

The New Biopolitics

How individual reproductive choices made around the world can destabilize the global economy and threaten our security—and what we can do about it.

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ill globalization destroy itself? Every few years, another crisis suggests it might. The Internet, satellite phones, and intercontinental air travel help terrorists cross the world in an instant. The global spread of democracy shakes authoritarian governments—and opens the way for Islamists in Tehran and Cairo, a populist strongman in Venezuela, and nuke-happy nationalists in New Delhi. Open capital markets wreck the economies of Southeast Asia. Divisions between Muslim immigrants and the rest of Europe explode in French riots and Dutch assassinations.

These unhappy stories are familiar by now. An open, mobile, interconnected world creates new threats, or amplifies familiar ones, and countries throw up new borders in self-defense. The uncertainties of political and personal freedom make invented traditions seductive: pure Islamic states, India for the Hindus, premodern idylls available for free download.

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But, along with electronic commerce, transnational fanaticism, and increasingly fluid borders, there is a missing piece in the current picture of globalization, one that puts the familiar paradoxes in a new light: biopolitics, the politics of human life and reproduction. Around the world, people are taking control of childbearing in new ways, which could produce serious consequences for global politics. In Europe, Russia, Japan, and South Korea, women are having too few children to sustain the current population. A shrinking workforce means too few taxpayers to support the next generation of retirees. The only obvious solution is greatly expanded immigration—which, recall, is already the source of riots, xenophobia, and deep political anxiety. All this threatens a perfect political storm of bankrupt welfare states, struggles over immigration, and crises of national identity. Meanwhile, in India, China, Taiwan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, a very different problem is growing. Abortion of female fetuses, along with other causes, has produced a population with roughly 100 million more men than women—men who are a prime constituency of extremist political movements in that volatile part of the world.

The demographic crises of globalization express a deep, troubling question. The crises emerge from hundreds of millions of free choices that earlier generations could not make: whether and when to bear children, and which children to bear. In other words, the two demographic crises express a dramatic new form of freedom, part of the unprecedented control people have gained over their lives in the several centuries of the liberal, modern experiment. The question is whether we have gained more freedom than we can handle. Liberal modernity is all about expanding human freedom, not so much in the mystic chords of George W. Bush's foreign-policy speeches as in the expanding realm of personal choice. Communication and mobility make traditions optional, not mandatory—by moving, or just watching and listening and mimicking, people decide who they will be as never before in history. And, as ideas and desires expand, technology increases our power to make wishes come true: hopping around the world, meeting a partner from another continent, choosing the most promising of a dozen embryos or 3,000 sperm donors. None of this has to be forced on us; people run headlong toward every one of these new choices.

Technology, with the liberal international economy that ensures its rapid spread, has made all this possible. But technology doesn't care whether you use it for an anti-landmine campaign or to wreck world climate and vaporize a neighboring country. It is as benign or destructive as the wishes it makes true. And free choice often turns out to be more choice than people want. Modern democracy is the great marketplace of easy answers to hard questions: nationalism, fundamentalism, and any other halfway believable story about how the

world makes more sense than in fact it does. Critics of freedom and democracy have always argued that people are too selfish, frightened, and confused to bring these hopeful principles to life. The last several hundred years have been a test of the question, with mixed evidence—good results from North America and the last 60 years of European history, disasters in Europe between 1914 and 1945, and Russia, alas, showing that no system, from monarchy to authoritarianism to democracy, is guaranteed to work. Globalization takes the same question to a new scale.

Do the biopolitical crises of Europe and Asia suggest that globalization makes the pessimists' argument? Is control over reproduction more freedom than we can handle, a kind of private selfishness that undermines politics and public institutions? Maybe. The answer will depend mostly on the intelligence and boldness of the political response. A pure *laissez-faire* approach to biopolitical problems might well mean a broken Europe, an inflamed Asia, and a failed globalization. On the other hand, a takeover of reproductive choices by the state might mean an even worse outcome, a return to the disastrous eugenic policies of twentieth-century totalitarianism. However, a political response that enhanced rather than cut back the personal freedom that drives the new biopolitics would make globalization fairer and more humane than it is now. And innovative financial arrangements could link the biopolitical fates of regions in a new model of an international and intergenerational bargain that would pave the way toward a governable globalization for mutual benefit.

The Biopolitical Atlas

Three biopolitical regions are emerging in the twenty-first century. First is an axis of inequality, including India, China, Taiwan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and parts of nearby East and Central Asia, which now have approximately 105 men per 100 women, with ratios among younger cohorts running as high as 118:100. Second is an axis of decline, sweeping in almost all of Europe along with Japan and South Korea, where fertility rates—the average number of children born to an adult woman—are well below the replacement rate of 2.1 required for a stable population. In a third group of countries, fertility presently hangs around the replacement rate: the United States, major Latin American countries like Brazil, Argentina, and Chile, and even giant Indonesia are all somewhere in this band.

THE MISSING WOMEN AND SURPLUS MEN

What do people in modernizing cultures do when they take reproduction out of the realm of luck and nature and put it under self-conscious control? In much of Asia, the answer has turned out to be that they have sons. For those condi-

tioned by U.S. abortion politics to think of reproductive choice as always and entirely pro-woman, this is a disconcerting irony. Even more troubling is that millions of individual reproductive choices produce a massive demographic distortion—scores of millions of men with no one to court, love, or marry.

Nobel laureate Amartya Sen first drew attention to what he called “missing women” in 1990. Sen estimated a worldwide deficit of 100 million women relative to the natural distribution of sexes at birth. Although later research has adjusted his estimates modestly downward, the phenomenon has only accelerated. Official Chinese statistics now put the ratio of boys to girls under age six at 119:100. In India, the sex ratio at birth now approaches 114:100.

Observers have offered a number of competing explanations for Asia’s sex ratios, including poor official record-keeping (suggesting the numbers may be a mirage) and the biological tendency of both improved maternal nutrition and hepatitis B infection to increase the share of male fetuses surviving to term. None is nearly adequate to explain Asia’s dramatic numbers, however (in particular, the reported share of males has increased even as public statistics have improved and hepatitis B prevalence has

fallen). And, in any case, although reliable figures are hard to come by, no one seriously disputes that sex-selective abortion and a bias toward sons in feeding and medical care contribute a great deal to Asia’s sex ratios.

Increases in the share of young men in the population have come with diffusion of inexpensive techniques for prenatal sex-identification. While aborting fetuses based on sex has been illegal in India since 1994, enforcement relies mainly on voluntary reporting by prenatal clinics and is all but meaningless. The first criminal sentence handed out under the act was in March 2006, and there are presently 37 criminal actions in process in a country of more than one billion people. Indian ads for prenatal sex-determination (which are technically illegal under the same law) trumpet how much less the procedure costs than a daughter’s dowry—a clear reference to the motive of ensuring that a family has sons. A study in one hospital in India’s Punjab state found in the 1980s and 1990s that almost 14 percent of mothers of sons admitted having sexed their fetuses—with reticence that may suggest underreporting. The comparable figure for mothers of girls was 2 percent. Presumably, the rest of the female fetuses were aborted.

The preference for sons in Asia has several interwoven sources. One is the cultural esteem given boys, men, and the parents of boys in societies where

Around the world, people are taking control of childbearing in new ways, which could produce serious consequences for global politics.

women's positions remain pervasively inferior. Another is economic: parents rely heavily on their children for retirement, and men's lifetime earnings remain much higher than those of women. China's one-child policy, which is strictly enforced in cities and often caps rural families at two children, intensifies both motives by raising the stakes of each birth. A daughter under those circumstances is not merely the first child, but *the* child.

Besides overwhelming sexual inequality, there is another problem with missing women: surplus men. For every absent 10 million women, there are 10 million men who will never marry and consequently will miss the main pathway to adult social integration. Unmarried men tend to unemployment, violent crime, and drug and alcohol abuse, and toward subcultures built around these. If they avoid these problems, they often swell the ranks of the army—a potential source of instability in politically volatile societies. Most significantly, single young men are the prime recruitment targets of extremist political movements, from Hindu nationalists to Islamist cells. Those movements give the shiftless something to do and, often, material support to do it. They give displaced and disrespected men recognition and status. Their ideologies, built around clashes of good and evil with their own cadres in the vanguard, insert an element of heroism into disappointing lives. Marches, riots, and even terrorism offer violent adventure to restless spirits. When a general in the military of the Palestinian Authority sketched the social profile of a suicide bomber for terrorism expert Jessica Stern, he described a surplus man: “He can’t find a job. He has no options and there is no social safety net to help him. . . . He has no girlfriend or fiancée. . . . he has no money to go to the disco and pick up girls (even if that were acceptable). . . . Marriage is not an option—it’s expensive and he can’t even take care of his own family.”

The next few decades look to be particularly sensitive ones for the politics of the countries with the largest numbers of surplus men. Pakistan's fragile authoritarian regime may or may not keep at bay Islamist forces that can expect to find their hardest men among the surplus males. While India's nationalists have a mainstream face that substantially kept control during the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s recent time in power, they also encompass large paramilitaries and thug bands that have led genocidal riots against Muslims. Even in government, the BJP has sometimes pressed an illiberal and aggressive form of nationalism, hostile to Muslims at home and obsessed with standing up to Muslim Pakistan. Fast-growing and restive China is a political black box at present. No outside observer knows how the country's political establishment will fare with its ideological cocktail of nationalism, residual socialist rhetoric—and that essential fortification, economic growth. An economic crash, an open

clash among a political elite that has been remarkable for its unified public face, or a confrontation with Taiwan could inspire political appeal to popular nationalist sentiment: then the “bare branches,” as China calls its surplus males, could become a critical constituency.

FALLING FERTILITY IN THE NORTH

What do people in developed countries do when they take conscious control of reproduction? In Europe and much of North Asia, they stop reproducing. Or, more exactly, they have so few children that the population, after centuries of fairly rapid expansion, stabilizes and begins to shrink. Italy’s fertility rate now stands at 1.28 children per woman, Germany’s at 1.32, and Japan’s at 1.33. Italy is typical of the Mediterranean countries—Spain comes in a bit lower at 1.27—while Germany’s neighbor Poland manages only 1.26. France and the Nordic countries are much more fertile, but still range between 1.64 (Sweden) and 1.87 (France).

Welfare states that depend on growing, or at least constant, populations are suddenly in serious jeopardy as relatively small numbers of current workers struggle to support their parents’ larger (and now longer-living) cohort in its retirement. This, too, is unsettling to people who learned to think about reproductive politics in the United States, where we tend to regard childbearing decisions as a matter of personal morality. When millions of individual choices produce demographic shifts with major consequences for public institutions, the personal becomes political in a way that the feminists who coined that slogan would hardly have imagined.

And this political crisis does begin with the personal. Europe’s declining fertility rates express changing priorities and ideas about the good life. Fertility has fallen as Europeans have put more emphasis on personal growth, the exploration of identity deep into adulthood, and nontraditional intimate relationships; fewer have chosen the traditional course of early marriage followed by childbearing. The wave of falling fertility has moved south in the last five decades, accompanying growing adherence to the “post-traditional” values that emphasize rich personal experience over customary roles and responsibilities. Even within countries, fertility is higher among traditionalists, lower among post-traditionalists. Reports from Japan suggest that an intense consumer culture and a cult of childhood have played a similar role there.

The difficulty for Europeans is a blown-up version of the familiar “baby bust” that promises to intensify the Social Security crunch in the United States. Falling fertility rates will not soon mean an absolute decline in population, although demographers predict that the populations of Italy, Germany, Japan,

and Korea will slip by 2050. They do, however, mean relatively large cohorts of retirees will share those countries with relatively small populations of employed adults. That translates into a high “dependency ratio,” the share of the population that does not work but depends on the productivity of others for its income. The share of Europeans eligible for pensions is expected to rise from 35 per 100 working-age adults today to 75 per 100 workers in 2050, with one-to-one ratios in Italy and Spain. Those figures represent a cruel drag on a productive economy. The European Commission estimates that pension and health care payments to retirees may drive up public spending by five to eight percentage points of GDP by 2040, crowding out productive investments.

If this were merely a technical problem, it would already be a technocrat’s nightmare. Unhappily, rising dependency ratios threaten political consequences

that go far beyond managing deficits, into the shadow regions of European nationalism and xenophobia. The post-World War II social democratic order in Europe rests on strong social guarantees: employment protection, health care, and pensions. It is now clear that these guarantees were haunted all along

Rising dependency ratios threaten political consequences that go far beyond managing deficits.

by problems of efficiency and budget constraints—although those might be surmountable on their own terms. The subtler taint on the European social order was its implicit reliance on ethnic sameness, the premise that the benefits one paid for in taxes would go to people like oneself. This interlacing of ethnic solidarity with public spending reached its apogee in West Germany’s nearly crippling decision to absorb the former East Germany, extending one of the world’s strongest economies and most generous welfare states to a dysfunctional authoritarian society. The European problem with immigration is not only racism or incompetence at managing assimilation, but also the fact that joining a European polity brings a hefty batch of entitlements, which Europeans balk at extending to new arrivals.

Paradoxically and perhaps tragically, the only straightforward way to ease the shock to Europe’s social spending is a massive increase in immigration, importing working-age taxpayers to reduce the dependency ratio and support retired Germans and Italians. Yet Europe seems less able to handle immigration sanely than to take on just about any other problem: the riots that locked down French cities and spread to other parts of the continent last fall were only the visible edge of a continent-wide discomfort that led the Rand Corporation’s European division to conclude that “the sheer numbers of immigrants that

are needed to prevent population aging in the EU and its member states are not acceptable in the current socio-political climate.” Even if Europeans managed to press past their ethnocentric politics, it is not clear that new citizens would vote to keep supporting aged Europeans to whom they felt limited allegiance—or that native-born Europeans, retired or otherwise, would endorse anything like the current level of social guarantees for the increasingly diverse working population as it aged.

THE AMERICAN ODDITY

The remarkable thing about the United States, in the midst of the world’s biopolitical crises, is how well our lack of a population policy works. Although politically embattled, abortion is widely available, along with a sophisticated array of birth-control techniques and technologies for all manner of prenatal screening. We enjoy as much power as Europeans to enforce our preferences for long childhoods, longer adolescences, and freedom to explore our own personalities and intimate relationships rather than change diapers and break up toddler fights. Yet the fertility rate of native-born Americans is just slightly below the replacement rate, and higher rates among immigrants keep the country’s overall fertility above replacement level. Although our Social Security system needs fixing, its demographic stresses are within reason: in 2050, demographers predict, the average American will be 36, compared with the average European, who will be 52. Those are different universes for pension policy.

We also have far more power than most Indians or Chinese to select among embryos to avoid disfavored traits and try to give an advantage to the children we bring to term, much to the alarm of conservative social critics who have predicted that a *laissez-faire* eugenics will result. But there is no evidence yet of any systemic distortions in the children Americans choose to bear: by and large we—like the Europeans—love, or at least live with, the children we have, and we do not try to ensure in the womb that we get children we will love.

What works for us highlights basic differences between the United States and Europe. If the United States were less immigrant-friendly, our native-only demographics would resemble those of France—although our birthrate would still be higher than the French rate and much higher than those of Germany, Italy, and other low-fertility societies. On the one hand, the demographic advantage of immigration rewards an American virtue that many commentators pointed out after last year’s French riots: a flexible and inclusive idea of national identity that makes room for just about anyone who is willing to “act American,” which means holding a job, raising a family, participating in consumer culture, speaking English, and expressing patriotism. That is a much

looser standard than the language-and-culture essentialism that has replaced blood and soil in European national identity. On the other hand, the contrast with Europe is a reminder that American membership guarantees very little: limited health care, expensive higher education, no permanent support for poor families or the unemployed. As a matter of fiscal accounting, the American friendliness to immigrants comes cheap, welcoming low-wage and usually eager workers with strictly limited rights to social support. An immigrant may take your job, which is the crux of resentment in the rural and working-class populations that are least welcoming to immigrants, but there is not much more he can take from you.

Dysfunctional Globalization—and a Solution

Taken as a whole, global demographic trends portend a dysfunctional world order. The threats to U.S. interests are at least two. The first is a weak and politically fractious Europe, its attention focused inward on fiscal crises and immigration conflicts, its resources drained by pension and health care payments, its population old and tired. If this were 1900, with Europe the world's main source of instability and imperial adventure and the leading competitor to U.S. power, that might be a cause for relief. In this century, though, despite recent (and narcissistic) attention to trans-Atlantic differences, the United States and Europe are allies almost perforce: Europe is the one other region of the world stably committed to liberal democracy, human rights, and some version of lawful international order. It is also massively weakened in international affairs, relative to its population and wealth, by its relentless attention to internal and neighborhood problems attendant on the ambitious project of uniting the continent.

A Europe that could put its own house more or less in order would be a major force for orderly international relations as it and the United States enter an inevitable decline relative to newly rich and powerful countries elsewhere. A Europe too distracted by its own failures to act effectively abroad would leave the United States alone to try to manage the transition to a multipolar world—a task we have so far engaged in fecklessly and with some disastrous results, such as the Iraq war, which a stronger European partner might save us from repeating.

The other threat is more dramatic. India is now a relatively liberal and stable nuclear power, however unsettling the nationalist undercurrents of its politics. China is a more or less reliable rational actor in international affairs, however shaky its internal ideological consensus. Imagine an India that more closely resembled Pakistan: a country with an illiberal and undemocratic government

hemmed in by extremists who, if they came to power, would take its politics in a scarier direction still. India approached that level of domestic repression and international paranoia when Indira Gandhi assumed emergency powers in the 1970s, a time when nationalist forces were much less politically developed than today. If that scenario still seems a stretch, then instead imagine either India or China in the grip of nationalist fervor strong enough to produce disruptive foreign adventures. Those scenarios do not require much imagination: a Chinese government willing to satisfy widespread popular sentiment by invading Taiwan, or an India determined to deal once and for all with Pakistan, is hardly more fantastic than, say, a U.S. government willing to settle old scores and indulge ideological visions by launching a unilateral invasion and occupation of Iraq. While the United States undertook its disastrous adventure only when the politics of September 11 and the Bush Administration's fixation on Iraq combined to overcome popular skepticism about war abroad, China and India may be carried forward on waves of popular sentiment.

LAISSEZ-FAIRE AND THE BARGAIN MODEL

One element of globalization is the worldwide spread of modernity—mobility, individual choice, uncertainty about what kind of life to lead, and technology that gives new power to human desires. The demographic gap between men and women in Asia arises from the technology of modernity operating in the absence of the cultural values that modernity has brought in the North Atlantic: above all, egalitarian individualism, in which men and women share in reproductive decisions and, much of the time, women make the final choice. Instead, the power to control reproduction now operates in settings where women are devalued and profoundly disadvantaged. How people use the technology reflects these inequalities. The problem of missing women and surplus men comes from an uneven spread of freedom, in which women exercise new choice in hierarchical and oppressive situations—choices made in corners, you might say. The more real control women exercise over all dimensions of their lives, the more likely it is that they will raise daughters in place of sons, pushing the demographic balance back into place. There is even evidence that the more power women have, the less likely a society is to tilt toward authoritarianism. In this respect, if there is a paradox in modern freedom, the answer is to become even freer.

But how do we get from here to there? The problem is familiar: globalization increases overall wealth and overall choice, but often in ways that produce social and economic disruption, political conflict, and terrible paradoxes like the missing women. Some of this is inevitable in an imperfect world; but part

of the reason we have politics, rather than only markets, is to try to manage the gains, harms, and dangers of sweeping change. Is there a way to balance the effects of globalization without curtailing its benefits? And does biopolitics suggest part of an answer?

Take Europe's demographic, fiscal, and immigration crises as a starting point. Two major features of globalization, capital movement and labor migration, are partly responses to differences in wage rates across nations. Those rates reflect, among other things, the ratio of capital to labor in each economy, with employers in high-capital countries paying more for relatively scarce labor and plentiful labor taking low wages in low-capital countries. In a borderless world where the cost of migration were zero, workforces would rearrange themselves—as capital has begun to do—until a single, global wage prevailed in each industry. If Europe did liberalize immigration, that move would enable workers in low-wage countries to take advantage of high European wages. Immigrant workers would drag European wages down somewhat, but with the offsetting benefit of increasing the working population paying into pension systems.

But Europe is not likely to liberalize immigration radically, and if it did, the political results might be ugly. Is there is a way to get some of the same benefits without moving people across borders? The best chance of doing so would be an example of what, drawing on proposals by Yale economist Robert Shiller, I call the bargain model of globalization: the use of international, market-based arrangements to manage the costs and benefits of economic integration.

Imagine a contract in which the governments of Germany, Japan, and Italy agreed to subsidize investments in education, public health, and infrastructure in India and China. In return, the Indian and Chinese governments would commit a share of future GDP to subsidize the public pension plans of the investor countries as their dependency ratios rise. The effect would be international and intergenerational burden-sharing that acknowledged and addressed what each region lacks. Today's rising generation in developing countries would get some of the public-investment benefits of living in a capital-rich society, by way of investments from such societies. Tomorrow's retirees would then harvest some of the benefits of living in a country with a large and dynamic working-age population, without actually living in such a country.

A bargain like this one would have some of the virtues of a market arrangement. No party would enter if it didn't expect to wind up better off as a result. The payments would reflect the best available judgments about the economic and demographic prospects of each country. There would be incentive for inclusion: a contract that included India, China, Thailand, Indonesia, and others would spread risk and increase the likelihood of an adequate payoff.

This bargain could also fit into a strategy for women's empowerment: properly targeted, the public investments in the first stage could do a lot for women's literacy, access to family planning, job training, and other aspects of sexually egalitarian development. Such investments would help women in developing countries push back against their increasingly male-dominated societies: skills and employment give women control of resources and an exit option from the family. Literacy also brings women into contact with a broad world of aspirations and ideas about what they might do and who they might be. Globalization that equalizes power in economic, social, and intimate life is less likely to produce perverse results like the problem of missing women. There is also some evidence—far from conclusive, but still provocative—that women's empowerment is good for democracy. Political scientist M. Steven Fish has found that indicators of women's status, particularly literacy and employment, correspond to democratic political culture as measured by the research organization Freedom House, even adjusting for the well-recognized correlation between democracy and social and economic development. Another political scientist, Karen Stenner, reports that susceptibility to authoritarian political appeals is highest worldwide among people with a hierarchical view of family structure, suggesting a link between the way intimate decisions are made and the way political culture develops.

CAN IT WORK?

There is nothing novel in a bargain model of globalization except the size of the bargains. From health insurance to mutual funds, modern social life rests on complex markets in risk that distribute the impact of costs and benefits that we cannot individually control. These are among the most humane features of market life: voluntary, mutually advantageous devices to check some of the arbitrariness of luck. A bargain model of globalization would extend the logic of voluntarily sharing costs and benefits to countries undergoing one of the most disruptive transformations in world history.

Other trial runs for a bargain model might include a similar arrangement between the United States and India. Imagine if the money sunk into the Iraq adventure had gone instead to the front end of a bargain that purchased medium-term payments into Social Security, beginning 25 years out, taken from India's current 7 percent annual growth. Another frontier for a bargain model of globalization is environmental policy. Treating the tropical forests that sequester carbon dioxide and release oxygen as global public goods requiring subsidy if they're to be kept at an adequate level would give rich nations reason to pay Brazil, Indonesia, and other tropical countries to preserve them.

Schemes like this are not novel, of course; but as global warming becomes impossible to ignore, they will grow more salient. The best thing we can do for them now is to pioneer the bargain model elsewhere, treating it as a step-by-step experiment in a changeable agenda.

New biopolitical crises are reminders of not-so-new truths: change has unexpected consequences, and the massive changes of globalization and modernity carry some potential disasters. They also bring the chance to look at economic integration and development with new emphases on women's empowerment and the search for mutually advantageous ways of managing globalization. They are reminders of growing international interdependence, which means both vulnerability and opportunity. That should not be a surprise. The inconvenient fact that we are all in this together is the starting point for what Tocqueville called the American contribution to modernity and what might now be our best contribution to globalization: self-interest, rightly understood. ■