

Marriage and Fertility in the Developed Countries

The decline of the birthrate in the industrialized countries is both a cause and a consequence of changes in marriage and the family. How will nations respond to a long-term decrease in population?

by Charles F. Westoff

Most of the world's developed countries now appear to be approaching zero population growth. Several European countries—Austria, East and West Germany and Luxembourg—have already gone beyond zero growth: they have more deaths than births each year. The United Kingdom is right at the balance point, with births and deaths about equal. If current trends in fertility continue, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Hungary, Norway and Sweden will reach or fall below zero growth in a few years; Bulgaria, Finland, Greece, Italy and Switzerland will follow by about 1990. If the trends should persist, the population of Europe as a whole and of the U.S.S.R. would begin to decline at the turn of the century and the U.S. population would stop growing in about 2015.

Will fertility indeed continue to decline? One can only speculate, more or less plausibly. Here I shall argue that the low level of fertility is the result of a long-term trend that may continue. And I shall examine some of the current social changes, particularly those affecting the institution of marriage, that seem likely to cause fertility to decline to new lows in the industrialized countries, and some of the ways those countries may respond to an actual or impending decrease in population.

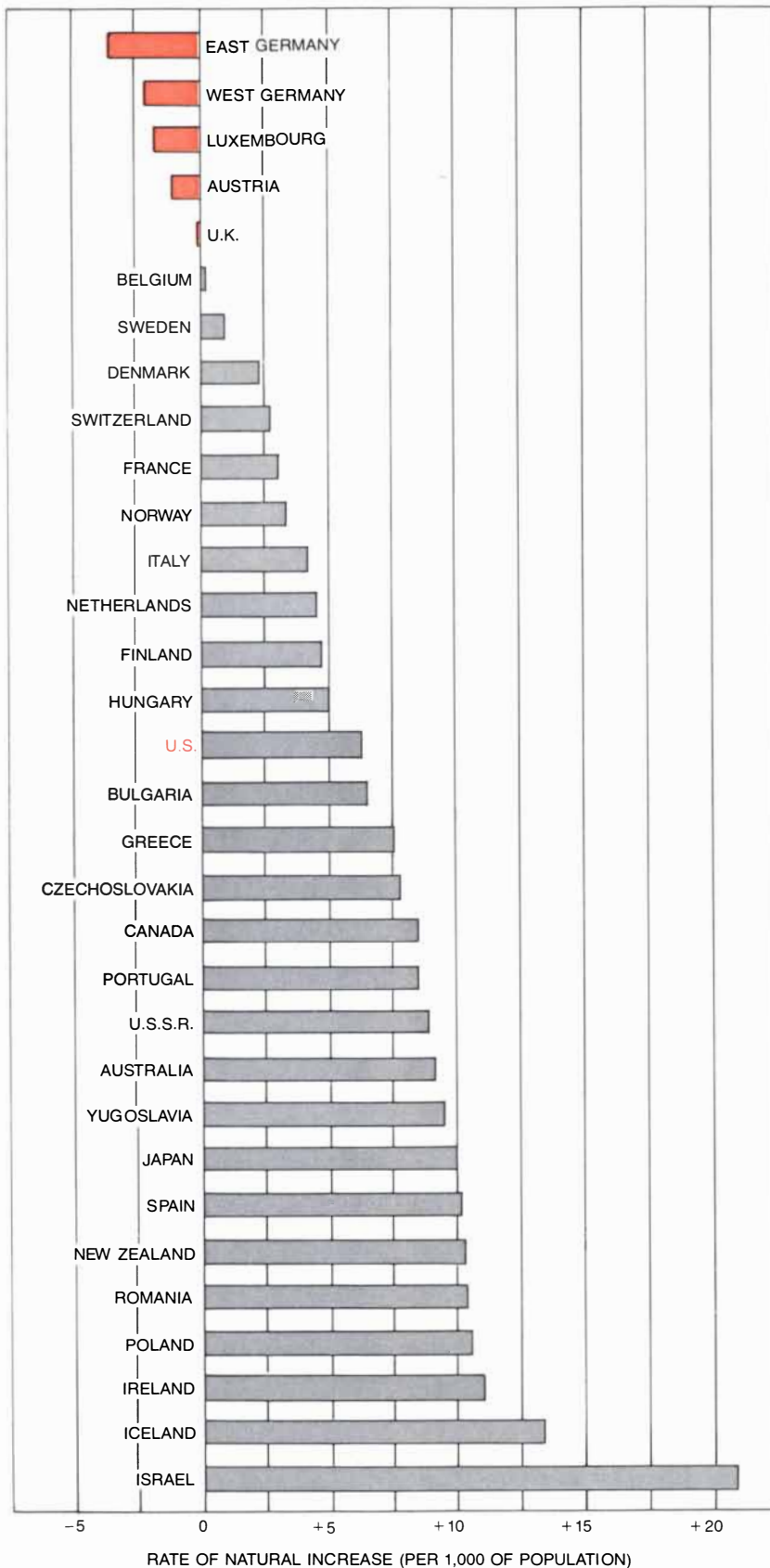
The projection indicating a decline in the European population by the year 2000 assumes that the total fertility rate in Europe will reach 1.5 by 1986 and remain at that level. (The total fertility rate in a particular year is the average number of births women would have over the course of their reproductive life

if they followed the rates characteristic of various age groups for that year; it is derived by summing the age-specific birthrates in a given year. The total fertility rate at which a population just replaces itself is 2.1 rather than 2.0, primarily because not all females survive to the reproductive ages. The relatively large size of the youthful population in many countries means that some years of below-replacement fertility are required before a population levels off and begins to decline.) A total fertility rate of 1.5 is below the rates now prevailing in Europe and below the lowest rate known to have been experienced by an actual cohort of women (1.8 for women born in 1907 in England and Wales). Nevertheless, the fertility trend is now on a trajectory that would bring it to 1.5 by 1986. The increased availability of sophisticated birth-control technology makes it increasingly feasible to attain such a low fertility level; everything seems to point in that direction. (Perhaps the trajectory of future reproductive levels is aimed too low too soon, in which case the time perspective may be off by a few decades.)

Because of the sustained "baby boom" after World War II and the resulting bulge in the population of child-bearing age, the U.S. (along with Canada, Australia and New Zealand) can expect to reach zero population growth somewhat farther down the road than most European countries. Including legal immigration and assuming an ultimate level of completed cohort fertility of 1.7 births per woman (the U.S. is currently reproducing at a rate implying about 1.8 births), the population of the

U.S. would effectively stop growing at a total of about 253 million in 2015. This is the current "low" projection of the Bureau of the Census. Even if fertility should climb back to the replacement level of 2.1, the population would be only 260 million in 2000 and 283 million in 2015, considerably below the 300-million population that only a few years ago was being predicted for the year 2000. The important difference between the projection based on a fertility rate of 1.7 and the projection based on a rate of 2.1 is not so much the 30-million difference in population in 2015; it is that at the lower fertility rate the population would have begun to decline, whereas at the higher fertility rate the population would still be growing at an annual rate of about five per 1,000 of total population. Both projections show considerable growth beyond the current population of just under 220 million because of the relatively high proportion of people in the childbearing years, a result of the baby boom.

Having described these recent projections, I must now admit that the record of population projections has not been a happy one. A 1947 projection of the 1970 U.S. population fell 65 million short of the 205 million actually enumerated. Projections made since the early 1960's of the U.S. population in the year 2000 have ranged from a high of 362 million (a 1964 projection) to a low of 245 million (the latest lowest estimate). The major variable determining such estimates is fertility, and fertility has changed considerably since the early 1960's. In view of the fact that any pop-



RATE OF NATURAL INCREASE (birthrate minus death rate) is below the zero-population-growth line in a few European countries, and it is approaching that level in most industrialized nations. Data are mostly for 1976; U.S. figure is for 12 months ending in May, 1978.

ulation projection is essentially based on an extrapolation of current fertility levels surrounded by a "high" and a "low" band, it is not surprising that projections drift badly off-target during a period of rapidly changing reproductive behavior. To develop more accurate population forecasts, demographers would have to know a lot more than they now do about the social and economic determinants of fertility. Even assuming such theoretical understanding, one would then have to predict the future course of the appropriate social and economic indexes, and there is no evidence that the relevant social-science disciplines have developed any such capability.

All of this suggests it is foolhardy even to speculate about future trends in fertility and population growth, let alone to take new projections seriously. How do we know a new baby boom is not in store? As a matter of fact there is one school of thought in demography that offers an attractive theory in support of just such a prediction for the U.S. The argument is that fertility responds positively to people's perception of their degree of opportunity, in particular as opportunity is affected by the competition of peers. Such competition is in part a function of numbers. People born during the low-birthrate period of the late 1920's and the 1930's came of age after World War II during an expansive period of great demand for labor. They were the parents of the baby boom. In contrast, the babies of the baby boom came of age in the late 1960's and the 1970's, when their large numbers increased competition for places in college and for jobs. They in turn have been responsible for the postponed marriage and low fertility that have characterized the past decade. This negative association between the size of a cohort and its ultimate fertility leads to a prediction that there will be another baby boom in the 1990's as people in the low-birth cohorts of the 1970's respond to the brighter prospects and competitive advantages stemming from their smaller numbers.

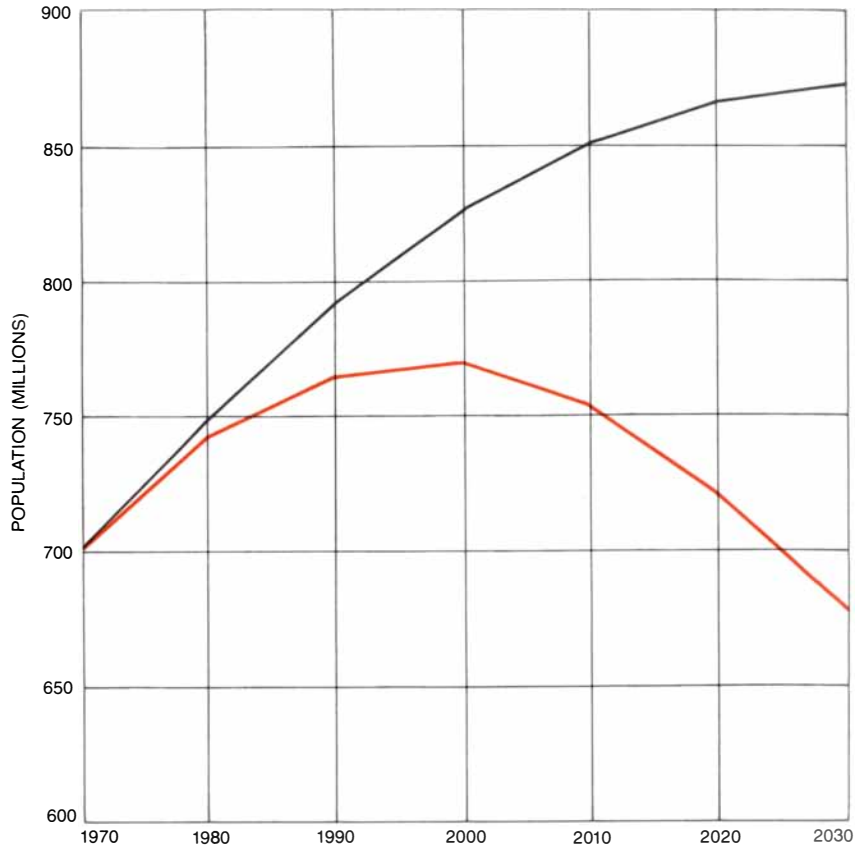
The theory is intriguing, but the empirical evidence for the cyclical pattern it predicts is largely limited to the two examples described above, and not much supporting evidence has been adduced for such a pattern in other countries. Moreover, the theory ignores the radical changes in the status and expectations of women. It appears to assume that the competitive economic advantage of reduced numbers is to be realized only by men, even though women have been joining the labor force at a steadily increasing rate. It is not at all clear that an increase in economic opportunity would automatically be translated into earlier marriage and higher fertility; might it not instead prompt young people to spend more on housing

and other consumer items, and also attract women to better jobs and to long-term career commitments? The cyclical theory is nonetheless a cogent one with some empirical support. What evidence speaks for the opposite view: that fertility will remain low?

Every time the birthrate records a new low (frequently in recent years) a demographer receives inquiries from journalists about what the decline can be attributed to: "the pill," abortion, sterilization, recession, the women's movement or some other ad hoc explanation. To ask what caused the latest decline, however, is to ask the wrong question. The decline is the long-term reality. The birthrate has been coming down more or less steadily for the past 200 years in this country—with the exception of one period. The real question, and the more perplexing one, is what caused that exception: the baby boom that lasted for more than a decade after World War II.

We are beginning to understand the baby boom demographically, although not the underlying causes. The notion that everyone married early and had a lot of children is imprecise at best. What apparently created the boom was a definite movement away from spinsterhood and away from childless and one-child marriages. There was a large increase in the proportion of women having at least two children, but the increase in the proportion of women having three or more children played a minor role in the boom; there was no return to the large families of the past. What social and economic forces generated and sustained the changes in marriage and childbearing is not at all clear. An unpredictable element of what might be called fashion seems to play a role in such changes, which is one reason it is not inconceivable that the marriage and fertility levels of the baby boom might reappear, however unlikely that may seem today.

If the baby boom was a temporary (but demographically significant) excursion, the secular downward trend in fertility from which it departed was one aspect of a major demographic transition in Europe and the U.S.: the long-term decrease in death rates and birthrates that accompanied economic development and modernization in general. What has been basic to the entire demographic transition has been a change in the economic value of children, from a source of income in agrarian economies to a considerable drain on income in industrial and postindustrial economies. The economic transformation of society has been accompanied by a decline in traditional and religious authority, the diffusion of an ethos of rationality and individualism, the universal education of both sexes, the increasing equality of

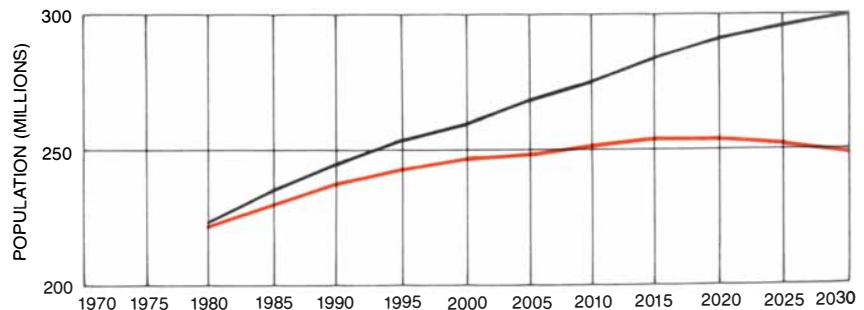


POPULATION WOULD DECLINE in Europe (including the entire U.S.S.R.) after the turn of the century according to one United Nations projection (color) made in 1975; the projection assumes that the total fertility rate would drop to 1.5, or about 25 percent below the replacement rate, by 1986 and remain at that level. Another UN projection (black) assumes constant fertility just below the replacement level, in which case the population would continue to grow, at a diminishing rate, through the period shown. Present trends favor lower projection.

women, the increasing survival of children and the emergence of a consumer-oriented culture that is increasingly aimed at maximizing personal gratification. When these changes are combined with the development and diffusion of sophisticated birth-control technology, it is hardly surprising that the institutions of marriage and the family show signs of change.

The important thing about this cata-

logue of social changes is that the changes all seem to be irreversible and that some of them, particularly those linked with the status of women, have not yet run their full course. In spite of some signs of net migration to rural areas, no return to an agrarian economy is likely. There is some resurgence of evangelical religion, but no one would argue that the religious or traditional authority of past centuries is being reestablished. Not-



U.S. POPULATION DECLINE would begin somewhat later, according to a Bureau of the Census projection (color) that assumes a drop in total fertility to 1.7, which is just below the current U.S. rate of 1.8. Another projection (black) assumes an increase in U.S. fertility to the replacement level, or 2.1. Both projections assume net legal immigration of 400,000 a year.

withstanding some recent disenchantment with the economic rewards of higher education, a prolonged period of education and training has become the norm. It does not take a professional economist to discern that the hunger for consumer goods has not abated in spite of the antimaterialist sentiments of the environmentalist movement. Birth-control technology, although it is still far short of ideal, is more widely used and more effective than ever before. Current efforts to reverse the trend toward permissive abortion may be partly successful, but the end result may well be merely to make abortion less convenient and more expensive. We are fast approaching the "perfect" contraceptive society, in which there will be no unwanted births.

In short, nothing on the horizon suggests that fertility will not remain low. All the recent evidence on trends in marriage and reproductive behavior encourages a presumption that it will remain low. It is instructive to review some of these trends in the U.S. and in two countries that have often been in the forefront of social change in the developed countries: Denmark and Sweden.

The number of marriages has been declining in Denmark and Sweden for the past decade or so—by 30 percent in Sweden between 1966 and 1975. In the U.S. there has been a radical decline in the proportion of women who marry young. In 1960 only some 29 percent of

the women from 20 through 24 years of age had never married; by 1978 the proportion had risen to almost 48 percent. That is about the same proportion as in 1940 and less than at the turn of the century, when more than 50 percent of the women between 20 and 24 were still single. Further increases in nonmarriage and the postponement of marriage would, in other words, be well within historical experience, but contemporary developments suggest that such increases will come about in the future for very different reasons. Many women now delay marriage until they are almost 30. Some of the postponement is due to the "marriage squeeze": the sharp increase in the birthrate after the war meant that during the late 1960's and early 1970's there were more women ready to marry than there were men of the conventional marrying age (a few years older). Much of the postponement, however, is due to fundamental changes in attitudes toward early marriage.

That conclusion is supported by the evident and increasing tendency for unmarried couples to live together. In the U.S. in 1976 an estimated one million couples (about 2 percent of all couples living together) were not married. It appears certain that cohabitation will become more popular in the near future. Its incidence has been increasing rapidly in Denmark, where more than a fourth of all women 18 through 25 live with a man to whom they are not married. In Sweden a recent survey found that

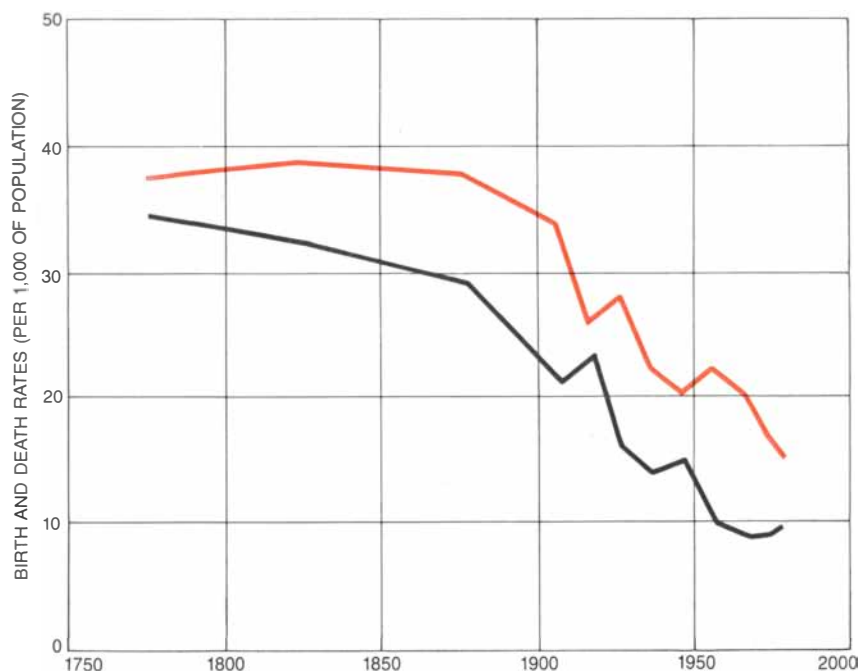
about 12 percent of all couples (aged 16 through 70) who were living together were not married. In many instances cohabitation is simply a prelude to marriage—a new form of engagement—and so perhaps not much has really changed, aside from the legitimization of the arrangement by a certificate. Perhaps, on the other hand, we are seeing the beginning of a more basic change that will significantly alter the institution of marriage. In either case it is clear that cohabitation means lower fertility, whether because of the trial nature of the arrangement or because of its relative instability.

Instability of the marriage relationship is increasingly the normal expectation, judging by the high and increasing U.S. divorce rate. The traditional notion of having one partner for life is no longer the norm for a growing segment of the U.S. population. The current divorce rate implies that perhaps half of all marriages will eventually be dissolved by divorce and that a third of all children will spend a significant amount of time with a divorced or separated parent. The divorce rate has about doubled in the past decade in Denmark and Sweden, although it is still lower in those countries than in the U.S.

The conventional wisdom about the high U.S. divorce rate is that it is an index of disenchantment not with marriage as such but with a particular spouse; the high rate of remarriage has been cited as evidence. Here too, however, the beginning of change can be discerned. The U.S. remarriage rate, which had increased along with the divorce rate, has started to decline. (In Sweden the remarriage rate has declined about 50 percent since 1965.) More second marriages now seem to be headed for divorce. Cohabitation is not limited to the premarital years; one is increasingly aware of middle-aged and even older divorced people living together unmarried.

One of the major factors that has historically affected the fertility rate is the changing economic role of women. In recent decades there has been a striking increase in the proportion of women who are in the labor force. In the U.S. the proportion of women in the prime childbearing years who are employed increased from less than two-fifths in 1960 to about three-fifths in 1977; it is projected to reach about two-thirds in another decade. For Europe as a whole the International Labor Organization has projected a three-fifths participation in the labor force for women of reproductive age by the year 2000.

Such increasing economic activity by women does not, to be sure, mean a commensurate increase in their financial independence; there remains a clear income inequality between the sexes. The earnings of women are well below



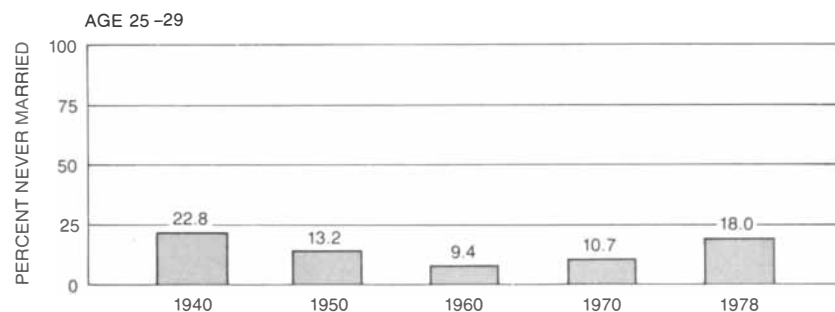
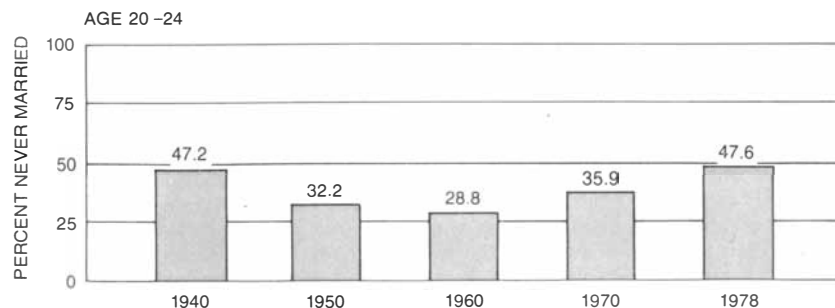
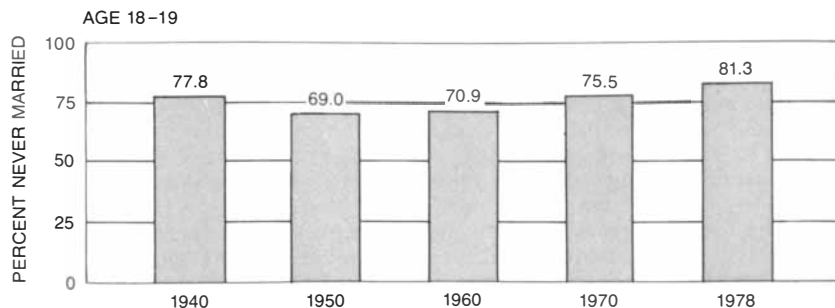
RECENT DECREASE in the rate of population growth in the currently developed countries is a result of the greater decline in the birthrate (color) than in the death rate (black). The current convergence of the birthrate and death rate at a low level of fertility and mortality indicates a return to demographic equilibrium. Such equilibrium had been the historical norm (but at a higher level of fertility and mortality) before the second half of the 18th century.

those of men in spite of diminishing educational differences between the sexes. Women are disproportionately concentrated in less remunerative jobs and they are paid less in the same jobs. Among year-round full-time workers from 18 through 44 who received income in 1976 in the U.S., the average woman earned only 60 percent as much as the average man. Still, the future trend of the economic status of women seems clear: even if genuine economic equality is probably generations away, an increasing number of women will have the option of financial independence.

There is a considerable body of research describing the complex causal connections between women's participation in the labor force and their fertility. Employment and children are not always incompatible, and various sequences of working and childbearing complicate the relationship. Regardless of any qualification, however, there seems to be little doubt that work and fertility are negatively correlated and that an increasing proportion of women will work in the future. Imagine, ultimately, a society in which men and women have the same incomes, in which there are as many women as men who are lawyers, engineers, corporation executives, physicians and salespeople. What would the consequences be for marriage and fertility?

Certainly the institution of marriage would lose one of its few remaining sociological rationales, if one thinks of marriage in functional economic terms as a system whereby the woman offers her childbearing and domestic services in exchange for the security and status of a man's income and occupation. This concept of marriage is unromantic, but there is no doubt that it goes a long way toward explaining the universality and persistence of the institution. If the economic rationale were lost, what then would provide the motivation for marriage? It is hardly necessary these days for companionship or for sexual gratification. Given the growing acceptability of cohabitation (and the ease of divorce), does it not seem likely that traditional marriage will become still less prevalent?

Perhaps the final sociological rationale for marriage is the bearing and nurturing of children, but the ongoing retreat from parenthood makes even this foundation a bit shaky. If current rates for first births were to persist, some 30 percent of U.S. women now of childbearing age would never have any children. The highest proportion on record was 22 percent childless, for U.S. women born in 1908. It seems likely that today's young women will break that record by a few percentage points, although they will not reach the 30 percent level implied by current rates. If the large increase in out-of-wedlock births



AGE AT MARRIAGE affects the birthrate. The "baby boom" of the 1950's and early 1960's was marked by early marriage, as is shown by these bars indicating the percent of women who were still single at various ages. That percentage has risen recently as women delay marriage.

registered in Sweden in recent years as a consequence of the increasing proportion of unmarried couples living together is any indication that the taboo on extramarital fertility is weakening, then even this function of marriage may be less important.

The decline of fertility, then, can be regarded as both a cause and a consequence of changes in marriage and the family. Having fewer children or none can be construed as facilitating the economic activity of women and increasing their economic equality with men, two developments that in turn make marriage and childbearing less of an automatic social response. A future increasingly incompatible with the concept of long-term traditional marriage is almost certain to be a future of low fertility in the developed countries.

There is a wide spectrum of views on the optimum rate of population growth in the developed world. Some people argue cogently that growth has

already exceeded a level mandated by environmental and other quality-of-life considerations, and that the additional population already "in the pipeline" will exacerbate the situation. From that point of view an actual decline in population is a desirable prospect. Others have concluded that the best outcome would be zero population growth. The Commission on Population Growth and the American Future investigated the economic, environmental and governmental implications of various rates of increase and concluded in 1972 that any growth beyond that to which the U.S. was already committed by the legacy of its past growth would only intensify the nation's problems and make their solution more difficult.

There is no magical quality, however, in the 2.1 fertility rate that just maintains replacement. No one has yet discovered any homeostatic mechanism that will automatically regulate a society's reproduction to keep it at the replacement level. If fertility continues

downward, then, the ultimate prognosis is negative population growth: declining population size and much older populations. It is worth reiterating that predictions to the same effect have been ventured before, in the 1930's; they were made to look ridiculous in the light of the subsequent baby boom, and that could happen again. What I am arguing is that (if my interpretation of the evidence is even only approximately correct) a significant renaissance in fertility seems unlikely and that the developed world has resumed the prolonged downward trend in fertility that began a century or more ago.

What is causing concern particularly in Europe, where the entire process of change is more advanced than it is in the U.S., is that fertility will remain well below replacement, that the proportion of older people will therefore increase markedly, that the population will therefore not remain stationary but will begin to decline—and that the aging of the population will make it increasingly difficult to arrest the demographic momentum of the decline.

Several countries have already given signs of being very uncomfortable with the low-fertility trend. A recent United Nations survey revealed that 10 European countries considered their current fertility rate too low. In West Germany (where in 1976 there were 733,000 deaths and fewer than 603,000 births) the growing concern was reflected by a recent television program that was titled "Are the Germans Dying Out?" and answered the question in the affirmative. One German demographer has said: "Beneath the blankets we are a dying people."

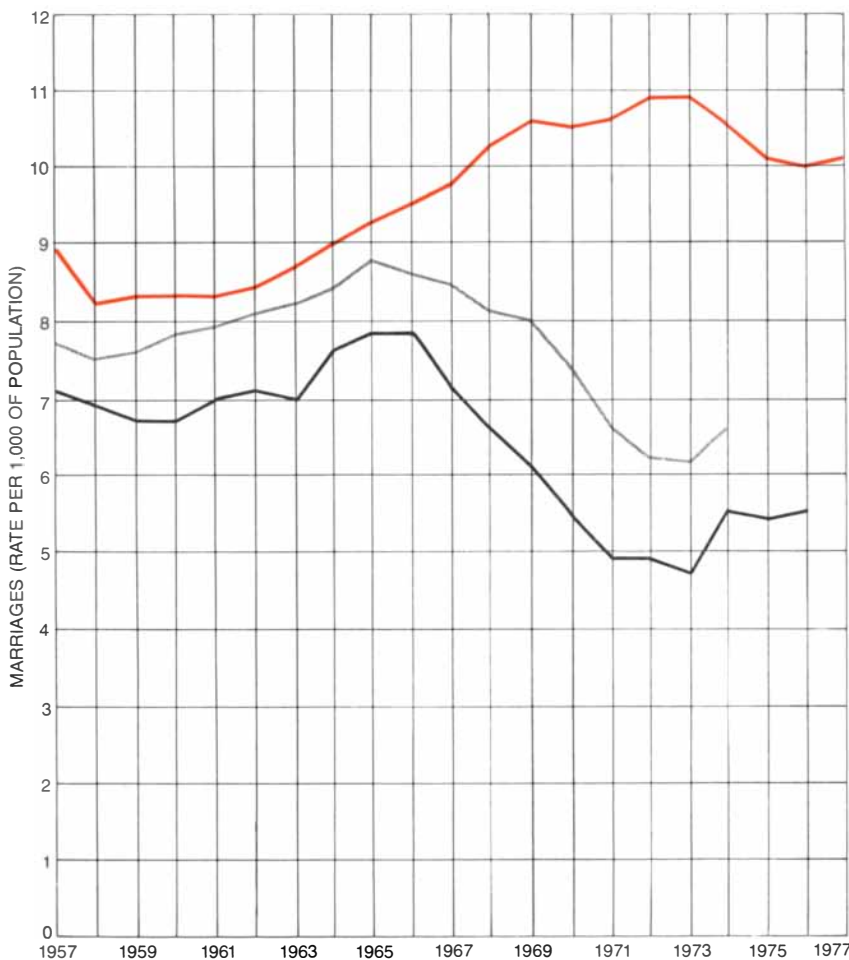
In France, where population growth has long been of concern both as a matter of national prestige and for specific national-security reasons, population has become the subject of a national debate. In 1976 President Giscard d'Estaing warned that no country with a middle-size population could realistically aspire to grandeur. The former premier Michel Debré, an extremist on the issue, regards the declining birthrate (which at 13.6 in 1976 still exceeded the death rate of 10.5) as a national peril. He

has gone so far as to propose a bill providing for a "family vote," which would give parents an additional vote for each child under voting age. For many years the French government has subsidized families with children by means of cash allowances and tax relief. Since 1976 there has also been a guaranteed minimum income for unmarried mothers, a two-year maternity leave for female civil service workers and exemption from military service for young fathers under special circumstances.

Many of Sweden's social-welfare measures have long been focused on the protection of children and assistance to parents (whether married or not). A recent example is a "parents' insurance" law that increases from six to nine months the amount of paid leave for either the mother or the father of a new baby. The leave may be taken over a period of up to eight years.

East Germany, where the birthrate had dropped to a low of 10.6 (with a death rate of 13.5) in 1975, reportedly succeeded in raising the birthrate to 13.3 in 1977 following the introduction of several new measures in mid-1976. These included reduction of the work week for mothers of two or more children, extension of pregnancy leave at full pay from 18 to 26 weeks and various financial incentives, the most striking of which is an interest-free credit of up to \$10,000 for the purchase of housing or furniture. The debt is reduced by \$1,000 for the birth of a child within eight years and by another \$1,500 for a second child, and is excused entirely on the birth of a third child. The cost of this provision is considerable: a reported 37 million marks (about \$18 million at the official rate of exchange) in canceled debts to date as well as the loss from women's absence from work. According to one report, "90,000 women—1 percent of the total labor force—have accepted the government's invitation to go into baby production."

Pronatalist policies have been actively pursued in other Eastern European countries. Romania achieved a certain notoriety among specialists in population policy for its demonstration of the potential demographic impact of outlawing abortion; that was done in 1966 and it more than doubled the birthrate in 1967. (The rate has declined slowly since then as illegal abortion and contraception were substituted for legal abortion.) Abortion laws have also been tightened in recent years in Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, and birthrates have increased. How much of the increase is attributable to pronatalist economic measures introduced at the same time (including maternity leaves, family allowances, subsidized child-birth services, preference in housing and



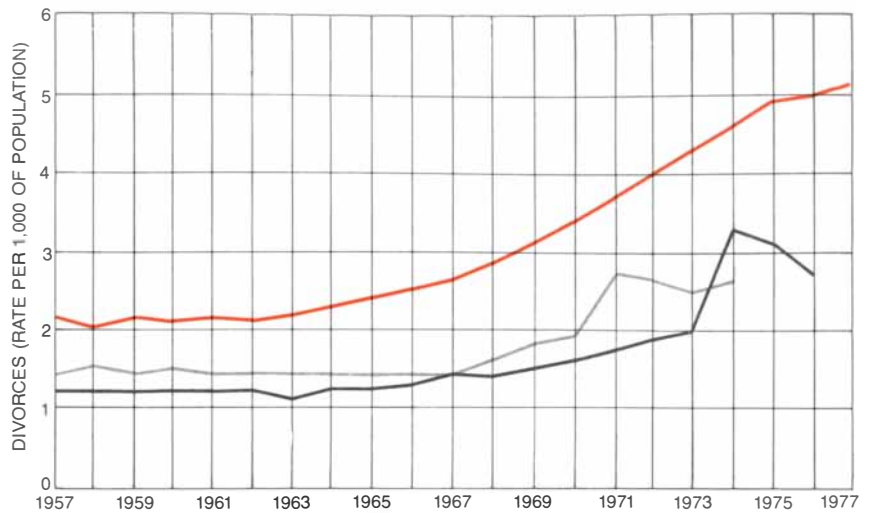
MARRIAGE RATE has been generally declining in Sweden (black) and Denmark (gray) since 1965 and in the U.S. (color) since 1973. More couples are living together without marriage.

other inducements) rather than to the change in the abortion laws is an open question.

Such responses to declining fertility suggest that an increasing number of governments will regard low fertility and negative population growth as a threat and will develop programs for inducing women to marry and to have more children than they now seem to be motivated to have. What kind of measures will be adequate to such an objective? The same question was being posed 40 years ago as several European countries confronted similar demographic futures (a prospect that was radically altered by World War II and its aftermath). At that time there was speculation that society might have to develop a class of specialists in reproduction, who would be compensated for their services and whose progeny would be raised in child-care centers in the absence of conventional family arrangements. Such schemes were made irrelevant by the rush to marriage, the suburbs and child rearing after the war, and they still have the ring of science fiction.

And yet given current trends it is not hard to visualize a society in which a third of the women remain childless, which would mean that the remaining two-thirds of the women would have to average slightly more than three births each to replace the generation. It seems unlikely that the mild and often trivial economic inducements so far implemented by governments could motivate the required fertility. It is hard to imagine well-educated and well-paid women, raised in a society that rewards nonparental roles, being sufficiently attracted by a few thousand dollars in benefits to sacrifice income, interrupt a career and devote the necessary time and energy to raising several children. An industrialized nation that decides not to tolerate negative growth may have to subsidize reproduction on a large scale, with a serious investment of public funds. Almost certainly it would have to guarantee working women that they will have ample leave for childbearing and will suffer no loss of income or position, and that they will find a comprehensive system of child-care institutions at their disposal.

As the birthrate in any country drops closer to the death rate immigration plays an increasing role in determining population growth. In theory a government attempting to maintain a particular rate of growth—zero growth, for example—could manipulate its immigration quotas to make up any deficit in the number of births in the preceding year or so. The qualifications for immigration could be set fairly high to bring in individuals with training and skills that are in short supply, assuming that



DIVORCE RATE in the U.S. (color) is high and has been increasing. The divorce rate is lower in Sweden (black) and Denmark (gray) than it is in the U.S., but it has been generally rising.

the economy could be kept strong enough to attract such people. Such fine tuning would be difficult, however. Immigrants arrive at different ages and, what is potentially more important, they arrive in various colors and nationalities and speaking different languages. Any country with substantial immigration seems sooner or later to experience problems, arising from differences in language, customs, religion or race, that tend to offset many of the economic and long-term cultural advantages.

In the past two decades or so most countries of western and northern Europe have admitted immigrants (or in many cases have merely admitted workers for temporary stays) from less affluent countries with a growing population and high unemployment. The influx has provided additional labor force, in particular for relatively menial work, that has helped to sustain rapid economic growth, but it has also created social problems. Countries with a shortage of labor will undoubtedly continue to resort to importing foreign workers as long as surplus labor is available from nearby countries with high fertility. No nation has yet opted for immigration for purely demographic reasons, however, and the experience with foreign workers is one the receiving countries are not likely to forget as they face the more basic problem of supplementing population growth.

In the U.S. illegal immigration is a growing concern, although no one has a clear picture of its magnitude or duration. Its effect is localized, but it undoubtedly has significant economic impact in parts of the country. Indeed, its economic value is what sustains illegal immigration; if it were not so valuable to localities and particular employers, the illegal flow would presumably be

more effectively controlled by U.S. authorities.

Whatever the short-term economic advantages of international migration, legal or illegal, it clearly offers no long-run solution for a country in which native fertility is well below the replacement level. In the U.S., for example, the volume of immigration would have to be about twice as high as the present legal total in order to avoid eventual negative growth.

The developed countries are just beginning to adjust to the prospect of a stationary population after several centuries of growth. If zero population growth turns out to be passed in the night and negative growth appears to be the course of the future, one can expect revolutionary social changes in the 21st century. We know very little about the short-run consequences of negative population growth, but the long-run consequence is clear enough.

I must make it clear that I am not here urging the desirability of maintaining a particular rate of growth. The Commission on Population Growth and the American Future concluded, after an exhaustive evaluation of the pros and cons of population growth, that the slowing and eventual cessation of growth appears to be in the best interest of the U.S. and that even short periods of negative growth may be beneficial. The point is that zero population growth is now in sight in many developed countries. If population declines for any significant length of time, it will be regarded—rightly or wrongly—with alarm. Before policies to stimulate fertility are developed uncritically, one would hope that serious efforts will be made to evaluate the costs and benefits of alternative rates of population growth.