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LOWEST-LOW FERTILITY IN JAPAN: CONSEQUENCES FOR A ONCE-GREAT NATION

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ABSTRACT. Japan, once a great economic superpower, is currently one of a number of countries experiencing lowest-low fertility, having a total fertility rate of less than 1.5. This demographic figure exists alongside two decades of low economic growth, undermining confidence in national integrity and longevity. The association of low growth and lowest-low fertility has provoked a contest between two visions for national rejuvenation – one an old and increasingly discredited liberalism, and the second, a new demographic conservatism. Japan's debate is not new or unique. Questioning the methods for national replacement and the relationship between fertility and national integrity remains a crucial aspect of nationalism in a globalized world. In the Japanese context, the contest is between two visions for the nation – on the one hand, a cautious nationalism with attendant liberal proclivities; on the other a more conservative vision for the role of women in the family and civic duties. The election of the Democratic Party of Japan (DJP) in 2009 saw fertility issues prominent in the election campaign. Nonetheless, recapturing the lost economic greatness and the role of fertility in definitions of Japanese nationalism remain unresolved and controversial issues.

KEY WORDS: lowest-low fertility, Japan, liberalism, new conservatism, nationalism.

INTRODUCTION: FERTILITY DECLINE AND NATIONAL INTEGRITY

Japan is one of many countries experiencing lowest-low fertility having a total fertility rate of 1.36 (Table 1). Lowest-low fertility describes the lowest category of below-replacement fertility (Billari, 2008). Japan's total fertility rate is a source of national shame for an economy once seen as 'No. 1' with many Japanese accepting a causal connection between economic decline and low fertility. In 2006, the Government lamented the fact that Japan represented less than 10% of global gross domestic product (Ota, quoted in Daily Yomuiri, 2008).

Table 1. Fertility levels of Select Developed Countries and Territories (2007)

Fertility near replacement (2.1–1.8)	Low Fertility (1.8–1.5)	Lowest-Low Fertility (1.5–1)
USA	Netherlands	Macedonia
Iceland	Estonia	Switzerland
Ireland	Luxembourg	Czech Republic
France	Belgium	Bulgaria
United Kingdom	Canada	Greece
Norway		Latvia
Sweden		Spain
Denmark		Italy
Finland		Austria
Australia		Slovenia
		Germany
		Malta
		Lithuania
		Japan
		Portugal
		Hungary
		Poland
		Romania
		Singapore
		South Korea
		Slovakia
		Taiwan

Source: United Nations (2007)

In recent years, demographers, geographers and political scientists rarely discuss the intimate connections between fertility issues and national pride and identity. The current low fertility in developed countries is revitalizing this interpretation of national decline. Low fertility for example, according to this view undermines national integrity by depleting national resources. Larger populations will deliver stronger economies and ensure national replenishment. It is not technically only a question of human resources, but is related to national identity, maintaining stability and preserving history and culture. Regional instability, national decline, paranoia and fear of globalization act as filters for delivering a variety of national interpretations of lowest-low fertility.

The connections between population and economic and national strength have also been important for understanding Japan's rise (Ueno, 1998: 106; Suzuki, 1995; 13). The late Keizo Obuchi argued "If the current rapid plunge of the birthrate continues, we will see a reduction in the population which is the source of national strength, and this will have a grave impact on our social and economic future" (Obuchi, 1998). Japan's Ministries of Economy, Trade and Industry and Health, Labor and Welfare argued more recently in 2006 and

2005 respectively that the large labor force and smaller dependant population in the early 1970s caused high economic growth (Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, 2006: 2; Ministry of Health, Welfare and Labor, 2005:13, 17). The latter also argued that shifts in demography also result in shifts in economic power and international influence (Ministry of Health, Welfare and Labor, 2005: 9). Japanese newspapers often articulate the same fears: a decreasing population "should not be allowed to undermine the nation's vitality and stability" (Daily Yomuiri, 2006; Kato, 2009; The Japan Times, 2007; Kitazume, 2006; The Japan Times, 2009).

While Japan's population did continue to rise during this time, Japanese fertility in the post-war era was declining, stimulated by the introduction of the Eugenics Protection Act of 1948/9 (Matsutani, 2006: 16). As seen in Table 2, Japan fell below replacement level in 1965, rose again and then fell below in 1974 for good. By the end of the 1960s, Japanese families viewed two children as the norm (Ueno, 1998: 103; Suzuki, 1995: 16). The fall in fertility has also been credited as laying the foundations for Japan's economic miracle (Bloom and Williamson, 1998). Eventually, declining fertility made its impact felt and in

Table 2. Reproductive Rates for Japanese Females (1948–2008)

Year	TFR	Year	TFR	Year	TFR
1948	4.4	1971	2.16	1993	1.46
1949	4.32	1972	2.14	1994	1.50
1950	3.65	1973	2.14	1995	1.42
1951	3.26	1974	2.05	1996	1.43
1952	2.98	1975	1.91	1997	1.39
1953	2.69	1976	1.85	1998	1.38
1954	2.48	1977	1.80	1999	1.34
1955	2.37	1978	1.79	2000	1.36
1956	2.22	1979	1.77	2001	1.33
1957	2.04	1980	1.75	2002	1.32
1958	2.11	1981	1.74	2003	1.29
1960	2.00	1982	1.77	2004	1.29
1961	1.96	1983	1.80	2005	1.26
1962	1.98	1984	1.81	2006	1.32
1963	2.00	1985	1.76	2007	1.34
1964	2.05	1986	1.72	2008	1.37
1965	2.14	1987	1.69		
1966	1.58	1988	1.66		
1967	2.23	1989	1.57		
1968	2.13	1990	1.54		
1969	2.13	1991	1.53		
1970	2.13	1992	1.50		

Source: National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2008 pp. 22–3

1995, the labor force peaked at 87.17 million and since then has begun to decline (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2002: 2).

Of course the interrelationship between national power and population dynamics is complex. That being said, there is at least intuitively sympathy with responses to low fertility connected with notions of national integrity. This tension is stronger for countries which feel the frailty of their national integrity more than others. This debate continues in countries as diverse as Australia (Kelly, 2005) and Lithuania (Vaitekunas, 2008). Despite or perhaps because of globalization, the debate over national rejuvenation remains a crucial aspect of nationalism. In this sense, Japan's experience is mirrored in other lowest-low fertility nations.

The consequence of lowest-low fertility in Japan has provoked a contest between two visions of nationhood: the older liberal vision and an embryonic conservatism. Liberalism in Japan was articulated by conservative political elites in power since 1955, in part as a reaction to the draconian politics of militarist conservatism in the pre-war and war period. After the very liberal abortion regime of the 1948/9 Eugenics Protection Act, Japan's fertility fell dramatically but hovered around replacement level for a number of years (see Table 2). During the period of decline and below replacement fertility, liberalism reigned. A common argument was "Matters related to marriages and births are something in which the government should not intervene; however the situation is serious enough to affect the future of the nation" (Kanezo Muraoka, quoted in Japan Times, 1998). Political elites protested the fertility decline in the 1960s and influenced the postponed introduction of new forms of contraception such as the contraceptive pill which was accepted as late as 1999 (Norgren, 2001). In the pre-war and wartime period, the Japanese state promoted fertility through incentives to strengthen the nation and had a negative impact on many Japanese. The state stood aloof from fertility issues up until 1989 when the total fertility rate reached 1.5. The end of the 1980s also witnessed the decline of the economy, generational change in political elites and Japan's realignment after the end of the Cold War.

LIBERAL AND CONSERVATIVE RESPONSES TO LOWEST-LOW FERTILITY

The precise role and influence of liberalism and new conservatism in Japan is difficult to track (Table 3) but there are a number of clearer aspects. There are four principal features of Japan's demographic liberalism. First, demography is but one of many facets in explaining Japan's economic history (e.g. Nakamura, 2005). Second, discussions of fertility begin in the 1920s which was when the birthrate began to decline due to social factors, changing female values and greater personal health (Matsutani, 2006: 7; 16).

Table 3. Aspects of liberalism and conservatism in Japanese demography

National Visions: Two Responses to Low and Lowest-Low Fertility in Japan	
Liberalism	New Conservatism
Demographic history is complex	Demographic history is simple
Appreciation of long-term processes	Focus on medium-term processes
Economy and fertility relations are multi-faceted	Economy and fertility relations can be discerned
Economic growth is foundation for families	Economic growth is important but unrelated
Economic growth requires foreign markets	Growth is dependent on full use of national resources
Foreign workers are necessary evil	Foreign workers are simply unnecessary
Freedoms of the individual are vital	Women have a civic duty to marry early and have kids
The low birthrate is a sign of the times	Low birthrate is caused by marriage postponement
Not Applicable	Education is key to reversing attitudes among women
Increasing female workforce is crucial	Traditional family values cannot be compromised

Third, the liberal explanation emphasizes a complex relationship between fertility growth and decline and national economic growth. The foundations for demographic management are seen as economic growth and prosperity (Ministry of Health, Welfare and Labor, 2005: 9). Also "there is no clear relationship" between economic growth and population change. The year 1960 (13.1% growth) saw the highest growth rate, which then decreased. The rate of labor force participation increase remained at similar levels throughout this period which means "factors other than labor input made a larger contribution to Japan's past economic growth" (Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, 2005: 345).

Finally, liberalism in Japan since the Second World War resisted until 1990 the notion of foreign labor. This is ironic because prior to 1945 Japan had extensive colonial territory- Korea, Taiwan and Manchuria and the invasion of Southeast Asia was justified by the notion of the brotherhood of Asia under Japanese guidance (the so-called 'Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere). Japan's economic supremacy was based on full employment of nationals and the exclusion and marginalization of foreign workers through design (government policy) or by default (union and/or corporate power). Even after the Immigration Control Act of 1990, as shown in Table 4, Japan has one of the lowest levels of immigration amongst all developed nations (Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, 2005: 296–9). Due to the decline in manufacturing competitiveness, Japan sought foreign workers in the form of South Americans of Japanese ancestry. The revisions were accompanied by a lack of infrastructure and national protections (Keidanren, 2003a, 2003b; 1999).

Table 4. Immigration as% of national population (2005)

Country	Percentage
Switzerland	22.9
Australia	20.3
Canada	18.9
New Zealand	15.9
Austria	15.1
Ireland	14.1
United States of America	12.9
Sweden	12.4
Germany	12.3
Spain	11.1
France	10.7
Netherlands	10.1
United Kingdom	9.1
Greece	8.8
Iceland	7.8
Norway	7.4
Portugal	7.3
Denmark	7.2
Belgium	6.9
Italy	4.3
Poland	1.8
Japan	1.6

Source: United Nations (2007)

The exclusion of foreign labor is crucial to the bureaucratic definition of national economic strategy. The Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry in the 2005 White Paper condemned foreign workers as a way to mitigate the labor supply arguing that "in reality, various issues are emerging, such as poor working conditions, frictions with communities in the region, and an increase in crime" (Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, 2005: 368; 387). The Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare concurs. In 2005, the Ministry argued: "It is *not appropriate to consider using foreign workers to cope with labor shortages* but it is important to development an employment environment in which domestic workers can take an active part" (Ministry of Health, Welfare and Labor, 2005: 23; italics added).

Not surprisingly, suffering Japanese business takes a more liberal approach. Cognizant of the opposition to immigration, the Japan Business Federation argued that the agriculture, nursing, welfare and manufacturing sectors will require foreign workers even with more domestic participation in those sectors (Keidanren, 2007b; Keidanren, 2003a,b; Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy, 2006: 2). Local governments have until recently said to have commonly supplied

work permits to 20,000 known illegal immigrants (Ministry of Justice cited in Martin, 2009). Reforms to the Alien Registration Act to return power to the national government were supported by both the LDP and the DJP (Matsutani, 2009). During Japan's negotiation of an Economic Partnership Agreement with Southeast Asia, a small number of nurses were accepted to train in Japan (Council of Economic and Fiscal Policy: 2006).

Most Japanese demographers are opposed to additional immigration (Matsutani, 2006: 16–17; Atoh, 2000). This consistent position is surprising considering Japan's low level of formal immigrant population, as of 2007, 1.6% of the population (Table 4). In June 2008, a group of politicians from the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) presented a so-called "Proposal for a Japanese-style Immigration Policy" to then Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda, justified on the basis of reducing Japan's population decline. The report argued "In order for Japan to survive, it must open its doors as an international state to the world and shift towards establishing an 'immigrant nation' by accepting immigrants and revitalizing Japan" (quoted in Ito and Kamiya, 2008). The proposal was led by former LDP Secretary General Hidenao Nakagawa and sought over 50 years, an increase to 10% of the population (Ito and Kamiya, 2008). This level would be similar to the national situation of Germany and Spain, though both these countries share the lowest-low fertility position with Japan. Fukuda is reported to have supported the proposal, though his tenure as Prime Minister ended on 1st September 2008 when he sought to increase costs for old aged care (Suzuki, 2008). The reformers themselves faced fierce criticism from within their own parties, forcing the idea of Japanese citizenship after a decade to be removed (Ito, 2008a).The proposal disappeared after Fukuda's resignation (Ito, 2008b). Neither former Prime Minister Taro Aso (2008–9) or the current Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama have to date supported the ideas contained in the report. The UN concept of replacement migration (2001) was dismissed but if Japan wanted the 2005 population (127.5 million) to remain constant, immigration of 381,000 per year between 2005 and 2050 would be required, a total of 17 million. To retain the 1995 population level however, a staggering 33.5 million would be needed, an average of 609,000 per year (UN, 2001: 54).

Japan's new conservatism concurs with a resolute opposition to immigration and the recognition of working rights for foreign employees. Beyond this common ground with liberalism, it differs in four ways. First, Japan's population crisis is caused by the birthrate and the role of single women in particular (Matsutani, 2006: 16; Atoh, 2000; Sato, 2007; Ohno, 2007; Ministry of Health, Welfare and Labor, 2005: 9). The falling birthrate is attributed primarily to marriage postponement; put differently the extended life of singleness (Atoh, 2001; Atoh, 2000 Masaki, 2006; Ueno, 1998; Ohno, 2007; Takahashi et al., 1999) especially

since the early 1970s (Kaneko, 2004: 2) with these choices are informing the ageing crisis (Usui, 2003: 16). The shift in values among Japan's single women and their desire to have fewer children creates low fertility and an ageing society (Sato, 2007: 1; Ministry of Health, Welfare and Labor, 2005: 15, 13; Japan Times, 2008). The former Prime Minister Taro Aso is reported to have said that having two children is a duty for Japanese (The Straits Times, 2009).

Second, the solutions to fertility decline are based on more efficient employment of the existing available national workforce. The shortfall in the workforce and management of social services is to be dealt by better national insurance and pensions and childcare provision to enable women to have both careers and families (Sato, 2007: 2). Ultimately, the solution to the labor market reform is to have more children (Ohno, 2007: 50, 52). In recent years, some Japanese companies have been providing financial incentives to female employees to allow them to raise children and work or even incentives to increase the number of children (Kurosawa and Matsubara, 2008; Masaki, 2006).

Third, new conservatism views education as a key vehicle to correct deficiencies in civic duties, reaffirming family values to the young. One view was that three generation households provided the best foundation for raising children because normally the life of the wife is too burdensome (Ohno, 2007: 53). In 2006, the Government argued that "In order to reverse the declining trend of birthrate, the Government will raise again the question of what social awareness lies behind the falling birthrate, and encourage people to reaffirm the importance of passing on life to the next generation, and nurturing life as well as the importance of family" (Japan, 2006: 15). Aside from promoting childcare and child support for children "the Government will promote national campaigns for restoring the bonds of family and community" (Japan, 2006: 15).

Fourth, new conservatives struggle to fit respectable demographic research into the three propositions. The role of single men is for example neglected. The proportion of men who never marry increased from 2.17% in 1920 to 12.57% in 2004. The statistic for women was 1.8% in 1920 to 5.82% in 2004. More men than women are not marrying at all in Japan. The average age of first marriage for men in 1915 was 27.4 years and for women was 23.2 years, but in 2004 it was 29.6 for men and 27.8 for women (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2006). Men are also delaying marriage, and on average are getting married at a later age than women. The scrutiny of women – their educational and career choices is not demography but politics.

New conservatives while supporting a more efficient use of the nation's female resources cannot engage effectively with the realities of Japanese women. The confidence many scholars have in the panacea of child care (Yashiro, 1998: 143; Ota, 2007a, 2007b; Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, 2005:

375) is puzzling because the shift to promote women working in Japan faces strong opposition. According to a 2004 Cabinet Office survey, only 40% of those surveyed believe Japanese women 'should continue working after they have children' while 34.9% prefer the traditional option of women taking time off to raise children (Cabinet Office Survey, 2004, cited in Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, 2005: 373). The percentage rate of division chiefs in Japanese firms from 1980 to 2004 rose from 1% to 2.7% (Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, 2005: 376) while in 2006, women comprised 3.7% of department heads of companies, 11% of all academic researchers and 9.4% in parliament (Otake, 2008). Japan has 10th position out of 179 countries in the Human Development Index (2009) but in terms of the gender-related development index Japan is 57th out of 108 countries (UNDP, 2009).

CONCLUSION – IMPLICATIONS FOR OTHER LOWEST-LOW FERTILITY COUNTRIES

The rise of new conservatism in Japan is rooted in Japan's conservative political structure. Liberalism in Japan since the war has been relatively superficial; the political elites were conservative. Liberalism was accepted in Japan as part of an accommodation with the United States. Access to the US consumer market and strategic relations during the Cold War required some pragmatic but limited acceptance of democratic values. The main difference between liberalism and new conservatism is the role of women and declining fertility. New conservatives view single women and marriage postponement as detrimental to the nation. By accepting their civic duty national integrity can be recovered. Unless women do their duty and restore the birthrate and population growth, irreversible injury to Japan's economy and prestige will be inflicted.

Most observers assumed that the electoral victory of the Democratic Party of Japan (DJP) on August 30th 2009 ushered in a radical shift in Japan's politics. The DJP is largely comprised of elected representatives who left the LDP in 1996. The grandfather of the current Prime Minister was Ichiro Hatoyama, an early post-war Prime Minister. The victory for the DJP was related to the issue of population decline and family values. A key issue was the role of the state in the provision of child support and dealing with low fertility. Child policies were an important difference between the two major parties The LDP promised free education for children while the DJP promised more childcare centers and more money for child-allowance irrespective of income, unlike the current system which has less money and depends on family income (Kato, 2009). The proposal was for a doubling of the child allowance until the age of 15. The Government

pledged that this policy would be funded from existing revenue and from cost cutting in wasteful government projects, but is more likely to result in either growing debt or higher taxation. Hatoyama, the current Prime Minister supports the revision of globalization and a new inward-looking nationalism. In his paper "My Political Philosophy", he wrote "post-cold war Japan has been buffeted by the winds of market fundamentalism in a US-led movement which is usually called globalization. Freedom is supposed to be the highest of all values but in the fundamentalist pursuit of capitalism…human dignity has been lost… How can we put an end to unrestrained market fundamentalism and financial capitalism that are void of morals or moderation in order to protect the finances and livelihoods of our citizens?" (Hatoyama, 2009). The puzzle for Hatoyama and for most Japanese conservatives is: if globalization is so destructive, why does the United States enjoy near replacement fertility?

It is too early to predict which response to low fertility will be consolidated in Japan. This rests in part of the longevity of the current government. If Hatoyama's political vision is translated into public policy it is however likely that Japan would pursue a more inward-looking nationalism, requiring a new educational vision to dispel affection for the fruits of globalization and greater emphasis on the efficient use of Japan's women both as mothers and workers. Hatoyama's vision for child support is also based on the traditional gendered division of labor, consistent with a new conservative response.

Japan in some ways is not alone. Responding to lowest-low fertility is a common public policy issue across the developed world. The pursuit of nationalism in national rejuvenation is a natural by-product of anxieties over the nature of the global economy. In some ways, Japan is alone however. Other lowest-low economies such as Lithuania, Portugal, Spain, Poland and Germany do face considerable challenges in mitigating the demographic imbalance and the ageing crisis, but they do so in the broader context of the European Union. Japan's relations with his closest neighbors have significant unresolved historical issues and dimensions and regional cooperation remains (if contrasted with the EU) in its infancy. Japan's position as a lowest-low fertility nation has been made more complex due to a generation of economic decline. For this reason, given Japan's once great status, inordinate attention has been focused on the causes, consequences and solutions for Japan. As a consequence of economic and fertility decline, the interpretation of demographics, once viewed through Japan's post-war liberalism has increasingly given way to a new conservatism. The challenge for this once-great nation in recapturing economic vitality depends in part on resolving the role of fertility and reaching an interpretation and policy response conducive to social stability. A renewed vision also requires a degree of openness usually found in other developed economies.

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NOTES

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