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The Birthrate Continues to Fall (February 1, 2010)

Berlin writer and journalist Tanja Dückers vehemently rejects attempts to attribute Germany's low birthrate to insufficient religiosity; rather, she places the blame on the family policy of the past decades. Above all, she attributes the declining birthrate to a lack of childcare facilities. On this point, she compares Germany with France, the "European fertility champion."

Religiosity Doesn't Help

The birthrate in Germany continued to decline in 2009. Obvious causes are overlooked in the search for reasons. Tanja Dückers comments.

Suddenly people are asking whether Germans are having so few children because they aren't religious enough. Malte Lehming has taken up this theme under the title "Becoming more religious for more children."

But the presumed correlation between religiosity and the birthrate is – in the case of Europe – simply nonsense: Europe's leading Catholic nation, Poland, has, like some other post-Communist countries, a low birthrate, as do the Catholic nations Portugal, Spain, and Italy.

By contrast, the "European fertility champion" (as the French media put it) for the third time in a row is France (where each woman has, on average, 2.02 children, as opposed to 1.35 in Germany). France – a country with comparatively few citizens who belong to religious denominations. The same is true of the Scandinavian countries, whose birthrates are likewise among the highest in Europe.

The distinction between "traditional" and "vibrant" religious communities also tends to confuse rather than illuminate meaningful connections between religion and the birthrate – "vibrant" and "traditional" religiosity are often not mutually exclusive, but rather exist in parallel in various age cohorts or social milieus. And many people, also in Germany, live out their religiosity with varying intensity in different periods or phases of life. The concept suggests a stasis in thought and emotion that doesn't correspond to reality.

[...]

Evidently, there is currently no adequate measure for the reasons behind the decline in births in Germany. And once again, people seek to blame the individual: commentators appeal to the conscience of men, but especially of women, and suspect women of moral shortcomings – instead of looking, quite profanely, at failures in family policy over the past few decades: the daycare options for children in this country remain completely insufficient.

In the old federal states, according to the Federal Office of Statistics, many regions only have enough daycare spots for five percent of children under three (France: enough for nearly 50 percent). In Germany, one-third of children over three still have no place, while in France nearly 100 percent of children over three are in daycare.

Given that people have been moaning and groaning about the imminent extinction of the Germans for decades, it is incomprehensible that nothing was done to remedy this situation sooner. It's scandalous that a daycare spot for a child under three can be guaranteed only from 2013 on. For there is no denying that most families today depend on two incomes and thus on daycare for their children.

Structural changes in the labor market over the past few decades have contributed to this situation in a decisive way: a gigantic low-income sector was able to establish itself here in Germany, more successfully than in almost any other Western European country, and real incomes have dropped more than the EU average.

In addition, the number of self-employed has risen dramatically over the past twenty years (according to information from the Research Institute for Small- and Medium-Size Business, one in three women in Germany was self-employed in 2008). Since, for the self-employed, work does not simply cease with the birth of a child, they are especially dependent on a well-developed childcare system.

In any case, the majority of those gainfully employed in this country cannot (or can no longer) afford to earn less or give up one income. In "post-feminist" times, women have long since ceased to work solely for reasons of "self-realization" (this is surely of little concern to the cashier at Lidl or the friendly lady on the other end of the hotline); rather, they work because the husband's income is inadequate.

That being the case, the discussions of the past few years about childless "career women" have been completely out of place. A woman in Germany must still expect that the birth of a child will lead to a long-term or permanent withdrawal from the workforce. At the same time, since the change in the divorce laws, women in Germany feel even more pressure to work: for if the marriage fails, they now receive support for only a few years.

Even in the most recent days, dubious priorities were set (the cash-for-clunkers program could be passed more quickly than an increase in the number of daycare spots). Only a few future-oriented ideas were put forth for a family policy that is suitable for this day and age. While in

Germany the “hearth premium” is being discussed, the French Minister of Family Affairs, Philippe Bas, stated provocatively: “Children are more successful when mothers work.” At the very least, studies commissioned by the French Ministry for Family Affairs show that maternal employment is not a handicap to children’s success in school.”

The extensive childcare opportunities in France are complemented by generous financial support and tax breaks, especially after the birth of the second child, as well as incentives for the mother’s quick return to the workforce. For French families, too, are mostly dependent on two incomes. Parents with three children are de facto exempt from taxation. And there is a three-year parenting allowance. In specifics, as well, “French conditions” are more family friendly: a father in Germany is entitled to one day off after the birth of his child; in France, a father gets fourteen. And mothers receive sixteen weeks of paid maternity leave.

The French social psychologist Dominique Frischer is convinced that the compatibility of motherhood and work is the reason for the French baby boom. In any case, the birthrate cannot be attributed to the higher number of migrant children, since immigrants in France adjust fairly quickly to the national average when it comes to the birthrate.

Thus there is much to be done in terms of family and education policy. Too much to drift off into the metaphysical realm.

Source: Tanja Dückers, “Religiosität hilft nicht” [“Religiosity Doesn’t Help”], ZEIT online, February 1, 2010.

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