This review of important social trends in the United States is published periodically and distributed to social scientists and opinion leaders in this country and in Europe. Each issue discusses a single topic of current importance.

In order to compare American trends with the experience of other countries, we have recruited foreign experts on social change as associate editors. Their names are listed below.

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A Puzzling Difference Between Europe and America

The natural growth or decline of a population is measured by the total fertility rate (TFR), roughly equivalent to the number of grown children the average woman contributes to the next generation. With the low rates of juvenile mortality prevailing in the United States and Europe, a total fertility rate of 2.11 would achieve full replacement from one generation to the next, disregarding immigration.

It is interesting to compare the trend of TFR in the United States since 1960 with the trend in the 15 nations that were members of the European Union in 2003. Both trends were well above the replacement level in 1960. By 1975, both trends had fallen below the replacement level. Then a curious thing happened. The American trend reversed and climbed back to the neighborhood of the replacement level, where it has remained ever since. The European TFR continued to sink, reaching the unprecedented low point of 1.42 in 1995. It still remains in that neighborhood, presaging dramatic changes in the ethnic composition of most of the EU member states as indigenous citizens are replaced by immigrants and their offspring. Although the total EU population is still slowly growing, that growth is entirely attributable to immigration.

The decline from 1960 on both sides of the Atlantic was part of a worldwide trend that has been changing the projected growth of global population from year to
year. The combined TFR of the world's less developed countries fell from 6.9 in 1970 to 2.8 in 2004. For the first time in modern history, some poor countries (e.g., Sri Lanka, Tunisia, Trinidad, Bulgaria) have rates significantly under the replacement level. Rates above 8, formerly common among the less developed countries, have entirely disappeared. Rates above 6 persist only in a few African countries.

The European demographic collapse is unequally distributed. Germany, Greece, Spain, Italy, and Austria display fertility rates in the range between 1.24 and 1.29, far below anything experienced since the dawn of their respective histories. Belgium, Denmark, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Finland, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and Switzerland show higher but still depressed rates between 1.41 and 1.74. Only France, Ireland, and Iceland are close to the replacement level. Even lower rates occur among the new EU countries of eastern Europe. The Czech Republic holds the record with a total fertility rate of 1.14. If these trends persist, the young people of the next EU generation will be predominantly Muslim. The immigration pressure created by a deficit of births in developed nations is irresistible.

The American TFR shows a different pattern. As of 2004, the total fertility rates of non-Hispanic whites, blacks, Asians and Pacific Islanders, and American Indians were all somewhat below the replacement level, but the much higher Hispanic rate raised the total. Moreover, the Hispanic minority is daily augmented by legal and illegal immigrants flooding into the country from Mexico and other parts of Central and South America. Spanish is a second official language in the western and southwestern states and in New York, Washington, Atlanta, and Miami. The restriction of Hispanic immigration, although favored by public opinion, became unthinkable as the newcomers gathered voting strength and learned to use it. In January 2004, the Bush administration announced a plan that would offer a degree of amnesty to millions of illegal immigrants and, in effect, permit unlimited future immigration from Latin America. The existing situation, with or without the projected measures, guarantees an ethnic transformation in the United States on the same scale as the ongoing ethnic transformation of the EU, although with different components. Diversity is further enhanced in the United States by substantial immigration from Asia, the Caribbean islands, and Africa. Non-Hispanic whites are now a minority in each of the 10 largest U.S. cities, where they were the overwhelming majority as recently as 1960.

Mendras (1997) identified three distinct patterns of fertility in western Europe. In the north, the high rates of divorce and extramarital births and the great number of single-person households signal the virtual disappearance of the conventional nuclear family. In the south, the nuclear family has proved more resistant. Adult children (or more commonly the lone adult child) remain in the family until they marry, even when they marry late. Grandmothers are often included in the household, and women still rule the domestic foyer. The middle countries seem to be in transition toward the northern model; their statistics all point in that direction.

American states show a somewhat wider range of fertility than European nations. The TFR of Utah is twice that of Vermont; the widest European gap—between Iceland and the Czech Republic—is somewhat smaller.

One effect of low fertility is an increase in the elderly population. The proportion of the EU population aged 60 and older rose from 16 percent in 1960 to 23 percent in 2000; the corresponding increase for the United States was from 13 percent in 1960 to 17 percent in 2000. But the gap is likely to grow. The median age of both populations is now over 35, in sharp contrast to developing countries with median ages in the teens. As of 2000, the EU was somewhat healthier than the United States, as measured by life expectancy at various ages, but both populations were the healthiest ever known. Women in both populations live, on average, about six years longer than men. Nobody knows why.

Another effect of low fertility is a decline in the youthful population. The proportion of the EU population under 20 declined from 32 percent in 1960 to 23 percent in 2000; the corresponding decrease for the United States was from 38 percent to 29 percent. If we combine the elderly and youthful segments of these populations to get a rough estimate of the proportion of dependents, we discover that the proportion of dependents in the EU declined slightly, from 48 percent to 43 percent between 1960 and 2000, and the proportion of dependents in the United States declined somewhat more, from 51 percent in 1960 to 46 percent in 2000, so that the burdens on people of working age would have been virtually identical if youth were subsidized as generously as old age.

Up to a point, the decline of fertility appears to be a normal consequence of modernization and is adequately explained by the declining value of children's labor, the rising status of women, the mechanization and simplification of housework, the increasing cost of child raising, and the availability of means for the voluntary control of conception. But it is not easy to explain why the norm of the two-child family still prevails in France and the United States, while the one-child family has become normal in Italy, Spain, and Greece. Since women in the one-child countries are on average less educated and less involved in the labor force than women in the two-child countries, the commonsense explanations fail.

The difference between the United States, where fertility has hovered slightly in the neighborhood of the replacement level since 1980, and such nations as Italy, Spain, and Greece, where fertility has plunged far below the replacement level in the same interval of time, is equally puzzling. Throughout the world, the most powerful depressants of fertility are higher education for women and the labor market participation of married women. Yet the United States has relatively more women with university educations and more married women in the labor force than the three low-fertility countries just mentioned.
Since the individual attributes of European and American women of childbearing age do not seem to account for the current difference in fertility, it may be useful to examine certain collective attributes that differentiate the United States from all of the nations of Europe. Three attributes deserve particular attention.

The average American home has more than twice the floor space of the average European home. The average floor space in American homes is about 2,300 square feet. In France it's 1,964, in Germany 932, in Spain 917, and in Britain only 817. The simplest and least plausible explanation of the divergence in fertility is that Americans have more room in which to raise children. France, with the most dwelling space in Europe, also exhibits relatively high fertility.

Another spatial attribute is the sharp difference in population density between the United States, with 79 inhabitants per square mile, and the EU, with 302 per square mile (as of 2005).

But I am inclined to give more weight to two other attributes.

First, Americans today are far more pious than Europeans. By very wide margins, more Americans than Europeans attend religious services regularly, believe in a divine power to which they routinely pray, and anticipate a life after death. Organized religion is a potent force in current U.S. politics, and political leaders are expected to hold religious convictions. The absence of piety in contemporary Europe is summed up by Reid (2004):

> A continent full of ancient churches and religious shrines is increasingly empty of practicing religion. In Britain, France, Germany, Holland, and Belgium, fewer than 10 percent of the population attend church as often as once a month. In Scandinavia, the handsome high-steeped churches that mark every city and village attract less than 3 percent of the population and governments no longer subsidize the disestablished Lutheran Church. In Amsterdam, the Dutch Reformed hierarchy is converting cathedrals into luxury apartments to pay its bills.

Second, the United States retains an independent capacity for war making, whereas the armed forces of European nations are now restricted to peacekeeping operations and to supporting roles in operations led by U.S. forces.

What these two collective attributes have in common is a timescale longer than the individual life. The individualism that marks both European and American societies today is tempered in the United States by religion in one way and by war making in another.

Pious Americans draw their worldviews from religious bodies that take for granted the continued importance of ancestors and their spiritual linkage to descendants. Reproduction is considered in some sense to be a duty so that the chain leading from past to future is not broken. The lineage of a particular family may not be clearly visualized, but the religious organizations in which most Americans participate see each new infant as an addition to the family of communicants.

War, particularly elective war, as practiced by the world's remaining superpower, challenges individualism by asserting that the interests of the state are more important than those of its citizens. It does so by inducing citizens to give their lives for the state when called on to do so and by celebrating those sacrifices as the highest form of civic virtue. The contrast between the brief life of the citizen and the nearly eternal life of the state is enhanced in the United States by the antiquity of our Constitution and by unreasonable high expectations for the future. In this context, too, giving birth is seen as a contribution to an entity much greater than the nuclear family.

This explanation is admittedly difficult to verify empirically, although a survey comparing women's childbearing experience with their religious and political views might be informative. Indeed, some existing bodies of survey data could be mined for that relationship.

It would be a mistake, however, to expect more than a moderate connection between the attitudes of individual women and their reproductive choices. Reproductive decisions are largely collective; women tend to follow their friends and neighbors in this as in other lifestyle choices.

In the long run, the similarities between the fertility experience of the United States and Europe may be more consequential than the numerical differences. In both cases, an indigenous population united to some degree by common descent is being displaced by immigrants of different ethnicity. But in Europe, the newcomers are more dissimilar in culture and perhaps less inclined to assimilate. And because the decline of fertility has gone much further in Europe, the immigration pressure is more intense there and the consequences less predictable.

Notes:
1. More exactly, the total fertility rate is the number of births that 1,000 women would have in their lifetime if at each year of age they experienced the birth rate occurring in the specified year. (Statistical Abstract of the United States 2002, note to table 71. It is divided here by 1,000 for easier comprehension.
4. And, according to the CIA 2004 summary, in the Gaza Strip. But current reports from Gaza indicate a far lower figure.
6. It is interesting to note that in 2002, blacks showed lower fertility than non-Hispanic whites for the first time since records began to be kept.