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Europe's Malaise

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In this column, you will not find an answer to the Big Question concerning the French riots: whether they portend a true Clash of Civilizations between Islam and the West, or at least between Islam and the continent of Europe, for, as any parents of teenagers will tell you, it is a dangerous job to read the motivations of disaffected youth.

But the riots do allow us to evaluate the present and future challenges facing Europe. First, and most importantly, although demographics are not destiny, the population trends facing the continent mean that the problem — integrating large numbers of Muslim immigrants — will not solve itself.

Just about every nation in Europe has now had below replacement-rate fertility for a length of time unprecedented in human history; it has been over three decades, for instance, since Germany experienced a year in which more native Germans were born than died. Real population decline is now occurring, and will only accelerate: The UN predicts that most European nations will lose between 10 to 30% of their population over the next 50 years. Just to maintain its current population, Italy would need over 16 million immigrants over that period.

But the real problem is even more dire than that, for European populations are also aging rapidly, meaning that the all-important ratio of workers to dependents continues to fall. Social welfare systems designed to be supported by the productive capacity of eight workers for every one dependent now have a ratio of four to one, and will eventually have a ratio of only two to one.

Three years ago, UN demographers investigated whether replacement migration could offset this dual challenge of fertility decline and aging, and discovered that the numbers that would be needed to do so are so high as to be impossible: 94 million immigrants would be required for France, alone, and 1.4 billion for all of Europe. If European nations did follow this path in order to maintain their current social welfare systems, by 2050 anywhere from 59 to 99 percent of each country's population would be foreign-born.

So the choice now taken by European governments — allowing enough immigrants to prop up their economies in the short time, even at the cost of some social unrest, will not be sufficient in the long term.

Second, Europe has found no optimal way to integrate its immigrants. From the Dutch policy of full multiculturalism to the French policy of blind equality, all have resulted in outbreaks of violence and mutual distrust. As the proportion of immigrants steadily rises, European government policies will swing on a pendulum from liberal pandering, through law-and-order crackdowns, through a neglect bred of confusion. European populations will flirt more frequently with far-right, anti-immigrant political parties, and European foreign policy, especially toward the Middle East, will be made in order to avoid inciting domestic Muslim populations.

Third, the grand experiment that is the European Union, an experiment that depends upon a new European citizenry devoid of strong parochial attachments, will be hampered both by native Europeans regaining appreciation of their national cultural identities in the face of the perceived immigrant threat, as well as by the immigrants, themselves, whose values differ strongly from the secular humanist philosophical foundation of the EU.

Fourth, the US and the EU will continue to drift apart. According to the UN migration study, “The European Union and the United States — the world's two largest economic blocks, often in competition with each other — are projected to follow starkly contrasting demographic paths in the coming decades.” The US will grow as the EU declines, both through more healthy

native fertility as well as through immigration that poses much less of a challenge to this society of immigrants.

In 2050, there will be more US workers than EU workers, suggesting that the US will continue to prosper during the next few decades, while the EU struggles to maintain the social systems — free health care, generous welfare and pension benefits — that Europeans deem to be morally superior to the US model, and through which many Europeans like to define themselves. It is possible, therefore, that the cross-Atlantic relationship could be increasingly marred by the old-fashioned sentiments of pride and envy.

Fifth, it is not clear that Europeans understand the depth of the malaise that must be at the heart of their fertility decline. A civilization cannot continue without babies, but a number of EU countries are expanding their already liberal abortion laws to ensure that any EU woman can obtain a free, state-sponsored abortion in their countries. Pressure is mounting on Ireland, Poland, Malta and Portugal, the last holdouts before a European-wide abortion license, even though their own fertility rates are already perilously low.

Only if this malaise, be it spiritual or philosophical, is addressed, and large numbers of Europeans once again welcome new life into the world, will the continent's future be brighter than all of those smoldering hulks of cars in the Paris suburbs. The UN demographers are not hopeful, concluding that, “the recent experience of low-fertility countries suggests that there is no reason to assume that their fertility will return anytime soon to the above-replacement level.” But, again, demographics is not destiny.