

column

DEMOGRAPHIC FEARS

Why are demographic developments often surrounded by anxiety? In the sixties the end of the world seemed to be near as a result of the “population bomb”. That fear has not faded, especially when looking at the developments in Africa. Today many western societies fear the consequences of aging for pensions, health care and the economy in general. Many people are also fearful of migration, not to mention the perceived devastating effects of persistent low fertility levels on the vitality of our societies. Related to this is the fear for population decline, which brings us full circle: from fear of explosion to fear of implosion. This anxiety takes on many forms, from well-written reports, articles and essays of scientists and policy analysts in journals and newspapers to massive support for anti-immigration movements and populist parties.

Why is this the case? We love the past and fear the future. Demographic forecasts depict a future



society different from today, but we do not like change. We like the world to be in equilibrium and to be stable, and we associate that with the past, whereas we think of the future as chaotic and unstable, and a threat to our wealth and comfort. Of course the world has never been in equilibrium, or stable — we just think it should be. Blame the economists with their equilibrium models, or blame the demographers with their stable population theories, or blame the inert and conservative human nature in general.

Maybe we demographers should rethink the way we present our predictions of the future. The future is an extrapolation of the past, and after all, we survived the past and have come out wealthy and happy so far, haven't we? So maybe in our future work we should mix some optimism into the presentation of our projections. Aging is not the end of the world, nor immigration, nor population growth nor low fertility, nor population decline.

Or is that too scary a thought?

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