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'Other People's Babies'

If the U.S. slipped into demographic decline like Japan, it would tear itself apart.



Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe with President Trump in West Palm Beach, Fla., Feb. 10.

PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS



By

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Japan is an excellent place to test the proposition that countries do better with low levels of immigration. In a land of 127 million people, there are just over two million foreign residents, and only a third of them are here for the long term. The number of illegal immigrants, which peaked at a modest 300,000 in the early 1990s, is down by 80%.

As for refugees, in 2016, Tokyo entertained 10,000 requests for asylum. It accepted a grand total of 28. Steve Bannon would smile.

The result, say immigration restrictionists, is plain to see. Japan's crime and drug-use rates are famously low. Life expectancy is

famously high. Japanese students put their American peers to shame on international tests. The unemployment rate clocks in at 3.1%. All this is supposed to be a function of a homogenous society with a high degree of cultural cohesion—the antithesis of cacophonous, multiethnic America.

Just one problem: The Japanese have lost their appetite for reproduction. To steal a line from Steve King, the GOP congressman from Iowa, the only way they can save their civilization is with “somebody else’s babies.”

Japan’s population shrank by nearly a million between 2010 and 2015, the first absolute decline since census-taking began in the 1920s. On current trend the population will fall to 97 million by the middle of the century. Barely 10% of Japanese will be children. The rest of the population will divide almost evenly between working-age adults and the elderly.

Imagine yourself as a 35-year-old Japanese salary man. You can expect that an ever-larger share of your paycheck will go to the government to fund the pensions and health care of your parents—who, at 70, can reasonably expect to live another 10 or 15 years, and who aren’t likely to vote for politicians promising to strip their entitlements.

Being Japanese, you were raised to make financial sacrifices for your elders, even if it means not having children of your own. Besides, it’s hard to want children with the economy in such bad shape. As Morgan Stanley’s Ruchir Sharma has noted, lousy demographics mean a lousy economy: The average rate of GDP growth in countries with shrinking working-age populations is only 1.5%. In 2016, Japan’s growth rate was 1%—and that was a relatively good year by recent standards.

What if the government paid you to have babies? Alas, along with millions of your countrymen, you suffer from what the Japanese call “celibacy syndrome” and aren’t interested in sex, never mind procreation. You’re also unhappy: In 2016, Japan ranked 53rd on the U.N.’s World Happiness Report, a notch above Kazakhstan but below El Salvador and Uzbekistan.

So Japan is in trouble, and the government knows it. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has tinkered with formulas to bring in lower-skilled temporary workers for housecleaning and farm jobs, and he has promoted various tax breaks and subsidies to ease the burden of raising children and caring for aging parents.

But whatever their other benefits, “pro-family” policies won’t reverse the demographic trend. Only large-scale immigration can do that, and the Japanese won’t countenance it. The flip side of cohesion is exclusion. The consequence of exclusion is decline.

Which brings us back to Mr. King and the U.S. immigration debates. A decade ago, America's fertility rate, at 2.12 children for every woman, was just above the replacement rate. That meant there could be modest population growth without immigration. But the fertility rate has since fallen: It's now below replacement and at an all-time low.

Without immigration, our demographic destiny would become Japanese. But our culture wouldn't, leaving us with the worst of both worlds: economic stagnation without social stability. Multiethnic America would tear itself to pieces fighting over redistribution rights to the shrinking national pie.

This doesn't have to be our fate. Though it may be news to Mr. King, immigrants aren't a threat to American civilization. They are our civilization—bearers of a forward-looking notion of identity based on what people wish to become, not who they once were. Among those immigrants are 30% of all American Nobel Prize winners and the founders of 90 of our Fortune 500 companies—a figure that more than doubles when you include companies founded by the children of immigrants. If immigration means change, it forces dynamism. America is literally unimaginable without it.

Every virtue has its defect and vice versa. The Japanese are in the process of discovering that the social values that once helped launch their development—loyalty, self-sacrifice, harmony—now inhibit it. Americans may need reminding that the culture of openness about which conservatives so often complain is our abiding strength. Openness to different ideas, foreign goods and new people. And their babies—who, whatever else Mr. King might think, are also made in God's image.

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