

# Why Johnny and Ginny can't breed

Birthrates in developed countries around the world are low. They have been low for a long time. And, despite the ideologically driven propaganda of climate alarmists—who peddled the lie of a looming-but-never-detonating “population bomb”—the catastrophic effects of a population implosion are in these countries, already beginning to emerge. While an influx of migrants has partially concealed the decline, such misguided policies can only camouflage the raw numbers and conceal the underlying problem: that entire cultures are now un-reproducing themselves out of existence. Thus does the chasten wisdom of the time-worn phrase endure: demography is, indeed, destiny.

The nations which have chosen to engage this problem more directly have encountered a curious conundrum: nothing that they do to encourage higher birth-rates seems to work. The social scientists are divided on the question of pro-natal policies: they are either entirely ineffective or they have not yet been enacted with sufficient levels of largesse—levels which would, in any case, render them too expensive to sustain. But this is yet another example of intellectuals asking precisely the wrong question. The political leaders and the leading minds who think the dilemma of depopulation can be solved by turning certain knobs on the dashboard of the technocratic state have not faced the much more fundamental questions: Why do populations need to be incentivized to heed the deepest instincts of the species? Why should the citizens of developed countries need to be bribed to perform the most basic functions of biology?

Political leaders and policy wonks can, to some extent, be forgiven for seeking simple solutions, and for thinking that one falling variable should have one corresponding cause. But such an attitude fails to grasp the unique and existential crisis that a non-reproducing populace constitutes; moreover, even on the level of policy, the factors at play are multiple. If birthrates were merely a function of couples forming during their reproductive years and voluntarily welcoming children, even so innumerable forces have encroached upon the habitat of the future that is the formation of a young, fertile, and family-minded pair. Cohabitation rates have risen as marriage rates have fallen, and long-term stable relationships, of any kind, emerge at later ages. And the rates at which these units dissolve has risen, too.

There are many material and cultural reasons for these shifts. While the cost of entertainment has fallen—with toys and electronics becoming ever more “affordable”—the basics of food and housing have increased substantially. So too has the cost of education and, with a larger percentage of men and women pursuing university education for longer, the period in which a couple who is looking to settle down gets pushed back accordingly: there is, for so many married or would-be couples, always another academic degree to collect or another professional milestone to reach before a family can be started—or so they think. But how many couples with this attitude are, in fact, wrong? And how many of them, to their searing regret, realize too late that they waited too long? And, even when such couples can have kids, how many wish that they had started earlier and had had more?

Such a scenario assumes that family formation even occurs; too often, this is not the case. Although electronic entertainment has become cheaper in purely economic terms, its cost is, in fact, incalculable: how many young men lose their best years to video games and pornography? And how many young women are drawn into the vortices of social media and the pernicious vanities and values which it so easily transmits? At the same ages, for example, when the protagonists of Jane Austen’s novels would be testing the characters of their potential partners in the safe social spaces of drawing rooms, and discovering their own priorities and preferences through letters, conversations, and careful reflection, our own young people are frozen in a prolonged adolescence. They might be pursuing studies of varying degrees of rigor and value; they might be grasping for the first rung of the corporate ladder; or they might be doomscrolling alone in a dorm room or their family home. What they almost never do, however, is get married at the same age at which other human beings have from time immemorial.

Of course, this problem predates the era of the smartphone and the advent of highspeed internet. Nor can this epochal shift be attributed solely to city-living, although urbanization is a long-acknowledged source of smaller families. Instead, the birthrates of every developed country all inflect in the 1960s: artificial contraception is the mechanism, but even more so is the mentality of contraception to which it gives rise. The fact that children have become a “choice” is what has shattered, more than anything else, the intergenerational continuum.

For human life is a comity between the generations. Adults care for the infants who will, in turn, render the same service to their parents in their dotage. The complementarity between the sexes, of which marriage is an image, find an analogue in the harmony of the old and the young that the cycles of the family enact. It is not by accident that the great civilizations of the past honoured marriage and encouraged the natural piety that is reflected in the Fourth Commandment of the Decalogue: "Honour thy Father and Mother." Contraception, however, has disrupted the cycles of civilizations and dispersed the values on which they depend: we have failed to honour our own parents by imitating their fecundity and the selflessness that child-rearing entails. And we have, likewise, dishonored the children that we have failed to sire and bear.

In 1955, Rudolf Flesch published a seminal work on literacy in America entitled, *Why Johnny Can't Read*. To raise children who cannot read is, indeed, a crisis, since literacy opens up a new generation to the vistas of experience of every generation that has preceded them. Yet we have now precipitated an even greater crisis: by creating the conditions in which the young can't breed, we cut off unborn generations from the gift of existence which has been bestowed on us, and we deprive ourselves of a posterity on whom we might grant life's gifts in turn. Ignoring Christ's axiomatic principle -- "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (*Acts* 20:35) -- we, as a culture, have chosen simply to receive; in depriving ourselves of the role of benefactors, we have deprived ourselves of a future.

If this dire situation is to be remedied, it will require heroic self-sacrifice on the part of the young who will need to resist economic pressure, cultural headwinds, and the spiritual stinginess that have conspired to make large families so rare. However, they will be more than repaid for their efforts, through the gifts they will receive from their children. Foremost among these gifts is life itself. Although the choice between life and death was set before Israel by Moses clearly enough, our own age has, for far too long, strayed down the wrong path. It is past time, then, to heed the call— and make the necessary decision—that will ensure our own survival: "I call heaven and earth to record this day against you: I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Therefore, choose life, that both you and your seed may live" (*Deut* 30:19).