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Demographics: The Age Trap

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1. An approach to the subject, with historical digressions

No doubt about it: we have it good. We live much more comfortably than our forefathers did. Our housing has become drier, brighter, more comfortable; working conditions are more humane. We (here in Switzerland) have no slums, and no «Manchester capitalism.» Our refrigerators are well stocked, we have ample leisure activities to increase our cultural horizons or our physical fitness, or just to pass the time. We lack for neither food nor drink nor medical care; pensions and the social security system promise us a comfortable life even after retirement. Demographic statistics document the results of such a life style compounded of prosperity and welfare: We're living longer.

Yes, we have it good. But an anxious question is being voiced: For how much longer? Our society is threatening to grow old. Our longer life expectancy is counter-balanced not by an increased birth rate, but rather by its decline. If we are to believe the demographers, the general outlook for the future is that, in the OECD countries, the proportion of pensioners to actively employed people will double by the middle of this century. Then who will be there to make the GDP continue to grow?

Not long ago, I happened to visit the place where my younger brother and I first saw the light of day back in the 1960's. Our mother did not give birth to us at home. When her labor began, my father brought her to a nearby Clinic for Mothers and Infants (and he had to call on a neighbor to help him out, because he did not yet own an automobile). That building still stands today, but it no longer houses obstetricians and midwives; instead the staff consists of care givers to the elderly. The clinic for mothers and infants has become a home for senior citizens. What an eloquent reversal of function: old age pushing out youth. The primary school which I once attended was forced to close its doors some years ago. There was a shortage of pupils. Many kindergartens now face the same problem.

Ladies and gentlemen, as you could gather from the advance announcement for today's NZZ Podium – or from the opening remarks by Martin Meyer – I write from Germany for our newspaper. So these days I am more aware of conditions in that country than here in Switzerland. But that is not very significant for our discussion. There are differences,

of course: Switzerland has fewer problems with its foreign immigrant population, and its pension system, which rests on multiple supports, is more stable than Germany's. These advantages of obviously more sensible pension and immigration policies are nothing to sneeze at. But in demographic terms, the two countries are very similar. In both places, the average age of the populace is above 40, the number of births below a statistical 1.5 children per woman; life expectancy in Germany is approaching 80 years, while Switzerland has already reached that level. All in all, Switzerland seems in somewhat better shape, which is something the Germans (who tend to regard Switzerland as a model country) would not deny, by the way. But that better shape here also has its gray hairs, facial wrinkles, and doubts about its vitality.

The question is: What do the demographers' figures mean? To all appearances, demography is a sober business. It counts mothers and children, men and women, workers and pensioners, life span, births and deaths, and places all these figures in a geographic and historical context. In the ordering hands of this science, silent data can speak a graphic language. Dynamically growing societies with a broad population base of children and youths are depicted as pyramids. A shape resembling a bell means you are looking at the promise of stability, since the bell shape represents a still-advantageous proportion of children (more) to senior citizens (fewer) and a healthy center section consisting of people in the prime of life.

But when the base becomes narrow, the middle section ample and the top quite wide, you're seeing something which approaches our present condition. Demographers like to use the term «urn» for this representation of a society with fewer births and a prolonged old age. This makes things very clear. West European societies such as the Swiss, German or Swedish begin their history as pyramids, later become bell-shaped and end up as «urns.» One is tempted to say, «Peace unto their ashes!» This tripartite development from pyramid through bell to urn was popularized by Friedrich Burgdörfer, who was the best-known German demographer of the mid-20th century. His work was an outstanding example of how demography uses graphic imagery to get its message across.

Demography tries to teach us mores. It was no different back in 1798, when Thomas Robert Malthus wrote his «Essay on the Principles of Population.» Behind the dry data of demography is hidden a concept of how a given population should be ideally composed. Reproductive behavior is measured against target figures. Each numerical figure is also a normative one, a prescription for how we should be living. Demography easily makes the transition from data collection to moral preaching.

Back in the 18th century, Malthus spread the concern that food production could not keep pace with population growth. But his prediction of a future marked by over-population, which would of necessity be decimated by famine and disease, has not been fulfilled. In 19th-century Europe, first the mortality rate dropped, then birth rates

followed suite. France served as a warning. There, after the 1789 Revolution, fewer and fewer children were born, a trend which continued during industrialization in the 19th century. At the same time, Germany experienced substantial population growth, making it a military power that enabled its victory over France in the war of 1870-71. But even for the German Empire, a declining birthrate was foreseeable. At the beginning of the 20th century, theoreticians blamed the two-child family. Demographers such as Sweden's Pontus Fahlbeck or Germany's Julius Wolf predicted that the two-child system would lead to catastrophe. Ancient Rome, they said, had practiced a similar «racial or national suicide.» First the desire to reproduce themselves was taken from the people, then the Empire was decimated and the Barbarians plunged in to fill the demographic vacuum.

A century ago, then, the two-child family was seen as a long-term harbinger of the collapse of state and community. Today, demographers hold up the two-child family as an ideal. To be more exact, it is 2.13 children per female that is given out as necessary for a population to keep itself at a constant level. How demographic targets do change! But what has remained virtually unchanged is the matrix of population discourse. When we discuss cultural guidelines and the changing roles of the sexes, women remain at the heart of the dispute. And we still measure birth rates by varying yardsticks. We would like to see more children in our traditional, native-born populace, but we are very suspicious of high fertility in our immigrant population. The distinction between «worthy» and «unworthy» parents which we apply to natives and foreigners is repeated on a sociological level with respect to education: we loudly bewail women who are highly educated and childless, while at the same time bemoaning that too many young women in the lower classes are having too many children. Although few here say it aloud, there is nevertheless a distinct impression that the «wrong» people are having children in our latitudes.

2. Systematic Questions

It is only when we make the transition from statistics to interpretation that demography becomes interesting for most of us. The following questions are primary in the discussion of population: Which facts are beyond dispute, and what projections are possible? How are we to evaluate demographic changes, what are their causes, and to what extent can we influence the course of things?

First to the hard facts. Even though demography now and then gives the impression that it is in possession of figures that are both certain and precise, the fact is that there is always room for adjustment up or down. For example: Germany's Federal Office of Statistics initially published the conclusion that 42% of German post-graduate women remain childless, but that figure was subsequently moderated, with the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research putting the figure at 32%, while the German Institute for Economic Research declared it to be 25%. Also to be taken into account is

that formerly birth statistics covered only those births occurring within legal marriages. That was not very important as long as the number of extra-marital births was merely marginal. But more recently parenting by unmarried couples and single parents has become nothing unusual.

Please don't misunderstand me. I do not want to create the impression that there is no basis to all the dismal messages about sinking birth rates and the rising proportion of the elderly. I would merely like to encourage you all to always take the statistics served up to you with a grain of salt. There can probably be little doubt about the general description of the situation as typified by the following statement by Franz-Xaver Kaufmann about the former West Germany: «Since 1975, newborns have been replacing only about two-thirds of their parents' generation.» So one-third is missing. And that third is missing from society first as children, but later as parents – which lends further impetus to the aging and declining of the population. Even if the youngest generation of mothers were to give birth to as many children per capita as previous generations of mothers, on average the population would inevitably age and decline, simply because it contains fewer parents and hence fewer children.

That is a very brief look at the statistical basis. Now for the projections: It is often said that medium-term demographic predictions are very accurate, because those people who could give birth in the coming ten or twenty years have already been born, and that the deficits can also be readily measured, so that a simple mathematical calculation is enough to stake out the upper and lower limits. According to this line of thinking, since we cannot alter the numbers of births and non-births after the fact, we also know approximately how many reproduction-capable Swiss or Germans we will have in the coming decades. Assuming, of course, that no wars or epidemics or other fatal catastrophes fundamentally alter the situation.

Even if we grant demography's ability to project, it should be noted that demographers who stick to their narrowly-defined field can only make predictions about population as a zoologist might make them about species diversity and maintenance. In other words, they should remain within the realm of biology. But demographers are very reluctant to accept that limitation. The demographic projections we've been regularly fed for some time now are spiced with sociological or economic suggestions. For example, we are told that statistically, by the year 2040, there will be 102 pensioners for every 100 active contributors to Germany's social insurance system. But that is pure fiction, since demographers cannot know how politics, economics and society at large will have reacted by then to the aging process. Above all, they should not assume that everything will continue as it is now.

Looking to the future brings us to the emotional heart of our discussion – the valuation of demographic change as good or bad, dramatic or banal, fatal or promising. Umberto Eco once divided cultural critics into two camps: the apocalyptics and the

integrationists. The former see things in starkly dark terms, while the latter believe that societal developments can actually be made to fit together quite nicely.

These two attitudes apply to our present discussion as well. The apocalyptics predict profound social divisions as the result of an aging and declining population: young against old, the childless versus parents, the highly educated versus the poorly qualified, native-born against immigrants. In this view, all these points of conflict – as well as the already existing one between rich and poor, of course – will be further exacerbated by demographic circumstances. To the battle of the generations will be added the competition between regions: shrinking cities and depopulated villages in Eastern Germany, for example, and zones of prosperity in the West; rural areas where the wolves and lynx outnumber the people.

Then there is the question of caring for the aged. Again according to the apocalyptics, pensions will have to be cut in half because there will be too few workers paying into the social security system; care of the aged will have to be automated, since personal services will be far too expensive for a health-care system threatened with collapse. This opens a broad field for the satirical imagination. Not long ago Second German Television stepped in and beat the drum with a three-part series claiming to depict how old-age homes will function by the year 2030: elderly inmates, including mentally confused seniors and those no longer fully in command of their bodily functions, are issued «mega-diapers» which, for the sake of simplicity, need to be changed only once a day, while for personal hygiene the inmates are put through a kind of assembly-line bathing system. TV critics found this demographic shocker too simplistic in its depiction, but the German Hospice Foundation warned against denigrating the TV production as mere science fiction. Said its director: «There is a startling amount of reality in the subject matter.»

The obverse of this vision is the calmer, more «functional» view, which sees the demographic drama as much less ominous. In this view, shrinking birth rates and the aging of the populace are in keeping with our social system. The emphasis here is on opportunities rather than risks. Frankfurt sociologist Karl Otto Hondrich has termed the declining birth rate a «stroke of luck» for our modern society. He argues that the decisive element for the financing of the social insurance system is not the number of active payers into the system, but their productivity. And with a declining birth rate productivity will rise, he maintains, because when there are fewer children they can be better educated and trained. They get more attention, more love, and this helps them become not only highly productive, with a great potential for creating added value, but also better family people.

In Hondrich's thinking there is no generational war and no economic collapse. His book published last year bears the programmatic title «Weniger sind mehr» («Less Is More»), and it brings some compelling arguments to bear. But I've probably been infected by the

apocalyptic viewpoint, because whenever I'm not under the immediate influence of Hondrich's contentions, I am plagued by the suspicion that he may have painted a much too rosy picture and obscured many ominous factors. For example, he does not touch at all on possible changes in people's view of life. To cite just one: What will life be like with the loss of beauty, energy and grace inevitably attached to a decline in the number of young people? I am not consoled by the argument that, on the other hand, we will remain youthful much later into our older years; at least from an aesthetic standpoint, that is a pale substitute.

The next points in my brief review of our subject are the closely-related questions of what is causing the declining birth rate, and to what extent we can influence the course of events. The idea is that, if we understand the causes, we would also know what adjustments to make. But as we shall see, the matter is not quite that simple. The difficulties do not by any means lie in the diagnosis of causes. With respect to these there is broad agreement among sociologists. Most frequently mentioned are increased prosperity, expansion of the welfare state (especially the socialization of care for the elderly), the emancipation of women and their pursuit of careers, and finally the shift in values as a result of which the ethos of social obligation has taken a back seat to the ideal of self-realization.

It may also be expressed in more general terms: Declining birth rates and rising life expectancy are the fruits of progress. They are the consequences – indeed, the intentional consequences – of prosperity and self-determination. Our societies have energetically worked to insure that people can live longer. With equal intention, we have developed means of birth control and now spend the time and money which used to be devoted to raising children on other enjoyable things. But it turns out that our achieved intentions have unintended side-effects, that the price of progress threatens to consume progress itself. Our child-poor paradise for the elderly does not seem financially viable in the long term, and the demographers are now coming along and telling us that raising children is a socio-economic investment which we have been neglecting for decades. The declining birth rate now appears to be an investment gap that will cost billions. How are we to get around that?

The matter is complicated by the fact that we cannot combat the causes. We cannot, and do not want to, turn back progress, nor do we wish to rescind the high value placed on the individual or his self-determination. It goes without saying that this also applies to that half of humanity which has the most to do with children because its members carry and give birth to them: women. We cannot return to the role model of housewife-and-mother. The emancipation of women cannot be rolled back. And because everyone knows this, public discussion generally revolves around how women can achieve both work and family. «Combining family and career» is the cry of the day.

Pragmatists believe that this is one point at which the problem can be approached. And there are certainly some other points at which wise policy can provide political guidance:

for instance, policies to reduce the so-called opportunistic costs of having children and to increase the incentives for doing so. But those whom we have termed the apocalyptics will be skeptical about any policy of incentives and will agree with Oswald Spengler, who wrote in Volume II of his «Decline of the West», in the section on the «Infertility of Civilized People»:

«The great shift occurs as soon as there are 'reasons' in the daily thinking of a highly educated populace for the presence of children. Nature knows no reasons.»

Thank you for your attention.