

SundayReview|OPINION

Bye-Bye, Baby

By MICHAEL S. TEITELBAUM and JAY M. WINTERAPRIL 4, 2014

NEARLY half of all people now live in countries where women, on average, give birth to fewer than 2.1 babies — the number generally required to replace both parents — over their lifetimes. This is true in Melbourne and Moscow, São Paulo and Seoul, Tehran and Tokyo. It is not limited to the West, or to rich countries; it is happening in places as diverse as Armenia, Bhutan, El Salvador, Poland and Qatar.

At just over two births per woman (down from nearly four in 1957 at the peak of the baby boom), the United States is more fertile than most other rich countries, like Germany and Japan. In large, emerging economies where labor is still relatively cheap — places like Brazil, Russia, Iran, much of southern India — fertility rates have steadily fallen since the 1980s. The working-age population in China, an economic miracle over the last 35 years, may have peaked in 2012, fueling planners' fears that China will grow old before it gets rich.

Very high national fertility rates have not disappeared, but they are now mostly concentrated in a single region: sub-Saharan Africa. Last year, all five countries with estimated total fertility rates (the average number of births per woman) at six or higher — Niger, Mali, Somalia, Uganda and Burkina Faso — were there. So were nearly all of the 18 countries with fertility rates of five or more (the exceptions were Afghanistan and East Timor).

Sub-Saharan Africa also makes up a substantial portion of countries with estimated fertility rates between three and four: Notable exceptions include Iraq, Jordan, the Philippines and Guatemala. Fertility rates just under three were reported in countries like Pakistan, Egypt, Haiti, Honduras and Bolivia.

THIS is news to many people, and also a source of alarm, even hysteria — mostly in the West. In his book, "What to Expect When No One's Expecting," Jonathan V. Last, a senior writer at The Weekly Standard, described a "coming demographic disaster" from "America's baby bust." Steven Philip Kramer, a professor at the National Defense University, says rich countries with low fertility should adopt "pronatalist" policies to close "the baby gap" and arrest a spiral of ever fewer workers supporting ever more retirees. Even the usually sober Economist recently warned about "the vanishing Japanese."

These dark prophecies have a long history, and they are as misguided as they are unoriginal. Theodore Roosevelt warned of Anglo-Saxon "race suicide" and, during the Depression, books like "Twilight of Parenthood" (1934) caught the Western public's imagination. After the powerful (and largely unanticipated) baby boom in the West, the chorus of calamity resumed. Dire Malthusian projections of mass starvation resulting from population growth outstripping the food supply — fear-

mongering briefly revived after the end of the baby boom by Paul R. Ehrlich's 1968 book, "The Population Bomb" — were discredited. But the march of fear continued, with evocatively titled books like "The Birth Dearth" (1987) and "The Empty Cradle" (2004).

Why do commentators, like Chicken Little, treat this worldwide trend as a disaster, even collective suicide? It could be because declines in fertility rates stir anxieties about power: national, military and economic, as well as sexual. Margaret Atwood's 1985 dystopian classic "The Handmaid's Tale," and the Mexican director Alfonso Cuarón's 2006 film "Children of Men," based on the P. D. James novel, are among the more artful expressions of this anxiety.

In reality, slower population growth creates enormous possibilities for human flourishing. In an era of irreversible climate change and the lingering threat from nuclear weapons, it is simply not the case that population equals power, as so many leaders have believed throughout history. Lower fertility isn't entirely a function of rising prosperity and secularism; it is nearly universal.

The new hand-wringing stems from a gross misunderstanding of the glacial nature of population change.

Even when the total fertility rate falls below 2.1 children, the "momentum" effects of earlier fertility trends will keep a population growing for many decades. In cases when the absolute size of a national population declines, the drop often turns out to be short-lived, and in aggregate numbers usually is so slight as to be of little significance.

THERE are exceptions, of course. After the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Russia experienced an unusual combination of rapid fertility decline to very low levels (falling to about 1.2 in 1999) coupled with remarkably high mortality for adult males — the latter largely attributable to alcohol abuse. This singular combination did produce a modest, and widely reported, decline in the Russian population. The Russian fertility rate has rebounded to just over 1.6, and mortality among working-age men has declined, perhaps because of concerted alcohol-regulation measures.

In nearly all countries that are not desperately poor, women of childbearing age inevitably compare the burdens of bearing children against the potential rewards. And in many of these countries, young women especially, but also young men, increasingly see marriage and childbearing as major risks, given high divorce rates and the responsibility to support aging parents, who are enjoying longer lives. The task of assessing these risks is heaviest for young adults (ages 20 to 35), who happen to be the same people who produce the most births in all societies. In Brazil, Italy, Turkey and the United States, these young adults must prepare for careers that now require extended years of higher education and, often, high levels of debt. Even with college degrees, employment is uncertain and career paths are increasingly unstable.

Meanwhile, dual-earner partnerships have become essential, in countries rich and poor alike, even as earnings have become increasingly precarious. High home prices and rents, along with limited access to mortgages, have restricted the ability to create the independent homes typically considered essential for new families.

Rapidly declining fertility — especially if rates go very low — does pose challenges. Yet it also can provide substantial benefits that have received less attention.

First, as noted, fertility decline is associated nearly everywhere with greater rights and opportunities for women. The deferral of marriage and the reduction of births to two, one or none across so much of the world — and, again, in countries that are still far from rich — are broadly consistent with the higher educational attainment and career aspirations of young women. It is no surprise that the hand-wringers over fertility decline are usually men.

Second, the work forces of societies with low-to-moderate fertility rates often achieve higher levels of productivity than do higher fertility societies. This is one reason China's economic growth far outstripped India's from 1970 to 2010 — a period when fertility declined rapidly in China (though only partly because of the one-child policy, now being relaxed) but did not decline as much in most of India.

Substantial fertility declines in southern India, notably in the state of Kerala, have been associated with significant economic and educational gains. It is not hard to figure out why. Children, teenagers and young adults are generally less productive than middle-aged workers with more experience, especially as employment in services rises and physical labor in agriculture and industry declines.

The fewer children who need primary and secondary education, the more resources there are that can be invested in higher-quality education per child — especially crucial for younger children — and in expanding access to higher and continuing education for teenagers and young adults.

Although China, in the early stages of its economic rise, benefited by tapping into a large pool of rural migrants moving to low-wage manufacturing jobs in towns and cities, the country is clearly trying to move rapidly (perhaps too rapidly) toward mass higher education, from which it anticipates rising productivity from a slower-growing but higher-paid work force.

Third, by enhancing the employment and career experiences of young adults, lower fertility can also bring about greater social and political stability. High-fertility societies commonly produce large numbers of young adults who have trouble finding productive employment — many experts have attributed everything from terrorism to the Arab Spring to this “youthquake” of disaffected young adults in the Middle East and North Africa — but this begins to change 20 to 30 years after fertility rates start to decline.

By then, young adults are no longer in great surplus relative to labor market demand; their relative economic value for employers begins to rise and their economic and career prospects improve. Over time, this should facilitate marriage and family formation.

It's true that in the United States — the world's largest economy for more than a century — younger workers face significant employment and career problems, which may partly be because of older workers' holding on to their jobs. The labor-force participation rate among older workers, especially older men, has increased over the last decade (but represents only a recent reversal). Indeed, the uptick may have something to do with improved health and productivity of older workers; the rise of service industries and the decline of manual-labor occupations; gradual but small increases in the Social Security retirement age; and the destructive effects of the financial crisis on the housing and retirement assets of many baby boomers. One cannot extrapolate a long-term trend from the last six years.

Finally, lower fertility rates may gradually reduce the incentives that have led a surprisingly large number of governments to encourage the emigration of their own young citizens, both to find work and send home hard-currency savings, as well as to remove them from potential political activism at home.

SUCH policies — sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit, but always accompanied by real ambivalence — can be seen in countries as diverse as Mexico, the Philippines, Bangladesh, Pakistan and India, as well as in many other countries in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. Out-migration as a way of life (and an instrument of national economic policy) has its limits.

Like all major social changes, the spread of low fertility poses challenges to established practices. Political systems that fail to adjust will predictably face vexing fiscal challenges, even crises. Generous public pension systems in Europe, with fewer younger adults employed and paying taxes while life expectancy at older ages rises, are a grave source of anxiety for members of the European Union. National leaders will have to decide whether the early retirement ages and high “wage replacement” payout rates of their pension systems, created decades ago under very different economic and demographic circumstances, can be adjusted to become sustainable over the long term.

There are, in fact, ways that low fertility can be moderated, or even reversed, over time. Indeed, this already has happened to modest degrees in some of the countries with the earliest fertility declines. Sweden and France were among the first European countries to experience low postwar fertility rates. Sweden's declined to about 1.6 in the 1970s and again in the 1990s, but has since rebounded to about 1.9, possibly because of a variety of support mechanisms for young families with children. In France, where public support for young families with children has been long-term public policy, fertility rates over the past half century did not decline as

much as in Sweden, and are now around two (about the same as in the United States). Part of the reason is that France provides subsidized day care for children, starting at 2 1/2 months. Fees are on a sliding scale based on family income. Other countries have been reconsidering traditional school schedules, such as half-days and early closing times that impose serious work-family conflicts for parents, and housing subsidies for young families.

The experience of places like Sweden and Russia suggests a modest recovery in fertility rates in countries where they have fallen to very low levels — rather than the “death spiral” feared by some commentators.

But with the global economy still quite fragile, it’s a safe bet that ominous jeremiads about endangered, geriatric societies will continue. Population doom of one kind or another is a recurring fad. Like most fads, this one can be safely ignored. Humanity has many legitimate problems to worry about. Falling fertility is not one of them.

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1. Thoroughly annotate.
 2. Complete SOAPSTone.
 3. Complete a reflection in which you incorporate the elements of your SOAPSTone analysis.