

The Decline of Births and the Transformation of All things

by George Friedman - May 7, 2021

The U.S. birth rate fell by 4 percent in 2020 compared to 2019, resulting in the lowest number of babies born since 1979. The fertility rate now stands at 1.64 births per woman, calculated over child-bearing years, which is the lowest since the 1930s when record-keeping began. To maintain the population level, American women need to average 2.1 births. To some extent, the decline is due to COVID-19, of course, but the bulk of babies born in 2020 were conceived prior to March, when the fury of the pandemic struck the United States.

The decline is the continuation of a massive shift in reproduction patterns. It is not unique to the United States. Birth rates started falling in Europe and in China (thanks to the one-child policy), but it is now a global phenomenon. Global population has not yet begun to fall, but the data shows that the advanced industrial world's population will begin contracting in the coming years, and population will stabilize in the poorer countries before declining.

I wrote about this in my book "The Next 100 Years," published in 2009, where I labeled it as the most significant social process facing the world. I argued there that the birth rate was falling because prior to the Industrial Revolution, children were valuable in helping to produce wealth and in guaranteeing parents would be looked after in their old age. Six-year-olds could weed vegetable gardens and plant food and, many years later, feed their aging parents, who had a life expectancy much lower than our own now. Children have become fiendishly expensive. A middle-class family in the city with a large number of children faces economic challenges, especially if the children intend to go to college. Oftentimes, the impulse to reproduce is tempered by economic reality.

That impulse has been hardwired into the human spirit by the power of sexual desire. And yet, a series of technical innovations – namely, contraception – have severed sexual impulse from reproduction. Those innovations, particularly the birth control pill, have had a radical impact on women's lives. My grandmother had 10 children. This wasn't an unusual number in her day. The production can be explained by economics and a lack of birth control, but never forget that money and lust, coupled with medical improvements that lowered infant mortality rates, drove the population explosion.

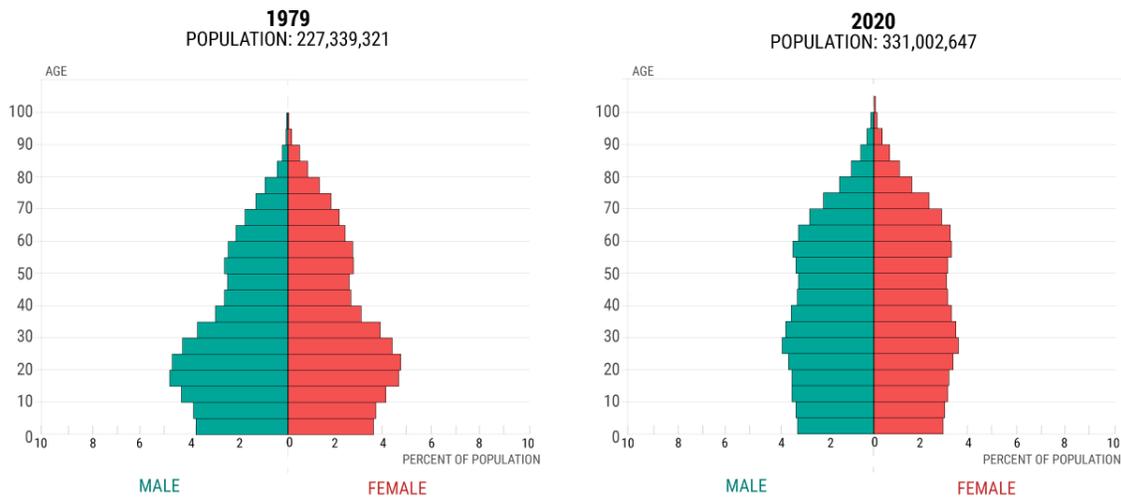
The cost of children imposed a self-limiting factor on reproduction without forcing us to suspend our psyches. This affected women's lives more than men's since unintended pregnancies were something for which women bore the brunt of the burden. Further technical innovations such as reusable bottles and baby formula meant that the father could share at least somewhat in nurturing the infant. The birth rate fell. But as important, the distinction between men and women narrowed. Women alone can bear children, but she now has control over whether and when this will happen, and the feeding of the infant can be transferred to others.

The economic imprudence of having children was controlled by technology instead of ineffective rules of celibacy. The experience of having children shifted to a small but significant extent. As being a woman became less grueling, the pattern of female life began to track with a male's. And this in turn created feminism, one of the most radical social shifts in human history. It took a relatively long time for reality to intrude on culture, but now the old role of women is seen as a form of discrimination imposed by men, instead of a necessity imposed by nature.

This is a vast experiment in the question of biological determinism. Women need not be turned into mothers by sexual desire. They do not have to engage in the intense nurturing of a newborn. The biological bond is broken. But does that change what Goethe called the eternal feminine and the eternal masculine? Can the transformation of a woman's role change a woman's psyche, or for that matter, does bearing the obligation of nurturing the child change not only the experience of a man but his psyche? With the birth rate plunging and gender norms converging, perhaps the greatest experiment in human history is taking place. The one thing a man can never do is become pregnant and experience what it means to give birth. Having been the helpless onlooker in such events, it does seem to transform life, but then the experience is no longer a byproduct of desire. For many, it's separate and therefore elective.

Not nearly as fascinating but still of interest is how a contracting population affects humanity as a whole. The dynamic of political life will obviously change. With life expectancy increasing from the same medical innovations that have redefined relations between men and women, there will be in the next couple of decades more people over the age of 60 than under. If democracy lasts as long, they will define the national agenda, very likely in their own interests, creating taxes that cripple the younger citizens and benefit the older. Moreover, the old will be decreasingly productive due to the many diseases of old age, and the cost of keeping them alive will stagger society.

United States Demographics, 1979 and 2020



Source: PopulationPyramid.net

Graphic redesign by Geopolitical Futures

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At this point, there is an affection for the elderly, particularly from their children, but since the elderly divert time and money, there is increasingly a sense of frustration. With the tilt in birth rates, many elderly will be without children. It will be the price they pay for the pleasure of having been free from responsibility. Their emotional and financial needs will be met wholly by the government, which is not so good at financial help and laughable at emotional help. In almost all traditional societies, the elderly are revered. What seems more likely in the future is that the elderly will be resented.

Of course, just as technological change transformed the lives of women, it might redefine the lives of the elderly. We hear rumors of extraordinary strides in medicine and in artificial intelligence. One might cure the miseries of old age, the other might maintain production without the need for a mass society. And one might add that the fear of global warming might subside with a smaller population.

The range of transformative possibilities contained in the decline of the birth rate is staggering. So is the opportunity for economic, cultural and social chaos. We have begun to feel the very earliest breakers on this beach, but clearly they will intensify. To my thinking, the issue of a shrinking population is the center of any imagining of the future.

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