Every society needs a steady inflow of young people, for intellectual, social and economic vitality—and to provide economic and social support for the elderly.

Economists have long pointed out the importance of young people in order to have an energetic and economically productive society. A country with a rising average age of a population approaching age 50 will almost certainly lack the number of young necessary for vitality. Other points to consider are the following:

- family and childrearing require support from government—family dependence is no longer adequate
- educated women need policies designed to make work and childbearing possible; modern women are more likely to give up child bearing than give up work and many women must, for economic reasons, enter the workplace
- cultural support necessary for family values but those values must now be set within the context of modern industrial societies, which offer few natural incentives to have children
 - children seem to many young people a great deal of trouble, much more so than my generation
 - affluence itself leads to smaller families
- religious support necessary for pertinent social and welfare values. Not enough to romanticize the family and to oppose abortion and contraception; they are only a small part of the problem:
 - abortion and cotraception provide means of limiting children but are not, by themselves, the cause of low birthrates
 - the ultimate reason why young people do not have children is that it is difficult, economically and socially, to so. It needs to be made easier.

Support of the Elderly

The growing number and proportion of elderly, exacerbated by low birthrates, will pose great problems in the future, not only because there will be fewer young people to support them, but because a large and vigorous group of young people are necessary for economic and social strength. What can be done? Even if young people

suddenly began having more children, it would take 30 years or more for their impact to be felt; that is, the time necessary for them to enter the work force and become contributing citizens. In the meantime, steps must be taken to deal with the aging problem:

- an increase in immigration: the US does not now have a birthrate problem because of high immigration rates, but this may be changing—but high immigration rates help national birthrates.

- early retirement policies need to be changed to later ages

- efforts need to be made to keep the elderly in the workplace, on either a full or part-time basis

- there is value in educating the old to take on new jobs and roles

- increased effort to induce young people to save for their old age in light of likely need to reduce pension benefits; and they can not depend upon their children for elder care

- elderly people should be strong advocates for policy changes supporting childbearing and working women policies

- elderly will have to depend more on each other to take care of each other

- special housing units for elderly in good health to live together, and to care for each other as they age

Conclusion: The combination of low birthrates and aging society pose some very difficult problems. They are separate issues in many ways but, ultimately, closely related. There will be an aging problem because of low birthrates, but the care of the present elderly is an immediate need, which a sudden rise in birthrates will not help. The long-term solution is more children, but the incentives and policies to raise birthrates must be put in place as fast as possible, understanding that there will be a

long lag time for the policies to have an effect. Nothing, however, is harder for most societies than to enact policies now that will not have an immediate effect. But the longer one waits, the worse the problem will be.