

Prosperity Through Timeless Values

Dr. Jennifer Roback Morse • Your Coach for the Culture Wars



THE EMPTY EUROPEAN VILLAGE

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Do countries with sub-replacement fertility need more government support, or less?

It Takes a Village to Raise a Child,” was Hillary Clinton’s Big Idea in the 1990s. Hillary’s supporters and detractors alike regard that slogan as a thinly-veiled code for increasing the government’s responsibility for the care of children. The demographic decline of Europe illustrates what would happen if we took this Village-Raising-Children image seriously.

The State Village takes over a substantial portion of the economic responsibility for the family, regardless of the marital status of parents. As state support becomes more significant, the mutual support of family members becomes less important. Parents no longer feel the need to marry each other, or even cooperate with each other. The state replaces the married couple as the primary support for children. And as a not-so-unintended consequence, state-funded child-care frees women from child-care responsibilities inside the home so they can work outside the home.

Welfare state advocates on both sides of the pond are quick to point out the benefits of state support. But let’s look at the cost side of the equation.

A recent report by the family-friendly Madrid-based Institute for Family Policies reports the broad European demographic trends. The number of marriages has dropped precipitously since 1980.

The percentage of children born outside marriage has increased to one third. More children are born outside of marriage than inside marriages in Estonia, Sweden, Bulgaria and France. Divorce rates have soared.

The birth rate in the 25 countries of the European Union is now 1.56 live births per female, while in the US the birth rate is 2.09, right around the replacement fertility rate of 2.1. Some countries are at critically low levels: Slovakia, Poland, and Romania have birth rates less than 1.3, with Germany at 1.32. In the absence of immigration, the population of these countries will drop in half approximately every generation.

The fall in marriage and fertility may seem like abstract numbers on the chalk-board. So let’s take a look at the human face of these demographic trends. Even with government support, raising a child alone is a daunting prospect. Women who would want three children if married, are understandably reluctant to try to care for more than one child on their own. When a woman believes her marriage may not last, she will, quite reasonably, want to establish herself professionally before having children. Instead of being married to her child’s father, a woman in a divorce-prone culture is married to a combination of the market and the state.

The average woman’s age at first marriage has increased from 23 in 1980 to almost 29 in 2005. Not all those women are living celibate lives. Some are sexually active in situations that can not possibly support a pregnancy. Nearly one out of every five pregnancies ends in abortion, making it the leading cause of death in the European Union. The number of abortions across Europe each year equals the entire population of Slovenia.

One out of every four European households is a lone individual. Two out of three households have no children. Half of European children have no siblings. So much for the Fraternity part of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity.

Unfortunately, the Institute for Family Policies recommends more of the same, failed welfare state policies. Steve Mosher, president of the US-based Population Research Institute, has a different approach. “Not one of the schemes adopted by the European countries has succeeded in recovering the birth rate to replacement. Why?” he asks rhetorically in his new book, *Population Control: Real Costs, Illusory Benefits*.

“Statist solutions will not solve the problem of the empty cradle, for it is the modern welfare state itself that relentlessly suppresses fertility. By its very existence, it discourages the formation of the very kind of strong, independent families that are necessary for robust fertility by fracturing the intergenerational dependency of the family, by adopting ‘gender-neutral’ policies that undermine the complementarity that is at the heart of successful marriage, by providing abortion on demand, by mandating sex education for children, by pushing state-funded contraception schemes on teenagers and young adults, and above all, by high tax rates.”

I think Mosher is correct. The statist Village has sucked the life out of marriage, which just happens to be the one self-sustaining institution that can oppose the pretensions of the state to control all of social life.

The European experience demonstrates that the Village needs the family far more than the family needs the Village.

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