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No Babies?

By RUSSELL SHORTO

IT WAS A SPECTACULAR LATE-MAY AFTERNOON IN SOUTHERN ITALY, but the streets of Laviano — a gloriously situated hamlet ranged across a few folds in the mountains of the Campania region — were deserted. There were no day-trippers from Naples, no tourists to take in the views up the steep slopes, the olive trees on terraces, the ruins of the 11th-century fortress with wild poppies spotting its grassy flanks like flecks of blood. And there were no locals in sight either. The town has housing enough to support a population of 3,000, but fewer than 1,600 live here, and every year the number drops. Rocco Falivena, Laviano's 56-year-old mayor, strolled down the middle of the street, outlining for me the town's demographics and explaining why, although the place is more than a thousand years old, its buildings all look so new. In 1980 an earthquake struck, taking out nearly every structure and killing 300 people, including Falivena's own parents. Then from tragedy arose the scent of possibility, of a future. Money came from the national government in Rome, and from former residents who had emigrated to the U.S. and elsewhere. The locals found jobs rebuilding their town. But when the construction ended, so did the work, and the exodus of residents continued as before.

When Falivena took office in 2002 for his second stint as mayor, two numbers caught his attention. Four: that was how many babies were born in the town the year before. And five: the number of children enrolled in first grade at the school, never mind that the school served two additional communities as well. "I knew what was my first job, to try to save the school," Falivena told me. "Because a village that does not have a school is a dead village." He racked his brain and came up with a desperate idea: pay women to have babies. And not just a token amount, either; in 2003 Falivena let it be known he would pay 10,000 euros (about \$15,000) for every woman — local or immigrant, married or single — who would give birth to and rear a child in the village. The "baby bonus," as he calls it, is structured to root new citizens in the town: a mother gets 1,500 euros when her baby is born, then a 1,500-euro payment on each of the child's first four birthdays and a final 2,500 euros the day the child enrolls in first grade. Falivena has a publicist's instincts, and he said he hoped the plan would attract media attention. It did, generating news across Italy and as far away as Australia.

Finally, as we loitered in front of a mustard-colored building up the street from the town's empty main square, a car came by. Falivena — a small, muscular man in a polo shirt, with gray hair and

a deeply creased, tanned face — flagged it down, for the young woman behind the wheel, Salvia Daniela, was one of the very people he was looking for. They exchanged a few words, and we followed Daniela back to her apartment to meet her family. Daniela, who is 31, and her 36-year-old husband, Gerardo Grande, have two children: Pasquale, 10, and Gaia, who is 5 and was one of the first “baby bonus” babies. Daniela and Grande say they are committed to being a traditional family, but it isn’t easy. Grande works for a development company and manages a bar in the evenings so that his wife can devote herself to the home. Their apartment, though cheery (with lots of enlarged photos of the kids), is cramped. “The baby bonus helped us,” Grande told me. He added, gesturing toward Falivena, “We think this man is a great mayor.”

There are some indications that Falivena’s baby bonus is succeeding — the first-grade class has 17 students this year — but that figure may be misleading. As it turns out, many of the new parents who have taken advantage of the bonus are locals who planned to have a child anyway. (Ida Robertiello, another of the baby-bonus mothers who sang Falivena’s praises for me, admitted that she was already pregnant with her son Matteo when Falivena announced his scheme.) The main effect of the bonus money may be on the timing of births. Last year Falivena was out of office, and the temporary replacement canceled the payments. “I know several women in Laviano who are pregnant now,” Daniela told me, and her husband added, with a rakish grin, that couples got busy because they knew Falivena was coming back as mayor, with a promise to restart the payments.

But with close to 50 mothers now eligible, Falivena doesn’t know how long he can keep the baby bonus going. And Laviano is still losing population.

DEMOGRAPHICALLY SPEAKING, Laviano is not unique in Italy, or in Europe. In fact, it may be a harbinger. In the 1990s, European demographers began noticing a downward trend in population across the Continent and behind it a sharply falling birthrate. Non-number-crunchers largely ignored the information until a 2002 study by Italian, German and Spanish social scientists focused the data and gave policy makers across the [European Union](#) something to ponder. The figure of 2.1 is widely considered to be the “replacement rate” — the average number of births per woman that will maintain a country’s current population level. At various times in modern history — during war or famine — birthrates have fallen below the replacement rate, to “low” or “very low” levels. But Hans-Peter Kohler, José Antonio Ortega and Francesco Billari — the authors of the 2002 report — saw something new in the data. For the first time on record, birthrates in southern and Eastern Europe had dropped below 1.3. For the demographers, this number had a special mathematical portent. At that rate, a country’s population would be cut in half in 45 years, creating a falling-off-a-cliff effect from which it would be nearly impossible to recover. Kohler and his colleagues invented an ominous new term for the phenomenon: “lowest-low fertility.”

To the uninitiated, “lowest low” seems a strange thing to worry about. A few decades ago we were

getting “the population explosion” drilled into us. The invader species homo sapiens, we learned, was eating through the planet’s resources and irretrievably fouling and wrecking its fragile systems. Has the situation changed for the better since Paul Ehrlich set off the alarm in 1968 with his best seller “The Population Bomb”? Do current headlines — global food shortages, [climate change](#) — not indicate continuing signs of calamity?

They do, as far as some are concerned, but things have changed somewhat. For one thing, around the world, even in developing countries, birthrates have plummeted — from 6.0 globally in 1972 to 2.9 today — as populations have shifted from rural areas to cities and people have adopted urban lifestyles, and the drop has perhaps lessened the urgency of the overpopulation cry. Meanwhile, in recent years another chorus of voices has sounded. Yes, we’re straining resources, they say, and it’s undeniable that some parts of the globe are overrun with humanity. But other regions now confront a very different fate. In Europe, “lowest low” isn’t just a phenomenon of rural areas like Laviano. Cities like Milan and Bologna have recorded some of the lowest birthrates anywhere, in part because the high cost of living forces couples either to move or to have fewer children. After the term was invented, “lowest-low fertility” got the attention of leaders in Brussels and national capitals across the Continent — and by now everyone from Seville to Helsinki seems to be aware of it. In Greece, the problem is so well situated in the national psyche that it is conversationally compacted: people refer simply to “the demographic.” Putting the numbers in a broader world-historical context stirred a debate about Europe’s future. Around the time that [President Kennedy](#) went to Germany and gave his “*Ich bin ein Berliner*” speech, Europe represented 12.5 percent of the world’s population. Today it is 7.2 percent, and if current trends continue, by 2050 only 5 percent of the world will be European.

To many, “lowest low” is hard evidence of imminent disaster of unprecedented proportions. “The ability to plan the decision to have a child is of course a big success for society, and for women in particular,” Letizia Mencarini, a professor of demography at the University of Turin, told me. “But if you would read the documents of demographers 20 years ago, you would see that nobody foresaw that the fertility rate would go so low. In the 1960s, the overall fertility rate in Italy was around two children per couple. Now it is about 1.3, and for some towns in Italy it is less than 1. This is considered pathological.”

There is no shortage of popular explanations to account for the drop in fertility. In Athens, it’s common to blame the city’s infamous air pollution; several years ago a radio commercial promoted air-conditioners as a way to bring back Greek lust and Greek babies. More broadly and significant, social conservatives tie the low birthrate to secularism. After arguing for decades that the West had divorced itself from God and church and embraced a self-interested and ultimately self-destructive lifestyle, abetted above all by modern birth control, they feel statistically vindicated. “Europe is infected by a strange lack of desire for the future,” [Pope Benedict](#)

proclaimed in 2006. “Children, our future, are perceived as a threat to the present.” In Germany, where the births-to-deaths ratio now results in an annual population loss of roughly 100,000, Ursula von der Leyen, Chancellor [Angela Merkel](#)’s family minister (and a mother of seven), declared two years ago that if her country didn’t reverse its plummeting birthrate, “We will have to turn out the light.” Last March, André Rouvoet, the leader of the Christian Union Party in the Netherlands (and a father of five), urged the government to get proactive and spur Dutch women to have more babies. The Canadian conservative Mark Steyn, author of the 2006 best seller “America Alone: The End of the World as We Know It,” has warned his fellow North Americans, whose birthrates are relatively high, that, regarding their European allies, “These countries are going out of business,” and that while at the end of the 21st century there may “still be a geographical area on the map marked as Italy or the Netherlands,” these will “merely be designations for real estate.”

The spiritual concerns aside, though, the main threats to Europe are economic. Alongside birthrate, the other operative factor in the economic equation is lifespan. People everywhere are living longer than ever, and lifespan is continuing to increase beyond what was once considered a natural limit. Policy makers fear that, taken together, these trends forecast a perfect demographic storm. According to a paper by Jonathan Grant and Stijn Hoorens of the Rand Europe research group: “Demographers and economists foresee that 30 million Europeans of working age will ‘disappear’ by 2050. At the same time, retirement will be lasting decades as the number of people in their 80s and 90s increases dramatically.” The crisis, they argue, will come from a “triple whammy of increasing demand on the welfare state and health-care systems, with a decline in tax contributions from an ever-smaller work force.” That is to say, there won’t be enough workers to pay for the pensions of all those long-living retirees. What’s more, there will be a smaller working-age population compared with other parts of the world; the [U.S. Census Bureau](#)’s International Database projects that in 2025, 42 percent of the people living in India will be 24 or younger, while only 22 percent of Spain’s population will be in that age group. This, in the wording of a Demographic Fitness Survey by the Adecco Institute, a London-based research group, will result in a “war for talent.” And the troubles for Europe are magnified by other factors in the existing welfare states of many of its countries. Europeans are used to early retirement — according to the Adecco survey, only 60 percent of men in France between the ages of 50 and 64 are still working.

Then there is the matter of what kind of society “lowest low” will bring. How will the predominance of one- and two-child families affect family cohesion, sibling relationships, care for elderly parents? Imagine a society in which family reunions consist of three people, in which nearly all of a child’s relatives are in their 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s, 90s. Laviano’s empty streets echo with something strange and seemingly new. As the social scientists Billari, Kohler and Ortega put it, Europe is entering “an uncharted territory in demographic history.”

The issue of [immigration](#) is related to “lowest low” as well. The fears on the right are of a continent-wide takeover by third-world hordes — mostly Muslim — who have yet to be infected by the modern malady called family planning and who threaten to transform, if not completely delete, the storied, cherished cultures of Western Europe. And to venture into even-deeper waters, no one knows how Europe’s birthrate might play out globally: whether it will contribute to the diminishing of Western influence and Western values; whether, as Steyn’s book title suggests, America will have to go it alone in this regard.

Will Europe as we know it just peter out? Will ethnic Greeks and Spaniards become extinct, taking their baklava and paella to the grave with them, to be replaced by waves of Muslim immigrants who couldn’t care less about the Acropolis as a majestic representation of Western culture? Venice has lost more than half its population since 1950; its residents believe their city is destined to become a Venice-themed attraction. Is the same going to happen to Europe as a whole? Might the United States see its closest ally decay into a real-life Euro Disney?

All interesting questions, but most are beside the main point. As it turns out, the deeper answer to the question “Where have all Europe’s babies gone?” goes far beyond the boundaries of the Continent.

TO BEGIN TO UNDERSTAND the global meaning of the low-birthrate phenomenon requires first examining Europe’s “baby bust.” Maybe the most striking way to set up the issue is via a statistic that emerged from a 2006 Eurobarometer survey by the [European Commission](#). Women were asked how many children they would like to have; the average result was 2.36 — well above the replacement level and far above the rate anywhere in Europe. If women are having significantly fewer children than they want, there must be other forces at work.

As it turns out, the situation differs by region. “It’s a mistake to think of Europe as a single entity in this respect,” Alasdair Murray, director of CentreForum, a London-based research group, told me. “There are really four different population changes happening in Europe.” One concerns Eastern Europe, where trends date from the Communist period and portend a special, and especially virulent, class of social problems. Bulgaria’s birthrate is 1.37, and life expectancy for males is seven years less than in Belgium or Germany; the E.U. estimates that Bulgaria’s population will drop from 8 million today to 5 million in 2050. Since 1989, Latvia’s population has dropped 13 percent; its fertility rate is one of the lowest in the world, and its divorce rate is among the highest in Europe, according to Linda Andersone, the deputy director of the Latvian Department of Children and Family Policy. Throughout most of Eastern Europe you see the same dark elixir of forces at play, which commentators attribute to Westernization, though it’s difficult to fix causes precisely. “We can see that birthrate declines date to the fall of the Soviet Union,” Murray said, “but is that due to the switch to a market economy or something else?”

Germany and Austria are in something of a category of their own. They share many of the same characteristics of other Western European countries with regard to forces affecting family life, but in addition childlessness is peculiarly high in these countries, and has been for some time. A 2002 study found that 27.8 percent of German women born in 1960 were childless, a rate far higher than in any other European country. (The rate in France, for example, was 10.7.) When European women age 18 to 34 were asked in another study to state their ideal number of children, 16.6 percent of those in Germany and 12.6 percent in Austria answered “none.” (In Italy, by comparison, this figure was 3.8 percent.) The main reason seems to be a basic change in attitudes on the part of some women as to their “natural” role. According to Nikolai Botev, population and development adviser at the [United Nations Population Fund](#), many observers have been surprised to find that in recent years “childlessness emerges as an ideal lifestyle.” No one has yet figured out why some countries are more predisposed to childlessness than others.

But the true fertility fault line in Europe — the fissures of which spread outward across the globe — runs between the north and the south. Setting aside the special case of countries in the east, the lowest rates in Europe — some of the lowest fertility rates in the world — are to be found in the seemingly family-friendly countries of Italy, Spain and Greece (all currently hover around 1.3). I asked Francesco Billari of Bocconi University in Milan, an author of the 2002 study that introduced the “lowest low” concept, to account for this. “If we look at very recent data for developed countries, we see that Italy has two records that are maybe world records,” he said. “One, young people in Italy stay with their parents longer than maybe anywhere else. No. 2 is the percentage of children born after the parents turn 40. These factors are related, because if you have a late start, you tend not to have a second child, and especially not a third.”

Plenty of anecdotal evidence squares with this. When I visited a day-care center for 3-month-olds to 3-year-olds in Milan, the manager, Mara Vavassori, showed me her roster of enrollment sheets. On one line of each was a date — 1964, 1967, 1963: the birth years of the parents of her toddler-clients. She had been in this business for 20 years, she said. It used to be that first-time parents were in their early to mid-20s. Today, she said, more than half were in their 40s.

On the surface there are economic explanations for why this phenomenon has occurred in southern Europe. Italy, for example, pays the lowest starting wages of any country in the E.U., which causes young people to delay striking out on their own. And as the British politician David Willetts has noted, “Living at home with your parents is a very powerful contraception.” But the deeper problem may lie precisely in the family-friendly ethos of these countries. This part of the self-definition of southern European culture — the “My Big Fat Greek Wedding” ideal — has a flip side. “In all of these countries,” Billari said, “it’s very difficult to combine work and family. And that is partly because, within couples, we have evidence that in these countries the gender relationships are very asymmetric.”

There, according to waves of recent evidence, is the rub — the result of a friction between tectonic plates in modern society that has been quietly at work for decades. The accepted demographic wisdom had been that as women enter the job market, a society's fertility rate drops. That has been broadly true in the developed world, but more recently, and especially in Europe, the numbers don't bear it out. In fact, something like the opposite has been the case. According to Hans-Peter Kohler of the [University of Pennsylvania](#), analysis of recent studies showed that “high fertility was associated with high female labor-force participation . . . and the lowest fertility levels in Europe since the mid-1990s are often found in countries with the lowest female labor-force participation.” In other words, working mothers are having more babies than stay-at-home moms.

How can this be? A study released in February of this year by Letizia Mencarini, the demographer from the University of Turin, and three of her colleagues compared the situation of women in Italy and the Netherlands. They found that a greater percentage of Dutch women than Italian women are in the work force but that, at the same time, the fertility rate in the Netherlands is significantly higher (1.73 compared to 1.33). In both countries, people tend to have traditional views about gender roles, but Italian society is considerably more conservative in this regard, and this seems to be a decisive difference. The hypothesis the sociologists set out to test was borne out by the data: women who do more than 75 percent of the housework and child care are less likely to want to have another child than women whose husbands or partners share the load. Put differently, Dutch fathers change more diapers, pick up more kids after soccer practice and clean up the living room more often than Italian fathers; therefore, relative to the population, there are more Dutch babies than Italian babies being born. As Mencarini said, “It's about how much the man participates in child care.”

The broad answer to the “Where are all the European babies?” question thus begins to suggest itself. Accompanying the spectacular transformation of modern society since the 1960s — notably the changing role of women, with greater opportunities for education and employment, the advent of modern birth control and a new ability to tailor a lifestyle — has been a tension between forces that, in many places, have not been reconciled. That tension is perfectly apparent, of course. Ask any working mother. But some societies have done a better job than others of reconciling the conflicting forces. In Europe, many countries with greater gender equality have a greater social commitment to day care and other institutional support for working women, which gives those women the possibility of having second or third children.

This is a crucial difference between the north — including France and the United Kingdom and the Scandinavian countries — and the south. The Scandinavian countries have both the most vigorous social-welfare systems in Europe and — at 1.8 — among the highest fertility rates. To better understand this north-south divide, I met with two sociologists who personify it: Mencarini and Arnstein Aassve, a Norwegian who last year took a position at Bocconi University, a university in

Milan that is becoming a center of demographic research in Europe. Demographically speaking, the two make an interesting contrast. She is a small, dark, fiery woman from southern Tuscany, given to spicing her analysis with passionate invective toward policy makers. He is a tall, reserved Scandinavian who speaks in calm tones and with precise British diction, tending to smooth his colleague's edges with scholarly qualifications. Over lunch of linguine with walnuts and arugula at an airily modern neighborhood trattoria in Milan, they dissected their cultures.

When Aassve moved from Norway to Italy last year to study fertility issues, he said, he found himself with a case of culture whiplash. As women advanced in education levels and career tracks over the past few decades, Norway moved aggressively to accommodate them and their families. The state guarantees about 54 weeks of maternity leave, as well as 6 weeks of paternity leave. With the birth of a child comes a government payment of about 4,000 euros. State-subsidized day care is standard. The cost of living is high, but then again it's assumed that both parents will work; indeed, during maternity leave a woman is paid 80 percent of her salary. "In Norway, the concern over fertility is mild," Aassve told me. "What dominates is the issue of gender equity, and that in turn raises the fertility level. For example, there is a debate right now about whether to make paternity leave compulsory. It's an issue of making sure women and men have equal rights and opportunities. If men are taking leave after the birth of a child, the women can return to work for part of that time."

What Aassve found in Italy was strikingly different. While Italian women tend to be as highly educated as Scandinavian women, he said, about 50 percent of Italian women work, compared with between 75 percent and 80 percent of women in Scandinavian countries. Despite its veneer of modernity, Italian society prefers women to stay at home after they become mothers, and the government reinforces this. There is little state-financed child care, especially for new mothers, and most newlyweds still find homes close to one or both sets of parents, the assumption being that the extended family will help raise the children. But this no longer works as it once did. "As couples tend to delay childbearing," Aassve says, "the age gap between generations is widening, and in many cases grandparents, who would be the ones relied upon for child care, themselves become the ones in need of care."

Meanwhile, the same economic forces are at work in both northern and southern Europe — it's just as hard to make ends meet in Madrid or Milan or Athens as in Oslo or Stockholm — which gives the predominantly two-income families in the northern countries an edge. This in turn leads to another disparity between north and south. In Scandinavia, thanks in part to state support, the more children a family has, the wealthier it is likely to be, whereas in southern Europe having children is a financial sinkhole, which drags a family toward poverty. Such an analysis flies in the face of social conservatives, who argue that simply encouraging people to have more babies will raise the population and add fuel to the economic engine.

If this reading of southern European countries is correct — that their superficial commitment to modernity, to a 21st-century lifestyle, is fatally at odds with a view of the family structure that is rooted in the 19th century — it should apply in other parts of the world, should it not? Apparently it does. This spring, the Japanese government released figures showing that the country's under-14 population was the lowest since 1908. The head of Thailand's department of health announced in May that his country's birthrate now stands at 1.5, far below the replacement level. "The world record for lowest-low fertility right now is South Korea, at 1.1," Francesco Billari told me. "Japan is just about as low. What we are seeing in Asia is a phenomenon of the 2000s, rather than the 1990s. And it seems the reasons are the same as for southern Europe. All of these are societies still rooted in the tradition where the husband earned all the money. Things have changed, not only in Italy and Spain but also in Japan and Korea, but those societies have not yet adjusted. The relationships within households have not adjusted yet." Western Europe, then, is not the isolated case that some make it out to be. It is simply the first region of the world to record extremely low birthrates.

WHICH BRINGS US TO A sparkling exception. Last year the fertility rate in the United States hit 2.1, the highest it has been since the 1960s and higher than almost anywhere in the developed world. Factor in immigration and you have a nation that is far more than holding its own in terms of population. In 1984 the U.S. Census Bureau projected that in the year 2050 the U.S. population would be 309 million. In 2008 it's already 304 million, and the new projection for 2050 is 420 million.

"Europeans say to me, How does the U.S. do it in this day and age?" says Carl Haub of the Population Reference Bureau in Washington. According to Haub and others, there is no single explanation for the relatively high U.S. fertility rate. The old conservative argument — that a traditional, working-husband-and-stay-at-home-wife family structure produces a healthy, growing population — doesn't apply, either in the U.S. or anywhere else in the world today. Indeed, the societies most wedded to maintaining that traditional family structure seem to be those with the lowest birthrates. The antidote, in Western Europe, has been the welfare-state model, in which the state provides comprehensive support to couples that want to have children. But the U.S. runs counter to this. Some commentators explain its healthy birthrate in terms of the relatively conservative and religiously oriented nature of American society, which both encourages larger families. It's also true that mores have evolved in the U.S. to the point where not only is it socially acceptable for fathers to be active participants in raising children, but it's also often socially unacceptable for them to do otherwise.

But one other factor affecting the higher U.S. birthrate stands out in the minds of many observers. "There's much less flexibility in the European system," Haub says. "In Europe, both the society and the job market are more rigid." There may be little state subsidy for child care in the U.S., and

there is certainly nothing like the warm governmental nest that Norway feathers for fledgling families, but the American system seems to make up for it in other ways. As Hans-Peter Kohler of the University of Pennsylvania writes: “In general, women are deterred from having children when the economic cost — in the form of lower lifetime wages — is too high. Compared to other high-income countries, this cost is diminished by an American labor market that allows more flexible work hours and makes it easier to leave and then re-enter the labor force.” An American woman might choose to suspend her career for three or five years to raise a family, expecting to be able to resume working; that happens far less easily in Europe.

So there would seem to be two models for achieving higher fertility: the neosocialist Scandinavian system and the laissez-faire American one. Aassve put it to me this way: “You might say that in order to promote fertility, your society needs to be generous or flexible. The U.S. isn’t very generous, but it is flexible. Italy is not generous in terms of social services and it’s not flexible. There is also a social stigma in countries like Italy, where it is seen as less socially accepted for women with children to work. In the U.S., that is very accepted.”

By this logic, the worst sort of system is one that partly buys into the modern world — expanding educational and employment opportunities for women — but keeps its traditional mind-set. This would seem to define the demographic crisis that Italy, Spain and Greece find themselves in — and, perhaps, Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan and other parts of the world. Indeed, demographers have been surprised to find rapid fertility changes in the third world, as more and more women work and modern birth-control methods become standard options. “The earlier distinct fertility regimes, ‘developed’ and ‘developing,’ are increasingly disappearing in global comparisons of fertility levels,” according to Edward Jow-Ching Tu, a sociologist at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. According to the [United Nations](#), the birthrate in 25 developing countries — including Cuba, Costa Rica, Iran, Sri Lanka and China — now stands at or below the replacement level. In some cases — notably China — the drop is explained by a concentrated effort at containing the population. In the rest, something else is happening. The lesson of southern Europe is perhaps operative: embrace the modern only partway and you put your society — women in particular — in a vise. Something has to give, and that turns out to be the future.

FOR \$100 OR SO YOU CAN buy online a Third Reich “Mother’s Cross” (officially, a Cross of Honor of the German Mother). The medals were struck, beginning in 1938, in bronze for women who had four children, in silver for mothers of six and in gold for women who gave birth to eight. They were given out annually on [Hitler](#)’s mother’s birthday to heroines of the cause of fertility, which the *Führer* referred to as “the battlefield of women.” Natalism — the state-sponsored policy to increase the birthrate — has a rather tainted pedigree. Nevertheless, in the age of “lowest-low fertility,” it has made a comeback. If your population is falling, one logical, or seemingly logical,

way to build it up again is to encourage people to have more babies.

Appeals to patriotism are one means of encouragement. Money is another. Mayor Falivena of Laviano is not the only one doling out cash for babies. Natalist plans in effect today in Europe include tax incentives, state-subsidized child care and both onetime and ongoing payments. The Netherlands, for an example of the latter, gives every family a *kinderbijslag*, or child supplement, of an average of about \$1,300 per child per year to age 13, and less thereafter. (While not a direct cash payment, the U.S. has a per-child tax credit of \$1,000 a year.)

While some of those pushing natalist policies have nationalistic or religious motivations — and a driving concern to preserve cultural identity — few advocate a return to stay-at-home motherhood. Indeed, as David Willetts declared in a 2003 speech on Europe's shrinking and aging population, "Feminism is the new natalism." That is, even conservatives like Willetts acknowledge that societies that support working couples have higher birthrates than those in which mothers are housewives.

The problem is that nobody is sure if natalist policies have much of an impact on birthrate, let alone on population. Most studies show an uptick in the birthrate in countries that implement some pro-child program, but a very small one. Perhaps the most comprehensive study to date, which was conducted in 1997 and analyzed 22 countries, found that a 25 percent increase in child-related subsidies to couples resulted in an average of 0.07 more births per woman. Some experts conclude that — as the case of Laviano seems to suggest — the real impact is on the timing of births: a woman who knows she wants to have another child may do so sooner in order to take advantage of a payment.

In 2003, the same year Falivena introduced his 10,000-euro "baby bonus," Italy adopted a national policy of offering 1,000 euros to every mother who had a second child. (Falivena hastened to tell me that his policy came first.) But when the Berlusconi government fell in 2006, the national scheme was dropped. Then, in his first address on returning to power in 2008, Berlusconi suggested that the government might revive natalist programs. Letizia Mencarini invoked this back-and-forthing with disdain: "A policy for families has to be implemented over a long period. In Italy we're changing our minds all the time."

France would seem to provide one example in support of natalist policies; if so, it may be the comprehensive and long-term nature of French commitment that proves decisive. After World War I, with the population decimated, a public outcry and debate led to the government's weaving natalist policies into the social fabric. The 1939 "*code de la famille*," included financial incentives for motherhood. While Germany moved far away from its tainted natalist policies after the war, France kept its programs alive throughout the 20th century. Today, they run from tax breaks to the *carte famille nombreuse*, or "large-family card," which gives discounts on travel and museum

entrances. According to Claude Martin, a research director at the French National Center for Scientific Research, France has one of Europe's highest birthrates, at 1.9. Martin says that this may be because of "the permanent public investment to facilitate conciliation between work and child-care responsibility."

Then again, for the past several decades France's fertility rate has been about the same as that in the United Kingdom, which has much more limited pro-natalist policies. Claude Martin notes an adjunct to child-related subsidies that may be more of a factor: 80 percent of French women between ages 25 and 50 are employed. It seems that money in itself isn't a sufficient lure to get couples to have babies. They may want another child, but adding a few euros to their bank accounts doesn't solve the underlying problems. As Alasdair Murray of CentreForum put it, "Structural problems in the labor and housing markets are the biggest barriers to fertility." The crux, Murray says, is that countries with low fertility "are still geared toward a male, single-wage-earning model. Women are expected to exit the labor market when they have children."

Besides natalist strategies, there is another obvious approach to increasing the population. If you can't breed them, lure them. The population flow largely went the other way during the first half of the 20th century, but immigration is quickly transforming European societies. Some are looking to Canada or Australia as models: there, the focus is on selective immigration — opening the door for those who have knowledge and training that will benefit the economy.

The United Kingdom is going through a radical transformation in its social makeup, largely as a result of immigration. Where a few years ago people were worrying about birthrate and falling population projections, a government report in late 2007 projected Britain would have 11 million more people by 2031 — an increase of 18 percent — and by one estimate 69 percent of the growth would come from immigrants and their children. Liam Byrne, Britain's immigration minister, called earlier last year for "radical action" to manage the system.

The British situation today seems a far cry from "lowest low," but it doesn't mean that immigration is the answer to low birthrates. The actual numbers, according to several authorities, are discouraging over the long run. By one analysis of U.N. figures, Britain would need more than 60 million new immigrants by 2050 — more than doubling the size of the country — to keep its current ratio of workers to pensioners, and Germany would need a staggering 188 million immigrants in the same time period. One reason for such huge numbers is that while immigration helps fill cities and schools and factories in the short term, the dynamic adjusts over time. Immigrants who come from cultures where large families are standard quickly adapt to the customs of their new homes. And eventually immigrants age, too, so that the benefit that incoming workers give to the pension system today becomes a drag on the system in the future. A European Commission working document published in November 2007 concludes that "truly massive and

increasing flows of young migrants would be required” to offset current demographic changes. Few Europeans want that. Immigration already touches all sorts of raw nerves, forcing debates about cultural identity, citizenship tests, national canons, terrorism and tolerance, religious versus secular values.

Meanwhile, in the midst of arguments about natalist and immigration policies come other voices and more elemental questions. Is it even possible to increase the population significantly? Is it even necessary? There are those who think that “lowest low” is not in itself a looming disaster but more of a challenge, even an opportunity. The change that’s required, they say, is not in breeding habits but thinking habits.

ONE DAY IN MARCH, I was standing on a platform at the top of a smokestack attached to a defunct sausage factory in the German city of Dessau, looking out on a ragged urban landscape: derelict factory buildings, brick homes and shops, a railroad track snaking through a swath of grass and dirt. Even the brilliant spring weather didn’t improve the view. But the bearish middle-aged man beside me was full of enthusiasm. He waved an arm expansively, indicating a distant tree line. “From here you see that the city is embedded in a protected nature area,” he said through an interpreter. “We will bring that into the city.” Listening to Karl Gröger, director of the city’s department of building, is disorienting; where local politicians are supposed to cheer development, he was standing in the midst of his city’s industrial infrastructure and saying, in effect, “Someday all of this will be wilderness.”

Like Laviano, Dessau is a harbinger of the demographic decline the rest of Europe faces. But where Rocco Falivena went natalist in an attempt to confront the issue of decline head-on, a consortium of 17 cities in this part of Germany has adopted a more innovative strategy. A decade or so after the fall of the Berlin Wall, politicians and town planners in eastern Germany were forced to realize that the growth they were expecting with the turn to capitalism and representative government wasn’t coming. They were in the crosswinds of two European phenomena: the economic malaise of the former Communist states and plummeting birthrates across the Continent.

“This was the first time in human history that cities started to shrink rather than grow,” Dr. Karl-Heinz Daehre, minister of land development and traffic for the province of Saxony-Anhalt, told me — with a trace of hyperbole — as we sat in his office in the provincial capital of Magdeburg. “There was a mental barrier that people had to overcome, that we had to tear down parts of our cities in order to grow, or to move forward. We understood that this wasn’t a Saxony-Anhalt problem, or even a German problem, but was part of an international problem. So we sought help.”

It so happens that Dessau is the city where, in 1926, the architect Walter Gropius planted the Bauhaus school of design, which embraced — and to some extent defined — Modernism and tried

to mesh design and architecture with the ways people lived and worked in the 20th century. “Nothing seemed more logical to us than to remember the 1920s and Gropius and the Bauhaus,” Daehre said.

The original Bauhaus building still stands in Dessau. It is sleek and cool and simple, with retro touches that remind you of every 1950s-era school building, every mid- or late-20th century office or factory, because it is in a sense the granddaddy of them all. The current director of the Bauhaus Institute, Omar Akbar, greeted me in his office there. Akbar is a dapper man and a gentle visionary who was born in Kabul, Afghanistan, and immigrated with his parents to Germany as a small boy. He talked about the high-flying ideals of Gropius and his colleagues, and how their approach to design was so revolutionary it became politically dangerous (it was considered “un-German” by the Nazis).

Akbar said that after officials approached him, he came to see the demographic challenges of Europe as a renewed opportunity for the Bauhaus Institute, a chance for it once again to play a role in defining the modern. “We said to the government of Saxony-Anhalt, ‘Shrinkage is a completely new phenomenon,’ ” Akbar told me. “We have to look for new ways to deal with it.” According to some, a declining population presents certain opportunities: to increase efficiency and livability, to change lifestyle and environment for the better. The plan that Akbar’s team came up with was for 18 cities in the region (two cities now share one government) to submit to an exhaustive process of review and soul-searching under the direction of Bauhaus planners and, by the year 2010, to come up with long-term redevelopment strategies appropriate to each — to find a way for each city to shrink constructively.

Dessau itself, Akbar said, had two distinctive features. One, as Karl Gröger indicated from the sausage-factory lookout, is that it is surrounded by protected national forest. The other is that it has no historic town center (80 percent of the city was destroyed in World War II) and thus no core. The plan, therefore, calls for demolishing underused sections of the city and weaving the nature on the periphery into the center: to create “urban islands set in a landscaped zone,” as Sonja Beeck, a Bauhaus planner, told me. “That will make the remaining urban areas denser and more alive.” The city has lost 25 percent of its population in recent years. “That means it is 25 percent too big,” Gröger said. “So far we have erased 2,500 flats from the map, and we have 8,000 more to go.” Beeck and Gröger walked with me through an area where a whole street had been turned into a grassy sward. Many residents were dubious at first, they told me, but as we walked, a woman recognized the government official and marched up to chat about when promised trees and flowers would be planted in front of her building.

Eisleben, another of the cities in the consortium, has a picture-perfect 16th-century downtown but is losing people fast, and many of its historic buildings have been long unused and uninhabitable.

Eisleben's shrinkage strategy centers on history: it happens to be the birthplace of Martin Luther. The city is laying out a tourist route — from the house in which Luther was born to his first church to the church in which he gave the last sermon before he died — that shows off its old center and turns its many derelict buildings and empty lots into art installations related to the father of Protestantism. The idea is to attract more tourists and money and build up the locals' pride in their history. There is a certain paradox here: thanks to its Communist heritage, this part of Germany has the distinction of being one of the least religious places on earth. Eisleben gets 100,000 religious pilgrims a year, but only 14 percent of its population are churchgoers, and hardly anybody expects a turnaround.

But while few locals themselves may feel religiously inclined, the thinking is that if religious pilgrimage is the best card in your hand, you play it. This notion — embrace shrinkage in order to revitalize your economy, rather than trying to coax women to have more babies — is, according to more than a few observers of the European scene, the right tack. Or better said, it is one part of the best overall strategy — one that embraces population decline. For there are those who argue that low birthrate in itself is not a problem at all. Paul Ehrlich, the Stanford scientist who warned us about the “population bomb” in the 1960s, is more certain than ever that the human race is catastrophically straining the planet. “It's insane to consider low birthrate as a crisis,” he told me. “Basically every person I know in my section of the [National Academy of Sciences](#) thinks it's wonderful that rich countries are starting to shrink their populations to sustainable levels. We have to do that because we're wrecking our life-support systems.”

Low birthrates and an aging population, according to Vladimir Spidla, director of employment, social affairs and equal opportunities for the European Commission, “is the inevitable consequence of developments that are fundamentally positive, in particular increased life expectancy and more choice over whether and when to have children.”

Alasdair Murray of CentreForum made the case this way: “There is an error whereby birthrate is being blamed for future economic woes. The European population is declining, and I don't see that you can do much about that. But the real question is: How necessary is population growth to economic growth? I say not much. A huge number of people in Europe are underemployed or out of work. Get them back in the labor force, and some of these problems are mitigated. That should be the first target, rather than getting people pregnant.” To this end, there are efforts afoot to increase working life at both ends of the spectrum. In the Netherlands, for example, where thanks to early-retirement plans, only 20 percent of people over age 60 are working, the government has recently mounted a campaign to get people used to the idea of working to age 65.

Those inclined to see the glass as half-full include some people who are closest to the numbers. James W. Vaupel, founding director of the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research in

Rostock, Germany, looking in particular at Germany's demographic status, is downright sunny on the future. He, too, says that the shrinking and graying of European societies is inevitable, but he suggests that "on balance, the future will probably be better than the past. People will probably live longer, healthier lives. Continued economic growth, even if at a slower pace than in the past, will further raise standards of living."

I put this to Carl Haub of the Population Reference Bureau, who monitors global fertility on a daily basis from his perch in Washington. Is it possible that these are basically "good problems," that Europeans, having trimmed their birthrates, are actually on the right path? That all they have to do is adjust their economies, find creative ways to shrink their cities, get more young and old people into jobs, so that they can keep their pension and health-care systems functioning?

Haub wasn't buying it. "Maybe tinkering with the retirement age and making other economic adjustments is good," he said. "But you can't go on forever with a total fertility rate of 1.2. If you compare the size of the 0-to-4 and 29-to-34 age groups in Spain and Italy right now, you see the younger is almost half the size of the older. You can't keep going with a completely upside-down age distribution, with the pyramid standing on its point. You can't have a country where everybody lives in a nursing home."

Russell Shorto is a contributing writer for the magazine. His most recent book, "Descartes' Bones: A Skeletal History of the Conflict Between Faith and Reason," will be published in October.

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