

The Death of Development

7 September 2004

Japan is dying.

Japan, a nation that has existed for thousands of years, a nation that has the world's most developed infrastructure, a nation that has the world's most rigorous academic system, a nation with the world's second largest economy, a nation with the world's fourth largest military spending, a nation with one of the world's highest standards of living, is dying.

Japan, a nation long defined by its collective and individual iron will, is unable to gather the strength to make the necessary societal and personal decisions to save itself. Japan, a nation whose successes have been built on societal and individual self-sacrifice, is unwilling to make the sacrifices required to rescue itself. Japan, a nation whose businesses are renowned for their long-range planning of ten, twenty and fifty years, is unable to look beyond the short term and take action to prevent the inevitable consequences of long term trends.

Japan is dying.

The end will come sometime in 2006. At midnight on a day of that year, probably in late summer, Japan's population will be smaller than it was the day before.

On that day, Japan, as we know it, will be dead.

And along with it will die the concepts of economic development, societal advancement, modern western society and evolution of humankind as a whole.

Japan is the epitome of the concept of societal development. It has literally pulled itself up from the mud of an agrarian society and risen into an ultra-modern, post-industrial nation-state. It has achieved the highest levels of economic development. It has adopted and integrated the defining characteristics of western society, ranging from democracy to depravity. It has encoded the end of warfare into its constitution and become literally the capital of the "higher plane of human evolution" peace movement.

As such, Japan represents the highest possible expression of what began when the first humans stepped out of cold, damp caves and gathered together in a collection of huts around the first campfires. That small first step of human societal evolution and economic development has culminated here in the hyper-developed nation of Japan.

And Japan is dying.

Japan is the canary in the coal mine of human, economic and societal development. Its impending demise sends ominous signals for the rest of the developed world, and casts a dark shadow over the developing nations aspiring to emulate the prosperity that Japan has heretofore enjoyed.

Currently, all developed nations share some or all of the same fatal attributes that have killed Japan: demographics and values.

All developed nations share an Achilles' heel that is proving universally fatal: as people become more educated and economically secure, they reproduce less. A nation requires a birth rate of 2.1 to maintain a static population size. Birth rates in the native populations of the developed nations of the world have fallen consistently over the last 20 years, with Japan's currently at 1.32 and falling.

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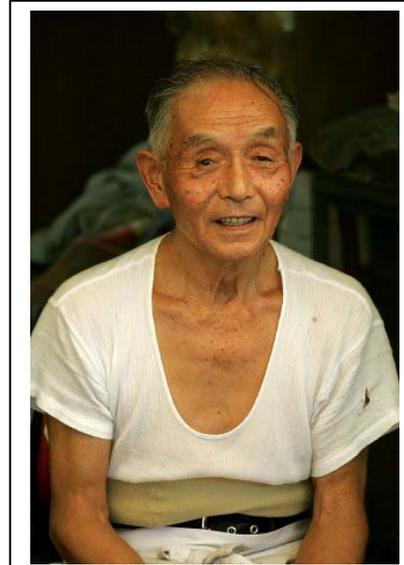
A developed nation requires tax payments by its working population to pay for retirement and social welfare programs. If there are fewer births, the working population grows smaller, and there are fewer workers to pay for the society's costs. Inevitably, taxes must rise on the smaller pool of workers or retirement and social welfare programs must decrease, or both. In any case, societal unrest and turmoil are the result. One current example can be found in Germany, where weekly demonstrations are protesting cuts in unemployment and other social welfare programs. Another example can be found in Finland, where this year the size of the workforce will shrink for the first time. By 2008, Finland's projected workforce of 2.3 million will need to support 1.3 million pensioners, 200,000 more than today. Finland's income tax rates of 58% are destined to rise as a result. The same painful effects and social upheaval caused by shrinking populations are being felt across the heavily socialist countries of Europe.

The causes of lower birth rates in developed countries are primarily related to education and values. The effects of education on birth rates are apparent even in developing countries, with the change in values affecting more developed economies where people have greater choice in their individual roles and destinies.

My interviews with workers and managers from the United Nations, UNICEF, USAID, various governments and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) conducted around the world have all featured one primary factor in reducing birthrates in developing countries: educating the women. A consistent message of these specialists is that women educated to even a high primary school level show markedly lower birth rates than their uneducated peers. Women in developed countries who achieve high levels of education and accompanying career and economic independence are extremely unwilling to abandon or delay those characteristics for child rearing.

Coupled with economic and career independence of highly educated women, the change in values in developed societies has proved to be a fatal one-two punch to sustainable birth rates. In Singapore, an Asian city-state of four million people, the government has appointed a "population czar" to encourage marriage and reproduction. Using tax breaks, economic incentives (up to \$10,500 USD per child), baby care subsidies, longer maternity leave and more leave days for working parents, Singapore hopes to reverse a falling birth rate that is threatening the ongoing viability of its society. Observers doubt that the programs will have any effect on a population that is obsessed with the five C's: career, condominium, club, credit cards and cars.

In the developed nations of the world the materialism instinct has replaced the maternal (and paternal) instinct. Adults in developed nations have made the conscious choice to pursue material goods and personal gratification instead of the sacrifices required for the greater good of the society, for a relationship or for child rearing. The results of those choices are reflected in ever fewer children. The number of children in Japan shrunk this year for the 23rd year in a row, making up only 13.9% of the population, compared with 20.1% for the United States, 18.6% for Britain and 14.5% for Spain.



Japan's aging population is a growing burden on ever fewer members of the working population.

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Japan's population is increasingly avoiding not only children, but relationships in general. 54% of women in their late 20s are single, up from 30.6% in 1985. About half of single women ages 35 to 54 have no intention to marry. A survey by Japan's largest condom maker shows the Japanese rank last among 28 countries in the frequency of sex. Japan's society has made the decision to pursue relationships with material goods instead of with a life partner and with children.

Particularly striking is Japan's conversion from a society defined by the peace and harmony of the collective society, known as "Wa," to one obsessed with the peace and harmony solely of the individual. In the past, Japan's people made society wide sacrifices to build an industrial economy and to rebuild

the nation after WWII. Today's generations of Japanese have adopted the American mindset of the individual above all, with the individual more important than the family, than the community, than the nation. Consequently, just as in America, it is highly unlikely that the majority of current and future generations would sacrifice their own immediate gratification for the good of the community or the nation.

For developed nations like Japan, with populations unwilling to reproduce at a level that will sustain the society, there is only one option to sustain their retirement and social welfare systems: immigration. This is a problematic option for long established societies rooted in cherished value systems and religions. One current example can be found in France, where the Christian nation is struggling to re-define itself as it attempts to absorb and integrate the 10% of the population who are Muslim immigrants. Similar societal fractures can be seen in Germany, with 5% of its population now Muslims, primarily Turkish immigrants, and in northern Europe, with backlash against immigrants and the "dilution of European races and values" being cited in Denmark and elsewhere.

Immigration is particularly challenging in Japan, which is probably the world's most racially homogenous large-scale developed country. Long saddled with problems of racism and discrimination, other than long-term Korean residents displaced here by Japan's colonial annexation of the Korean peninsula, Japan has no significant immigrant communities. Japan is a country in which generations were taught racism. In the words of Japanese WWII veteran Ichiro Koyama, "We were a race apart. We thought the Chinese and people of Southeast Asia were inferior to us. We knew they were human, but they were a lower class." Japan is also a country that has yet to fully face its ugly past in this regard. Revisionist history textbooks, written by ultra-nationalists, that completely ignore Japan's brutal colonial suppression of surrounding countries and its role in WWII, are being adopted in high schools, drawing loud protests from China and South Korea in particular. It is difficult to project a scenario in which the Japanese nation, seeped in lingering racism and in denial of its genocidal past, can open its doors, hearts, minds and economy to a flood of immigrants.

Although both young and old Japanese that I interviewed all expressed that Japan must allow "immigration from other nations of Asia," it is hard to imagine how this society could ever fully adapt to 10 to 25% of its population being naturalized citizens with non-Japanese Asian ancestry, much less to a sizable population of Arabs, Indians, Hispanics or Africans. At a minimum, it seems reasonable to assume that major social upheaval would be the inevitable result of immigration levels required to maintain a viable working population.

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Across the developed world, nations are facing similar challenges associated with the immigrant influx required to supplement their shrinking native populations. Even in the United States, with its long history as a nation of immigrants, the greatly expanded, world's highest levels of immigration introduced in the mid sixties are generating backlash. America's immigration challenge is Hispanic, and the 18% growth in the Hispanic population in the decade from 1990 to 2000 in an overall population that grew by only 2.5%. Hispanics are now the largest minority group in America, and are approaching majority status in some areas such as New Mexico, where they made up 42% of the state in 2000. The higher birth rates of the first few generations of immigrants in developed countries ensures that this trend will continue.

A second challenge is that the size of the Hispanic population in America has reached a critical mass, enabling both burgeoning political influence and the creation of a parallel, Spanish speaking society that operates independently of the native English speaking Anglo nation. In states such as California it is possible to operate within the society for a lifetime entirely in Spanish, including all interactions with state government, such as obtaining a driver's license. This parallel existence capability de-motivates Hispanic immigrants from the level of societal integration that has powered the engine of American vitality and energy, it's ethnically and racially diverse population.

As the other developed nations of the world struggle with implementing immigration policies and with their new immigrant populations, America has the opportunity to leverage its largest unique global competitive advantage, its highly diverse, immigrant based population. But first, America must find a way to facilitate, encourage and enable the full integration of its parallel Hispanic sub-culture into the overall society. If it cannot, America will face the same daunting challenges of immigrant integration currently factionalizing Europe and that will potentially soon be the spark of societal upheaval here in Japan.



An empty school and playground, a powerful symbol of Japan's dwindling number of children.

Our time here in Japan has provided us with a unique opportunity to witness and experience the apogee of human societal and economic development. But for all its "best in the world" attributes, Japan, as we have seen it and known it, is dying. Soon, Japan, as we know it, will be dead, and its demise will mark the end of humankind's long development-based climb from the cave to the condominium.

Japan is dying, and its death marks the death of development, the death of the model of species, societal and economic development that has defined the last few million years. Mankind will, from this point forward, be in a post-development phase, struggling to define a new evolutionary model that enables ongoing economic and societal viability for developed nations in an era of self-absorbed, shrinking, native working populations.

Text and photos by Douglas Hackney

This document is located at: <http://www.hackneys.com/travel/japan/index-japanjournals.htm>

Sources:

New York Times; Japan Times; The Herald; The Daily Yomiuri; The Asahi Shimbun; USA Today; U.S. Census Bureau; Japan Ministry of Public Management, Home Affairs, Posts and Telecommunications; University of Hawaii; United Nations; and personal interviews conducted in South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, India, Bhutan, Turkey, Syria, Jordan and Japan.