

The West's War on Children

The world has now seen several decades of something quite new: explicitly anti-child policies. By this one might think I am referring to the "one-child" policy in China. And to a certain extent I am. Fines and the withholding of education and other services, not to mention forced abortions, rather comfortably fit within any definition of "anti-child;" so we may take the Chinese de-population experiment as a model of the type. As to the results: The demographic implosion the Chinese regime's murderous policies have wrought has proven so dangerous to that country's economic and social infrastructure that the government has sought to reverse course on its more draconian methods. But this reversal will prove too little, too late, just as it has in Japan, where the demographic implosion has been proceeding for much longer than in China, and has produced a prolonged, painful, and seemingly irreversible contraction of economic activity and wealth. And this is what we have been experiencing only slightly less obviously, in the West. It is time we reassessed our own anti-child policies and, more important, their bases in bad social theory, personal motivations, and theology.

Institutions and entire societies are literally being hollowed out from the inside by a refusal to have children. As anyone who pays attention to such things has noticed, the downward spiral of populations is far from just an east Asian phenomenon. Europe has been demographically imploding for decades and has suffered prolonged periods of slow and no growth, along with mounting pressures on retirement systems and chronically high unemployment rates, with massive underemployment and youth unemployment. Sadly Americans, as with so many things, believe themselves immune to the sicknesses attendant on the European policies our political elites seek to follow. Yet we have been in demographic decline as well. The decline has been slowed only by wave after wave

of (often illegal and more often culturally ill-conceived) immigration. Economic activity is stagnating and businesses are having trouble finding workers and even customers (here universities are merely the tip of a very large iceberg).

It would be easy but misguided to lay the blame for our demographic troubles at the feet of contemporary ideology. The Green fantasy of a magically pristine world in which the people serve their Earth Goddess by reducing their own numbers while enjoying wind-powered teleportation devices was never serious. Such progressive silliness is merely a product of an imagination shaped by earlier ideological choices and their social consequences. In brief, we do not procreate because we no longer feel connected with those around us, no longer see ourselves as part of an ongoing culture and civilization, no longer care terribly much about our society in and of itself, and no longer see ourselves as part of a natural order.

Children are the center of any reasonably healthy society. Child-rearing is at the center of any reasonably healthy civilization. To say this today is to risk self-parody, for one never escapes the cloying cries of "what about the children!" in our public policy debates. But it is important to note the differences among types of child-centrism. We currently inhabit a society in which more people die than are allowed to be conceived and survive until birth. Such a society is fundamentally different, including in its child-centrism, from one in which new life is welcomed as part of the natural order. The children who succeed in being born today often are treated as precious items to be protected from all harm, affirmed, and made the center of attention in any reasonably well-off household—at least when that attention is given by professional "caregivers" in government, education, or the childcare industry. What these children are not is part of functioning families and communities, in which they learn how to cooperate, compete, and practice daily virtues. The result? Two generations of people who are too self-centered to

enter into lasting marital relationships, choose life, and work to make better lives for themselves and their posterity.

From children being the center of our culture we have reached a point where each child sees himself as the center of the world. Why? Because so few of us recognize ourselves as part (though not the center) of an ongoing tradition, an order of existence tying the dead with the living and the yet unborn.

What makes children the center of this vision? Children are not merely "the future" in some abstract sense; they are carriers of our traditions and of our beings in this world. They are to be valued for themselves, as products of both God's love and our own selves. But they also are to be valued—and reared—as carriers of our way of life into the future. They are the next link in the chain of social being of our families and other associations, and also of ourselves. The ancient Greeks and Romans recognized the sense in which one's children were an important facet of one's own immortality. Christians in particular should recognize this fact, given Christ's integration of son (of God and of man) within God Himself. By recognizing our own position within an order of being that extends upward to God, Christians in particular can see that order of being by which we are linked to those who came before us and those we must rear to take over from us.

This vision and reality were undermined by a combination of progressive myths, many of which have become so mainstream as to be unquestioned by the vast majority of Americans. Key, here, is the myth that large populations equal poor societies. From the observed fact that in large families each member tends to have fewer things for himself, millions of Americans conclude that abundant life kills abundance. But, first, on a social scale this is not true—societies need to grow in population to keep growing economically (and, as for the Green myths, we should keep in mind that 94.6% of America's land remains rural open space). Second, and more important, no

society can thrive or survive over time if material abundance is its only goal.

The prejudice against children begins from an immoderate desire for order. Order, the first need of all, is like all other goods in that it can be taken too far. And disgust with the intrinsic disorder of children (especially boys) takes this good to the point of denying the value of life itself. When one adds to this prejudice the social science myth that traditional societies remain poor because they include too many children, one gets a powerful argument against life. Some traditional societies are ruled by policies, such as subdividing inheritances and multiplying the obligations of family members, that do in fact discourage economic advancement. That said, however, contemporary policies in the West have gotten to the point of substituting the government for the family so thoroughly that they, too, have undermined entrepreneurship while having the further disadvantage of sapping the spirit out of communities and increasingly isolated individuals.

Traditional societies are poor for many reasons. They survive because their families remain strong. Modern societies, after decades relentlessly pursuing wealth, are becoming poorer, and increasingly have only the state to look to for "social" security. That state, while seemingly unstoppable in its growth and grasp for power, is running out of money and drowning in the bureaucratic red tape it uses to bind the rest of us to its will.

In addition, society itself is becoming increasingly disordered even as we in effect consume our children. As our middle class disappears, those children who do survive until birth are either palmed off to the state, then to drugs, technology, and further dependency, or put onto "the path to success" at the hands of various facilitating professionals who coddle them in a stress-filled manner creating sky-high suicide rates and the pathetically fragile creatures who

inhabit elite institutions of education. This is a society suffering from a veritable death wish, as those with the responsibility for raising responsible adults either eschew children altogether or abandon them to others while they pursue their own vision of personal success, treating spouses and children as mere accoutrements, consumer items made more precious by emotional attachments that, alas, are rooted in precious little practical experience at shaping lives and characters together.

It would be all too easy to throw up our hands and say that this is the inevitable route of decadent cultures, and especially of cultures rooted in the drive for economic well-being. While understandable, such a reaction would be misguided on several levels. First, material goods are in fact good. It is pursuing them for their own sakes, rather than as necessary but limited tools in building a good life for one's family, that is wrong. Moreover, the progress toward our atomistic society was not paved merely with greed, but more fundamentally with a revolt against nature. By this I mean not merely the rejection of traditional families and the necessary role of women as primary caregivers, but also rejection of men's obligation to marry, have children, and stay married, supporting their families in good times and bad.

Many public policies contributed to the downfall of the traditional family and its moral core of child rearing. From the nationalization and exponential expansion of social security and other welfare programs to the so-called professionalization of all kinds of local public services, the drive for uniform fairness and security has stamped out much of family and community's reason for being. But the essential problem goes deeper, for it is spiritual. A healthy, vibrant society requires citizens who see themselves as parts of things that are larger than themselves, in which they must play important, though rarely central roles. This means that families, churches, voluntary associations, and states are

part of a way of life. They are aspects of our nature as social beings.

When we ignore our social nature—or substitute mere political activism for community life—we may enjoy ourselves as flies of a summer, whether singly or in swarm-like mobs. More likely we will merely make ourselves miserable in pursuit of pleasures and honors of the moment that will never satisfy because they have no place in any larger order and so lack any intrinsic meaning or value. And so, no matter how many toys we accumulate before we die, we die fundamentally alone and unmourned, in a society that is dying, largely unnoticed even by its own members.

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