

The End of Babies

By Anna Louie Sussman Nov. 16, 2019

Something is stopping us from creating the families we claim to desire. But what?





Illustration by Jun Cen

In the fall of 2015, a [rash of posters](#) appeared around Copenhagen. One, in pink letters laid over an image of chicken eggs, asked, "Have you counted your eggs today?" A second — a blue-tinted close-up of human sperm — inquired, "Do they swim too slow?"

The posters, part of a campaign funded by the city to remind young Danes of the quiet ticking of their biological clocks, were not universally appreciated. They drew criticism for equating women with breeding farm animals. The timing, too, was clumsy: For some, encouraging Danes to make more babies while television news programs showed Syrian refugees trudging through Europe carried an inadvertent whiff of ugly nativism.

Dr. Soren Ziebe, former chairman of the Danish Fertility Society and one of the brains behind the campaign, believes the criticism was worth weathering. As the head of Denmark's largest public fertility clinic, Dr. Ziebe thinks these kinds of messages, fraught as they are, are sorely needed. Denmark's fertility rate has been below replacement level — that is, the level needed to maintain a stable population — for decades. And as Dr. Ziebe points out, the decline is not solely the result of more people deliberately choosing childlessness: Many of his patients are older couples and single women who want a family, but may have waited until too late.

But the campaign also notably failed to land with some of its prime targets, including Dr. Ziebe's own college-age daughter. After she and several classmates at Copenhagen University interviewed him for a project on the campaign, Dr. Ziebe sought answers of his own.

"I asked them, 'Now, you know — you have gained a lot of information, a lot of knowledge. What are you going to change in your own personal lives?' he said. He shook his head. "The answer was 'Nothing.' Nothing!"

If any country should be stocked with babies, it is Denmark. The country is one of the wealthiest in Europe. New parents enjoy 12 months' paid family leave and highly subsidized day care. Women under 40 can get state-funded in vitro fertilization. But Denmark's fertility rate, at 1.7 births per woman, is roughly on par with that of the United States. A reproductive malaise has settled over this otherwise happy land.

It's not just Danes. Fertility rates have been dropping precipitously around the world for decades — in middle-income countries, in some low-income countries, but perhaps most markedly, in rich ones.

Declining fertility typically accompanies the spread of economic development, and it is not necessarily a bad thing. At its best, it reflects better educational and career opportunities for women, increasing acceptance of the choice to be child-free, and rising standards of living.

At its worst, though, it reflects a profound failure: of employers and governments to make parenting and work compatible; of our collective ability to solve the climate crisis so that children seem a rational prospect; of our increasingly unequal global economy. In these instances, having fewer children is less a choice than the poignant consequence of a set of unsavory circumstances.

Decades of survey data show that people's stated preferences have shifted toward smaller families. But they also show that in country after country,

actual fertility has [fallen faster](#) than notions of ideal family size. In the United States, the gap between how many children people want and how many they have has widened to a 40-year high. In a report covering 28 countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, women reported an average desired family size of 2.3 children in 2016, and men wished for 2.2. But few hit their target. Something is stopping us from creating the families we claim to want. But what?

There are as many answers to this question as there are people choosing whether to reproduce. At the national level, what demographers call “underachieving fertility” finds explanations ranging from the glaring absence of family-friendly policies in the United States to gender inequality in South Korea to high youth unemployment across Southern Europe. It has prompted concerns about public finances and work force stability and, in some cases, contributed to rising xenophobia.

But these all miss the bigger picture.

Our current version of global capitalism — one from which few countries and individuals are [able to opt out](#) — has generated shocking wealth for some, and precarity for many more. These economic conditions generate social conditions inimical to starting families: Our workweeks are longer and our wages lower, leaving us less time and money to meet, court and fall in love. Our increasingly winner-take-all economies require that children get intensive parenting and costly educations, creating rising anxiety around what sort of life a would-be parent might provide. A lifetime of messaging directs us toward other pursuits instead: education, work, travel.

These economic and social dynamics combine with the degeneration of our environment in ways that hardly encourage childbearing: Chemicals and pollutants seep into our bodies, disrupting our endocrine systems. On any given day, it seems that some part of the inhabited world is either on fire or underwater.

To worry about falling birthrates because they threaten social security systems or future work force strength is to miss the point; they are a symptom of something much more pervasive.

It seems clear that what we have come to think of as "[late capitalism](#)" — that is, not just the economic system, but all its attendant inequalities, indignities, opportunities and absurdities — has become hostile to reproduction. Around the world, economic, social and environmental conditions function as a diffuse, barely perceptible contraceptive. And yes, it is even happening in Denmark.

'I have so many other things that I want to do'

Danes don't face the horrors of American student debt, our debilitating medical bills or our lack of paid family leave. College is free. Income inequality [is low](#). In short, many of the factors that cause young Americans to delay having families simply aren't present.

Even so, many Danes find themselves contending with the spiritual maladies that accompany late capitalism even in wealthy, egalitarian countries. With their basic needs met and an abundance of opportunities at their fingertips, Danes instead must grapple with the promise and pressure of seemingly limitless freedom, which can combine to make children an afterthought, or an unwelcome intrusion on a life that offers rewards and satisfactions of a different kind — an engaging career, esoteric hobbies, exotic holidays.

"Parents say that 'children are the most important thing in my life,'" said Dr. Ziebe, a father of two. By contrast, those who haven't tried it — who cannot imagine the shifts in priorities it produces, nor fathom its rewards — see parenting as an unwelcome responsibility. "Young people say, 'Having children is the end of my life.'"

There are, to be sure, many people for whom not having children is a choice,

and growing societal acceptance of voluntary childlessness is undoubtedly a step forward, especially for women. But the rising use of assisted reproductive technologies in Denmark and elsewhere (in Finland, for example, the share of children born via assisted reproduction has nearly doubled in a little more than a decade; in Denmark, it accounts for an estimated [one in 10 births](#)) suggests that the same people who see children as a hindrance often come to want them.

Kristine Marie Foss, a networking specialist and event manager, almost missed out on parenthood. A stylish woman with a warm smile, Ms. Foss, now 50, always dreamed of finding love, but none of her serious boyfriends lasted. She spent most of her 30s and 40s single; those were also the decades in which she worked as an interior designer, created several social networks (including one for singles, “before it was cool to be single”), and expanded and deepened her friendships.

It wasn’t until she was 39 that she realized it might be time to start thinking seriously about a family. A routine visit to the gynecologist prompted an unexpected revelation: “If I become 50 or 60 and I don’t have kids, I know I’m going to hate myself the rest of my life,” said Ms. Foss, now the mother of a 9-year-old and 6-year-old via a sperm donor. Ms. Foss has joined the ranks of what Danes call “solomor,” or single mothers by choice, a cohort that has been growing since 2007, when the Danish government began covering IVF for single women.

There are those who have always sought to lay the blame for declining fertility, in some way, on women — for their individual selfishness in eschewing motherhood, or for their embrace of feminism’s expansion of women’s roles. But the instinct to explore life without children is not restricted to women. In Denmark, one out of five men will never become a parent, a figure that is similar in the United States.

Anders Krarup is a 43-year-old software developer living in Copenhagen who recently rediscovered his love of fishing. Most weekends he drives to

the Zealand coast, where he communes with the sea trout. When he's not working at his start-up, he meets friends for concerts. As for a family, he's not particularly interested.

"I'm feeling very content with my life at the moment," he told me.

Mads Tolderlund is a legal consultant who works outside of Copenhagen. At age 5, he was struck with wanderlust when he saw an advertisement for Uluru, or Ayers Rock, in Australia. He eventually resolved to visit every continent in his lifetime, and today, at 31, has just Antarctica to go. In his view, people have children either because they truly want them, because they fear the consequences of not having them, or because it's the "normal" thing. None of those reasons apply to him.

"I have so many other things that I want to do," he said.

A 'quixotic lifestyle choice'

Are all these options not precisely what capitalism promised us? We were told that equipped with the right schooling, work ethic and vision, we could have professional success and disposable income that we could use to become the most interesting, most cultured, most toned versions of ourselves. We learned that doing these things — learning, working, creating, traveling — was rewarding and important.

Trent MacNamara, an assistant professor of history at Texas A&M University, has been [pondering human attitudes](#) toward fertility and family for over a decade. Economic conditions, he notes, are only part of the picture. What may matter more are "the little moral signals we send each other," he writes in a forthcoming essay, signals that are "based on big ideas about dignity, identity, transcendence and meaning." Today, we have found different ways to make meaning, form identities and relate to transcendence.

In this context, he said, having children may appear to be no more than a

"quixotic lifestyle choice" absent other social cues reinforcing the idea that parenting connects people "to something uniquely dignified, worthwhile and transcendent." Those cues are increasingly difficult to notice or promote in a secular world in which a capitalist ethos — extract, optimize, earn, achieve, grow — prevails. Where alternative value systems exist, however, babies can be plentiful. In the United States, for example, communities of Orthodox and Hasidic Jews, Mormons and Mennonites have birthrates higher than the national average.

Lyman Stone, an economist who studies population, points to two features of modern life that correlate with low fertility: rising "[workism](#)" — a term popularized by the Atlantic writer Derek Thompson — and declining religiosity. "There is a desire for meaning-making in humans," Mr. Stone told me. Without religion, one way people seek external validation is through work, which, when it becomes a dominant cultural value, is "inherently fertility reducing."

Denmark, he notes, is not a workaholic culture, but is [highly secular](#). East Asia, where fertility rates are [among the lowest in the world](#), is often both. In South Korea, for example, the government has introduced tax incentives for childbearing and expanded access to day care. But "[excessive workism](#)" and the persistence of traditional gender roles have combined to make parenting more difficult, and especially unappealing for women, who take on a second shift at home.

The difference between life in tiny Denmark, with its generous social welfare system and its [high marks for gender equality](#), and life in China, where social assistance is spotty and women face [rampant discrimination](#), is vast. Yet both countries face fertility rates well below replacement levels.

If Denmark illustrates the ways that capitalist values of individualism and self-actualization can nonetheless take root in a country where its harshest effects have been blunted, China is an example of how those same values can sharpen into competition so cutthroat that parents speak of "[winning](#)

[from the starting line](#)," that is, equipping their children with advantages from the earliest possible age. (One scholar told me this can even encompass timing conception to help a child in school admissions.)

After decades of restricting most families to just one child, the government [announced in 2015](#) that all couples were permitted to have two. Despite this, fertility has [barely budged](#). China's fertility rate in 2018 was 1.6.

The Chinese government has long sought to engineer its population, reducing quantity in order to improve "quality." These efforts are increasingly focused on what Susan Greenhalgh, a professor of Chinese society at Harvard, describes as "cultivating global citizens" through education, the means by which Chinese people and the nation as a whole can compete in the global economy.

By the 1980s, she said, child-rearing in China had become professionalized, shaped by the pronouncements of education, health and child psychology experts. Today, raising a quality child is not just a matter of keeping up with the latest child-rearing advice; it's a commitment to spending whatever it takes.

"These notions of the quality child, the quality person, got articulated in the language of the market," she said. "It means, 'What can we buy for the kid? We need to buy a piano, we need to buy dance lessons, we need to buy an American experience.'"

Talking to young Chinese people who have benefited from their parents' investments in them, I heard echoes of their Danish peers. For those with the right credentials, the past few decades have opened up opportunities their parents never imagined, making having children look burdensome by comparison.

"I feel like I just got out of college, just started working," said Joyce Yuan, a 27-year-old Beijing-based interpreter, whose plans include earning an

M.B.A. outside of China. "I still think that I'm at the very beginning of my life."

But Ms. Yuan and others were also quick to note China's harsh economic conditions, a factor that rarely, if ever, came up in Denmark. She cited, for instance, the high cost of urban living. "Everything is super expensive," she said, and quality of life, especially in big cities, "is extremely low."



The factors suppressing fertility in China are present throughout the country: In rural areas, where 41 percent of its nearly [1.4 billion](#) citizens still live, there is little enthusiasm for second children, and policymakers can seemingly do even less about it. In Xuanwei Prefecture, after the central

government announced in 2013 that couples in which one spouse was an only child could apply for permission to have a second baby, just [36 people](#) sought such approval in the first three months — in a region of around 1.25 million people. “Local family planning officials blamed economic pressure on young couples for the low take-up,” [the authors of a study on China and fertility wrote](#).

In urban settings, the opportunities for education and enrichment are more abundant, and the sense of competition more intense. But Chinese couples everywhere are responsive to the pressures of the country’s hyper-capitalist economy, where setting a child down the right path could mean life-changing opportunities, while heading down the wrong one means insecurity and struggle.

As access to college has expanded, the value of a diploma is worth less than it once was. Competition for places in top schools has grown more brutal, and the need to invest heavily in a child from the start more imperative. For many mothers, arranging the details of a child’s education, seen as the most critical channel for upgrading his or her “quality,” has almost become a full-time job, said Dr. Greenhalgh.

One Beijing resident, Li Youyou, 33, sees the stratified nature of reproduction in China playing out within her own circle. A wealthy friend with a high-earning husband is having her second child this year. Another, from a modest background, gave birth this summer; when Ms. Li asked her about a second, she said she could barely contemplate providing for this one. Ms. Li, who teaches English, was planning a visit to bring a gift for the baby. She wondered if she should just give money.

Ms. Li has no near-term plans for a family. She hopes instead to pursue a doctorate in linguistics, preferably in the United States.

“Having a relationship is not my priority right now,” she said. “I more want to focus on my career.”

'I should have \$200,000 saved before having a child'

My own experience as an American has been in some respects Danish, in others Chinese. I am one of the lucky ones: Thanks to scholarships, and my mother's tremendous sacrifices, I graduated from college without debt. Thus unencumbered, I spent most of my 20s working and studying overseas. Along the way, I got two master's degrees, and built a rewarding, if not especially remunerative, career. In my late 20s, I learned about egg freezing. It seemed like a secret weapon I could use to stave off the decision of if and when to have kids — an absolution, of sorts, for spending these years abroad and not searching terribly hard for a partner.

At 34, I finally underwent the procedure. Last year, I did another round. Ever since then, there's a number I've been playing with as I've wondered about whether and when I will use those eggs. According to my back-of-the-envelope calculations, I should have \$200,000 saved before having a child.

To be clear, I am fully aware that people far worse off than me have children all the time. I know that even the prospect of a pre-pregnancy savings target vaults me firmly into the realm of tragicomic middle-class absurdity. I am resolutely not saying that if you don't have this (or any sum of) money, you should reconsider children.

Rather, this number is a hybrid — an acknowledgment of the financial realities of single parenthood, but also the arithmetic crystallization of my anxieties around parenthood in our precarious era. To me, it demonstrates that even with my abundant privileges, it can still feel so risky, and on some days impossible, to bring a child into the world. And from the dozens of conversations I've had in reporting this essay, it's clear these anxieties are shaping the choices of many others, too.

Where did I get the \$200,000 figure from? First, there's at least \$40,000 for [two rounds](#) of IVF. (That I am contemplating this route also speaks to the obstacles of dating under late capitalism — but that's a subject for a

different article.) [Thousands of dollars](#) in hospital bills for a birth, provided it's not a complicated one.

As a freelancer, I wouldn't be eligible for paid leave, so I'd either need child care (easily \$25,000 a year or more) until the child starts prekindergarten, or have enough saved to support us while I'm not working. I could sell my studio apartment, but homeownership is a key means by which parents pay for college, and I am as terrified of relinquishing this asset as I am of launching a child into the job market sans higher education credentials. On some days, I tell myself I'm being responsible by waiting. On other days, I wonder how this anxiety over my present might crowd out the future I envision.

The point is not really whether \$200,000 is reasonable; it is that the very notion of attaching a dollar figure to an experience as momentous as parenthood is a sign of how much my mind-set has been warped by this system that leaves us each so very much on our own, able to avail ourselves of only what we can pay for.

For decades, people with as much good fortune as I have were relatively immune to these anxieties. But many of the difficulties that have long faced working-class women, and especially women of color, are trickling up. These women have worked multiple jobs without stability or benefits, and raised children in communities with underfunded schools or poisoned water; today, middle-class parents, too, are time-starved, squeezed out of good school districts, and anxious about plastic and pollution.

In the 1990s, black feminists, facing the conditions above, developed the analytical framework known as reproductive justice, an approach that goes beyond reproductive rights as they are usually understood — access to abortion and contraceptives — to encompass the right to have children humanely: to "have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities," as the collective SisterSong put it.

Reproductive justice was not always well understood or embraced by mainstream reproductive rights groups. (Loretta Ross, one of the founders of the movement, said an early focus group found people thought the term referred to seeking fairness for photocopiers.) But the trickling up of reproductive injustice could potentially give it broader traction. "White America is now feeling the effects of neoliberalism capitalism that the rest of America has always felt," Ms. Ross said.

Are we prepared, though, for what it asks of us? Ms. Ross compared reproductive justice activism to parenting. "When you parent, you've got to work on safe drinking water, and safe schools and a clean bedroom at the same time," she said. "People's lives are holistic and interconnected. You can't pull on one thread without shaking up the whole thing." Seen in this light, incremental improvements like paid parental leave are only a partial fix for our current crisis, a handful of crumbs when our bodies and souls require a nourishing meal.

'This system of value is literally going to kill us'

The solution, therefore, is not to compel a man like Anders Krarup to put aside his fishing and procreate, nor to dissuade Li Youyou from pursuing her Ph.D. Instead, we must recognize how their decisions take place in a broader context, shaped by interrelated factors that can be hard to discern.

The problem, to be clear, is not really one of "population," a term that since its earliest use, according to the scholar Michelle Murphy, has been a "profoundly objectifying and dehumanizing" way to discuss human life. Hundreds of thousands of babies are [born on this planet every day](#); people all over the world have shown they are willing to migrate to wealthier countries for jobs. Rather, the problem is the quiet human tragedies, born of preventable constraints — an employer's indifference, a belated realization, a poisoned body — that make the wanted child impossible.

The crisis in reproduction lurks in the shadows, but is visible if you look for it.

It shows up each year that birthrates plumb a new low. It's in the persistent flow of studies linking infertility and poor birth outcomes to nearly every feature of modern life — fast-food wrappers, air pollution, pesticides. It is the yearning in your friends' voices as they gaze at their first child, playing in their too-small apartment, and say, "We'd love to have another, but ..." It is the pain that comes from lunging toward transcendence and finding it out of reach.

Seen from this perspective, the conversation around reproduction can and should take on some of the urgency of the climate change debate. We are recognizing nature's majesty too late, appreciating its uniqueness and irreplaceability only as we watch it burn.

"I see a lot of parallels between this tipping point that people feel in their intimate lives, around the question of reproduction under capitalism, also playing out in broader existential conversations about the fate of the planet under capitalism," said Sara Matthiesen, a historian at George Washington University whose forthcoming book examines family-making in the post-Roe v. Wade era. "It seems like more and more people are being pressed to this place of, 'O.K., this system of value is literally going to kill us.'"

Conversations about reproduction and environmental sustainability have long overlapped. Thomas Malthus worried that population growth would outstrip the food supply. The 1970s saw the emergence of ecofeminism. Since the 1990s, reproductive justice groups have sought a better planet for all children. Today's [BirthStrikers](#) disavow procreation "due to the severity of the ecological crisis."

While climate catastrophe has revived elements of the insidious discourse of population control, it has also prompted a new [wave of activism](#), born of an understanding of just how deeply these foundational components of life — reproduction and the health of the planet — are linked, and the collective action that is required to sustain them.

The first step is renouncing the individualism celebrated by capitalism and recognizing the interdependence that is essential for long-term survival. We depend on our water supply to be clean, and our rivers depend on us not to poison them. We ask our neighbors to watch our dogs or water our plants while we're away, and offer our help in kind. We hire strangers to look after our children or aging parents, and trust in their compassion and competence. We pay taxes and hope those we elect spend that money to keep roads safe, schools open, and national parks protected.

These relationships, between us and the natural world, and us and one another, testify to the interdependence that capitalist logic would have us disavow.

Reproduction is the ultimate nod to interdependence. We depend on at least two people to make us possible. We gestate inside another human, and emerge with the help of doctors or doulas or kin. We grow up in environments and communities that shape our health, safety and values. We must find concrete ways to recognize this interdependence and resolve to strengthen it.

One of the people upon whom my existence depends, my father, died of a heart attack when I was 7. At some point, I started wearing his watch, a beautiful gold thing that would slide up and down my wrist, heavy with sentiment. This year, on a work trip, I sat down in a hotel lobby to get some writing done. I took the watch off to type, only to realize on a bus going home that I'd left it at the hotel. Hours of searching the lobby and sobbing to the hotel staff failed to bring it back.

Later that evening, writing in a journal, I consoled myself by listing some of the things he had left me that I couldn't lose if I tried: the large-ish nose, the sense of humor, the shrimpy stature that curtailed both his basketball career and mine.

In that moment, I understood why I had frozen my eggs. Intellectually, I am

skeptical, even critical, of the inherent narcissism of preserving one's own genetic material when there are already so many children without parents. Even as I was going through with it, injecting drugs into my abdomen each night until it came to resemble a dart board, I struggled to articulate why, at least in a way that made sense to me.

But as I reflected on the immaterial gifts I like to think I inherited from him, it became clear I craved genetic continuity, however fictitious and tenuous it might be. I recognized then something precious and inexplicable in this yearning, and glimpsed how devastating it might be to be unable to realize it. For the first time, I felt justified in my impulse to preserve some little piece of me that, in some way, contained a little piece of him, which one day might live again.

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