

"Europe must radically change its attitude towards children"

Fewer babies were born in Switzerland in 2024 than ever before. Just like almost everywhere else in the . British demographer Paul Morland explains why Child poverty is contagious, where the limits of immigration lie and what leads to the modern flight from the family. **Interview: Nicole Althaus**

NZZ AM SONNTAG: *Mr Morland, more than 8 billion people populate the world today. Earth, and by 2086 it is predicted to be 10 billion before the population shrinks. So it will still be a while before the title of your book - "No one left" - true. Are you fuelling panic?*

PAUL MORLAND: No! You have to think of demographics as an incredibly large and slow steamer. It takes an incredibly long time for a change of course to become visible. That is precisely the problem: around fifty years ago sometime in the 1970s, the birth rate in many European countries fell below the level of generational replacement. We should have been worried back then. But we didn't, because a country's population continues to grow for quite a while, relatively few older people die and enough young women have children. So in the long term, it will be problematic. In demographic terms, however, the long term means that action must be taken today.

Is the age of depopulation that we are entering also so elusive because humanity has no collective concept of it?

In fact, you have to look all the way back to the Middle Ages. The last time the world's population shrank was in the middle of the 14th century, when the plague ravaged Europe. After that, the classic demographic model prevailed for a long time: people multiplied like carrots and died like flies. Until industrialisation changed everything, hunger decreased, people moved to the cities, hygienic and medical progress reduced mortality and, finally, women had careers instead of children. Most people in Europe today are aware that the world is getting greyer, but not what it means when more workers are leaving the market than are coming in.

Because there is still enough immigration?



Paul Morland

Born in 1964, the scientist is one of the world's most renowned demographers. He studied philosophy, economics and international relations at Oxford and carried out research at Birkbeck College, University of London, specialising in demography. Morland is the author of several books, father of three children and lives in London.

Exactly. To understand what could be in store for us, you have to look at Japan. The country was long regarded as the country of the future. Then it reached the demographic point that China is now at and the population shrank - followed by thirty years of economic stagnation. Not only economic growth, but also the degree of innovation depends on having enough young, well-trained workers. Old people like me can still work, but we rarely come up with really new ideas. You can see from the patent rate that creativity is declining in Japan. However, the most painful consequences are often not even addressed because they don't appear in the statistics.

And these are?

When the population shrinks, the villages are the first to become deserted. We are already seeing this in East Germany. In Japan, even the suburbs of cities are now being depopulated. Every week, around 4000 people in Japan die of maternal mortality.

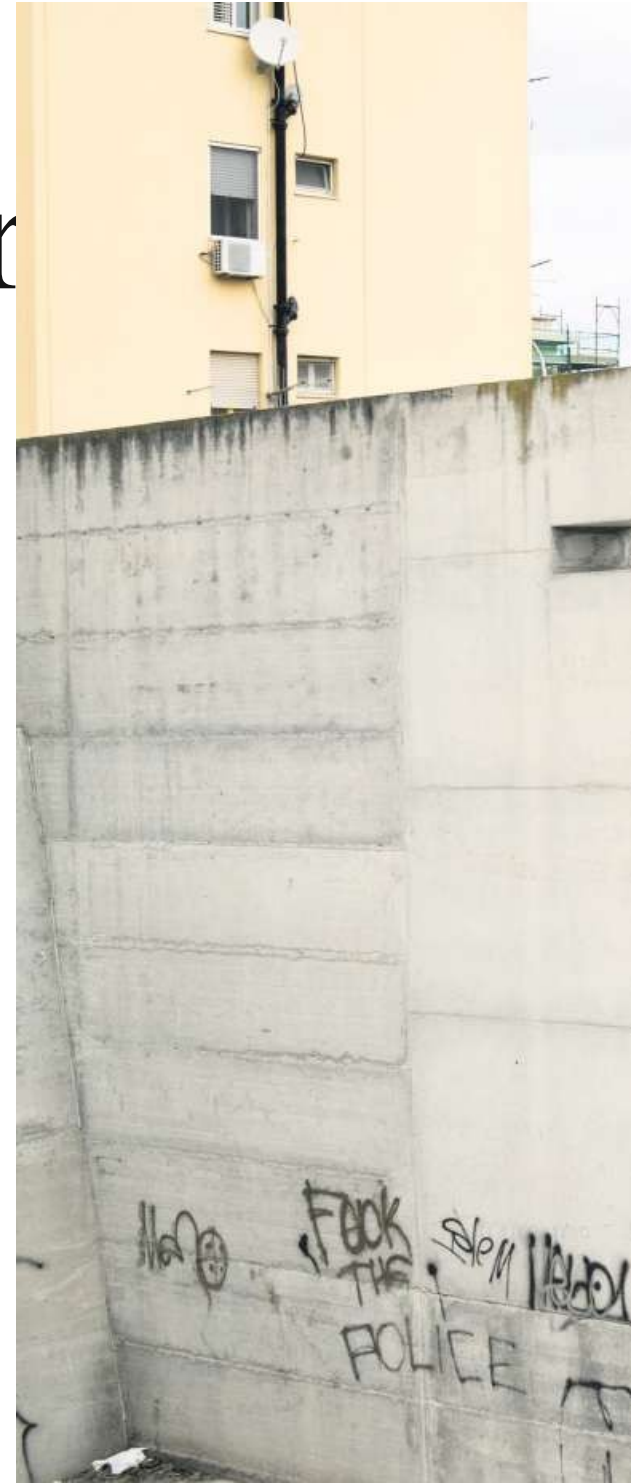
alone in their own four walls. An entire industry has grown out of the need to clear and clean homes in which people were found weeks after their death. And even if there are offspring, a few children have to look after many elderly relatives. When I visited Korea, I always came across groups of grandparents, parents and aunts in restaurants or parks, all gathered around a single child. You wouldn't want to be in their shoes.

In Japan, robots pflegen old people. Are artificial intelligence and technological progress the answer?

A recently published report by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology investigated the use of robots in a Japanese retirement home and came to the conclusion that they added to the carers' workload rather than taking any away. Of course, artificial intelligence will massively change the world of work, but the above finding fits with the historical facts: So far, no technological progress has ever led to fewer jobs. In most cases, the opposite has been the case. And even if artificial intelligence does indeed destroy more jobs than it creates, the often-proven fact remains that people need to be around other people to lead a healthy and happy life.

Between 1920 and 1930, the birth rate in Europe fell, only to rise rapidly after the Second World War. Could such a scenario be repeated?

Hardly. Rates fell much lower after the 1960s and have not recovered since then. I see Europe as a demographic disaster area: there are countries where things are going badly, such as France, Ireland and Scandinavia. And there are others where things are miserable: Italy, Portugal, Spain, Germany and the Balkans are among them. These countries are facing the demographic trilemma.



Children have long since become a common sight on Italian streets.

What do you mean by that?

For me, there are three decisive factors: a dynamic economy, ethnic continuity and a penchant for small families. A society can afford two of these, but not all three. Japan, for example, has collectively opted for small families and ethnic continuity and has allowed few immigrants into the country. The country is paying for this with stagnation. And a national debt that amounts to 250 per cent of gross domestic product. Germany, the UK and Switzerland want a dynamic economy despite small families - They are focussing on immigration, which will change the country.

For Viennese demographer Wolfgang Lutz, a low birth rate is only a catastrophe for nationalists, the do not want immigration.

I am pro-natalist, I support the political promotion of the family and am still not against immigration. But there are limits to this. In the battle for well-trained skilled labour, rich countries with a high quality of life and high wages like Switzerland will remain attractive. However, many locals find an immigration rate that is too high in too short a time much less attractive. It is not for nothing that anti-immigration parties are growing in France, Germany and Italy. What's more, the pool of immigrants from countries with a good standard of education is shrinking along with the population. It will be much more difficult to integrate poorly educated people from Nigeria into the economy than well-educated Polish women.

Today, more Ghanaian doctors work in the UK than in Ghana itself. . .

. . . yet Ghana has 90 per cent fewer doctors per capita and an infant mortality rate that is ten times higher. Europe once divided up Africa's soil among itself, today it is competing for its human capital. I think that is similarly arrogant.



GEORGE GEORGIOU / PANOS

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Is humanity simply not as keen to spread its genes as is claimed?

We have a demographic fertility crisis, not a biological one. Both men and women still want children, but they are no longer having them. Almost no matter where they live. And scientists have been wrong time and time again: Europe has long feared the "yellow peril", but today India has replaced China as the world's most populous country. And it may surprise many people that a woman in Calcutta only has one child on average.

Why is our perception of such demographic developments so distorted?

Because we cling to images. We still associate the Italian Mamma with a large flock of children and two daily prayers to the Madonna - although Italian families have been a part of our society since the middle of the 20th century. The fertility rate in the 20th century is quite low, and Catholicism has long ceased to protect against child poverty. We also think that Islam is a bulwark against child poverty, but North Africa, the Middle East and Iran have also fallen below the reproduction rate of 2.1 children per woman that would be needed to replace the population.

So it applies to both Catholic and Protestant nations, Buddhist and Muslim. And it doesn't matter whether they are democratically organised or autocratically governed. What is so contagious about the falling birth rate?

This is a question that even the demographers are still trying to answer. Whenever you think you have discovered the root of the problem, you come across an exception. The richer the country, the fewer children? This refutes the fact that the birth rate is falling even in poor countries, but Israel can still afford to have large families. The idea that the breakdown of traditional family norms, i.e. marriage, children, role sharing, is to blame? That doesn't hold up either. Greece, Italy and, above all, Korea prove the opposite; people do get married there and traditional gender images are stronger than elsewhere. But the birth rates are the lowest ever. That leaves women's education - it is certainly one of the most important, if not the most important reason for modern child poverty in the world.

Educated women are too clever to bear many children?

Firstly, educated women are also economically in a position to make their own decisions.

to meet. Secondly, societies in which women have access to education are also societies in which they can use contraceptives. If these two conditions are met, everything on the question: What does the woman want? As a rule, an academic woman does not want six children, but often - even in Switzerland - she wants more than she gets.

So the crux lies in the difference wanting and having?

Precisely. If you want to boost the birth rate, you need to focus more on the reasons why people don't want to have children.

In Viktor Orban's Hungary, women no longer have to pay taxes after the birth of their fourth child, and in France a third child also reduces a family's tax burden

The birth rates in both countries are nevertheless falling. Does family support help all?

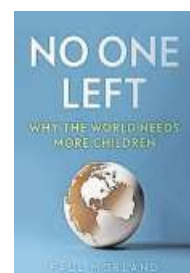
It is difficult to measure their impact. The measures change too often for this and there are always several factors at play. Hungary has invested large sums of money and still only managed to increase the birth rate slightly,

"NO ONE LEFT" BY PAUL MORLAND

The basics of demography are actually simple: people are born, they die, they immigrate or off. How to change population, economy and state power.

Today, fewer children are born almost everywhere than would be necessary for humanity to replace itself. The consequences are labour shortages, pension and debt crises. crises. Paul Morland sees

the solution in a new, progressive pro-natalism. (Paul Morland, No One Left, Swift Press, 2024.)



Now it's falling again. But we don't know, how low it would be today without these measures. France is certainly not the country with the highest birth rate in Europe for nothing, even though it also recorded a historic low birth rate last year. Several studies show that affordable daycare places are the most effective.

They have achieved little in Japan.

That is true. External childcare is particularly useful in societies where women are well integrated into the labour market and men also help out at home.

Scandinavia has always been praised as a role model when it comes to family support and the emancipation of women and men. Nevertheless, Norway, Finland and Denmark are also at an all-time low. 8.3 per cent decline. Can Europe still be helped?

One thing is clear: a return to the is neither feasible nor desirable.

Modern societies are trying to reconcile two potentially contradictory things: on the one hand, women's full participation in the labour market and, on the other, the unchangeable biological reality of childbirth. In doing so, we must not compromise women's rights, we must harmonise them with biology.

That sounds nice, but how is it supposed to work?

Politics is important, but culture is more important. This is proven by Israel, the only exception in the Western world. Even if you exclude Orthodox Jewish women, the country has the highest birth rate. Yet the women are educated, employed and, like the Swiss, do not enjoy generous parental leave. However, there is one fundamental difference between Israelis: they have not yet organised their lives without children. Larger families are not the exception, but the norm.

And that has a normative effect?

Exactly. Both large and small families strengthen themselves in a society. Where children are a natural part of life, parents receive more help and understanding. And young women are infected by the enthusiasm for children. Conversely, it is also true that where people have few children, tolerance dwindles. Parents find it harder to find accommodation, they are mobbed on public transport and the nuclear family becomes a role model for the next generation.

You can hardly make it child-friendly.

This is certainly not easy. History shows that the downward adjustment of family size relatively fast, while the upward adjustment is rare. For example, migrant women have always adapted quickly to the norm in their country of immigration and have also had fewer children. But I remain optimistic.

And what fuels your optimism?

The awareness of what lies ahead,

is only growing slowly. Politics, the economy, we all need to debate more about what we want. If people in Europe, in Switzerland, want to continue to be satisfied with so few children, then they will either have to make friends with a shrinking economy or with the idea of many more immigrants from foreign cultures into the country. Neither is a death sentence, but it is a complicated new context that needs to be dealt with politically.

to navigate. I am in favour of a modern, progressive natalism wherever I can. Europe must radically change its attitude towards children.

Do you want a kind of welcoming culture for babies?

You could put it like that. But it doesn't just need women who are willing to give birth. It needs everyone. Politics, the economy and men who lend a hand at home. We tend to forget that there hardly a better world in which to have children than ours. Even if we don't get the birth rate to two children per woman, but just 1.5, it's still worth it. The population will decline slowly, but the ratio of pensioners to workers will improve. And that is crucial.