

# The Human Reality Behind the Border Crisis

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**I**n the background of the immigration debate looms a larger issue: the demographic transition—or collapse—underway in the

world's wealthy economies. Contrary to 60 years of dire Malthusian warnings about overpopulation, much of the world faces a precipitous birth shortage. Across the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development countries, fertility rates have fallen well below replacement level, usually considered an average of 2.1 children per woman. America's fertility rate now stands at 1.67.

Not only are people in wealthy economies having fewer children, they're also living longer. The share of the US population that is over age 65 is projected to grow steadily for at least the next four decades. Developed economies across the world are turning into geriatric wards in which there are literally too few young hands to empty the bed pans. Aging societies that can't produce enough young workers face long-term economic stagnation in the form of labor shortages, persistent inflation, sluggish growth, stalled innovation, and general decay.

Political economists from Karl Marx to Roberts Solow have noted that capitalist economic growth depends not only on factors like rising labor productivity and a robust rate of investment, but also on at least some population growth. Under capitalism, a national economy can't prosper if its population is stagnant or shrinking.

Like much of the United States, the New

England village where I live has a labor shortage, particularly in services. Two restaurants in the area have closed because the owners can't find enough workers. Enrollment at the local high school is half what it was three decades ago.

While not yet what geographers call a “naturally occurring retirement community” —a place where at least 50 percent of the population is over age 60—this town, like many others like it across the United States, Canada, Japan, and the European Union, is on its way.

It isn't entirely clear why birth rates in developed economies are so low. A big part of it is that the expense of childrearing in wealthy economies is causing a growing number of women to forgo reproduction entirely, while those who do have kids tend to do so later in life and then have fewer children than they had

wanted. The Pew Research Center found that 40 percent of American women “nearing the end of their childbearing years” reported having fewer children than they wanted. The findings for European women were similar. Alienation and the failure of people to couple up is part of the story. About a quarter of 40-year-old Americans aren't married and never have been; that's a marked increase over the recent past. Environmental toxicity and the rich world's “male fertility crisis” —so-called spermageddon —which has seen average sperm counts reduced by half during the last 50 years, probably doesn't help either.

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In response to collapsing birth rates, many wealthy economies have implemented pro-natalist policies. These help, but not very much. Poland's program of cash grants for children has boosted the birth rate a bit, as did a similar program in Norway. Hungary has managed to lift its birth rate to 1.6, up from 1.2, after considerable outlays. Generous pro-natalist provisions in France seemed to work for a stretch of years in the early 2010s during which the French fertility rate got very close to replacement level. However, those rates have since sunk back to only around 1.8 children per woman.

To really boost births, it seems that much more radical and comprehensive changes would be necessary. For women who want to be mothers to have more children and start doing so earlier, the landscape would have to be dotted with free, safe, inviting playgrounds and childcare facilities. Long and well remunerated maternity and paternity leave would need to be the norm. And every sort of professional training from trade schools to the basic four-year bachelor's degree to medical school would have to be recalibrated. Not only would family housing and free schooling likely be necessary, but perhaps mothers have to be given extra cost-free years to get through college—and respected for doing so. Who knows what kind of policies, and hefty fiscal costs, might emerge from robust pro-natalist experimentation.

Population growth across most of the Global South is also subsiding. Only Africa is projected to have steady population growth for the rest of the century. In the Global South, the decline of subsistence agriculture, in which children as young as 6 often contribute more to the family budget than they consume, plays an important role. But then there are cases like Nigeria, where more than 70 percent of the population depends on subsistence agriculture, yet population growth has peaked and begun to decline.

One thing is clear: Wealthy economies that can't produce children at the replacement rate face economic stagnation and decline.

Critics of immigration often portray newcomers as “stealing” jobs. But this argument incorrectly portrays the economy as having a static, preexisting, stock of jobs. In reality, the supply of jobs is more contingent and depends more upon the supply of workers than we often realize. After all, workers are also consumers, and all producers need consumers. Indeed, most people occupy multiple economic roles simultaneously. Most of us are workers, consumers, taxpayers, and savers; and many of us also play the role of investor and entrepreneur. Workers, be they immigrant or

native-born, never just “take” jobs. They also create employment through their consumption, tax-paying, saving, and, when things go well, also by investing and starting businesses.

In other words, you can manufacture all the widgets in the world, but if no one buys them, your firm goes under. One person’s wages are thus another person’s income when spent on groceries, and yet another person’s public roadway when spent as taxes. For a capitalist economy to thrive it needs not only workers, but consumers, taxpayers, savers, investors, and entrepreneurs. Even a fully socialist economy would need enough workers to take care of its non-working population. Collapsing birth rates across developed economies threatens all this.

Restrictionists have another argument against immigration, one they seem to have borrowed from the Europeans: culture and the idea of “the Great Replacement.” Immigrants are allegedly destroying “our” culture. They fail to assimilate and thus become something like a political fifth column. In many European countries, immigrants do

European countries, immigrants do seem to be isolated from the host cultures, and many of these countries don't have automatic universal birthright citizenship. But talk to any American expat or foreign-posted professional who has lived in Europe for a period of time, and you begin to suspect that the problem might be European culture, not immigrants.

Even in supposedly warm and effusive Italy, xenophobia is pervasive. An Italian-American friend of mine who has lived in Italy for 20 years and is now an Italian citizen describes himself as still feeling deeply alienated from the homeland of his grandparents.

“These people are totally uptight!” he laments. “The doctors and engineers all address each other by their titles when they socialize. Everyone is constantly busy with the family and the church. You can only be real friends with Italians if you went to grade school with them.”

An Afghan friend who found refuge in Sweden describes generous social programs that have allowed him to fully integrate into the Swedish economy. Language classes have made him fluent, therapy for his

made him fluent, therapy for his PTSD from working as a war reporter have brought him peace, and publicly funded training has allowed him to start a business as a landscaper and horticulturist. But he, his wife, and their kid have almost no social connections to native-born Swedes. His cousin, who lives in Nashville, Tenn., doesn't face this sort of barrier to social integration. "There's some kind of wall," he tells me. "Swedes just are not like Americans."

One hears similar stories from foreigners living in Germany, France, and Holland. This European cultural rigidity seems to produce real alienation between immigrant groups and the host culture.

Maybe it's because these Europeans lack the imprint of frontier culture, in which strangers clustered together out of desperation and necessity. Whatever the case, America doesn't isolate immigrant cultures; she eats them by the shovel full. America is the voracious assimilator, consuming wave upon wave of mass migration with barely a burp.

In America, immigrants don't threaten the culture. It is the other

**“Before long, the old cultures live on only as folkloric simulacra.”**



way around. Move to America and your old culture will be melted down and recycled. Before you know it, your kids speak nothing but English. Immigrants can even live clustered in a homogeneous ethnic enclave, but American acculturation still wins. Blame pop music, Hollywood, TV shows, public schooling, our automobile-dependent geography of vast spaces, multicultural workplaces, military service, and our sometimes comically high national self-regard—what Tocqueville called the “annoying” and “irritable patriotism of the Americans.” You think immigration threatens America? Well, then you obviously “mis-underestimate” the brute force of American culture.

Far from isolating immigrants and holding them back, on these shores, the old cultures disappear so fast, it is genuinely sad. The children of parents born in the highlands of Guatemala or Vietnam now ride skateboards, play video games, and then, to the horror of elders, marry Americans who are very often the monolingual English-speaking children of yet other immigrant cultures that have also succumbed to the relentless onslaught of

the relentless onslaught of Americanization. Before long, the old cultures live on only as folkloric simulacra, ersatz replicas deployed by the local chambers of commerce to draw in regional tourism.

Another argument against immigration suggests that immigrants don't appreciate their adopted country. Although academics and public opinion surveyors rarely ever research the political attitudes of the foreign-born as a distinct group, it is safe to assume that most immigrants are similar to the one group that has been surveyed about their attitudes about the United States, foreign-born Latinos. Pew has found that

large majorities of Latino immigrants say the United States has better opportunities to get ahead and is a better environment for raising children. Its health care and education are also highly rated. One of the only questions on which Latino immigrants rank their home countries as better is on the strength of families.

None of this is surprising, given the global geography of capitalism. Moving from a poor economy to a

wealthy economy is bound to bring massive opportunities.

As for the understudied political attitudes of immigrants, my informal conversations with immigrants over many years suggests that most of them are profoundly appreciative of American civil liberties and American political democracy. As fraught and frayed as those institutions might be, they still compare well to conditions in, say, Colombia, Ukraine, Egypt, Côte d'Ivoire, or Pakistan. In most countries of the Global South, the police are corrupt, violent, and operate with near total impunity. Even the worst police departments in the United States are tame by comparison; most immigrants seem acutely aware and appreciative of such differences.

As election-panicked Democrats increasingly imitate the anti-immigrant rhetoric of Republicans, the real nature of American immigration policy is once again laid bare. The goal is to have immigrants come, but then keep them terrorized and working as hard as possible for as little as possible. A clip of Milton Friedman was making the rounds on the internet in which he extols the

the interest in which he enjoys the economic benefits of “illegal immigration.” The free-market economist liked undocumented immigrants because they pay taxes but don’t necessarily receive services. Just as important but unmentioned by Friedman is that undocumented immigrants, lacking many political protections, are less likely to organize unions or go on strike. For the employer class, this is fantastic: Allow immigrants to help grow the economy, but don’t let them have a say in how the economic output is distributed.

Alas, the left response is mostly to cry for “open borders.” But this is an unrealistic, NGO-funded canard

that achieves little other than activist self-satisfaction. No state will simply open its borders. The essence of state power is to control territory.

Immigration reform based on the real political economy of immigration is necessary. Some sort of amnesty for America’s estimated 11 million long-term, law-abiding, hardworking, undocumented immigrants is desperately needed. Ronald Reagan was able to preside over such a deal; one would hope the current generation of politicians

current generation of politicians might try to match him.

Meanwhile, as the election heats up, Donald Trump and the Republicans escalate their anti-immigrant rhetoric. Given the socially and economically beneficial role played by immigrants and the fact that a great many American voters actually experience immigrants as a net positive force, I suspect this sort of gratuitous immigrant bashing—even as it riles up parts of the GOP base—might be electorally counterproductive. Trump recently had a higher favorability rating among Latinos than did Biden; 1 in 4 Latino voters is said to know someone who is at risk of deportation. Why alienate these people?

More importantly, none of the current rhetoric will change the underlying economic and demographic realities. In the face of falling birth rates and an aging population, we remain politically unable to imagine transformative pro-natalist policies because those would likely threaten the prerogatives of big business while requiring cuts to the military budget

and tax increases on the rich. Under such conditions, immigration becomes a social and economic imperative. America isn't doing charity work by accepting immigrants. Quite the opposite, the national economy benefits from immigration.

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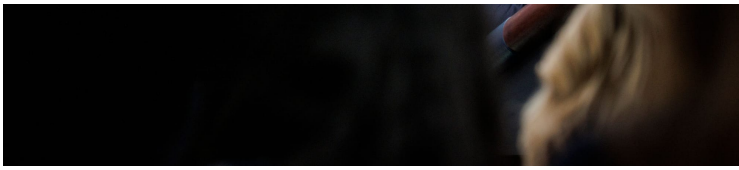
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