

(Ir)responsibility for future generations – us and the life of those to come or to miss

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Received: 9 March 2018; Accepted: 12 August 2018; Published: 31 August 2018

Abstract. The current and forecasted image of the demographic processes and condition of the socio-economic order of the West (evident e.g. the in case of pension systems based on intergenerational solidarity) calls for thorough reflection. Not only potential, but also increasingly real economic problems in this area indicate that the possibility of serious conflicts and tensions within Western civilisation is growing. To analyse and diagnose this developing crisis one needs to look “under the surface” of current social phenomena and processes and draw attention to fundamental cultural shifts. These are the background of such challenges as the advancing depopulation of Western countries. The question that lies behind these, which deserves thorough reflection, is the problem of responsibility for future generations and the related crisis of solidarity. The paper aims at exploring these issues.

Keywords: responsibility for future generations, fertility, individualism, population ageing, solidarity.

JEL Codes: I31, J11, J12, J13, J14, J24.

1. Introduction

We are links in a chain; it is up to us to keep things going because who knows which generation will be the one to make the big difference
[Handy 1994, p. 241]

Current transformations in social life in the West, understood here in general as the European Union and countries such as the United States, Canada and Australia, call for multidimensional analysis and reflection. Even though I will refer to a somewhat simplified or statistical picture of these societies, it is necessary to remember that there are some differences in the levels or intensity of these phenomena within the West. Some of them – such as low fertility or changes in marriage and family patterns – have already been studied, yet other are still waiting for researchers to engage and explore

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them. It seems that the problem I call “the (ir)responsibility for future generations” is one of these which remains as yet undiscovered and unstudied. This concept, which I am introducing here, means that the current picture of socio-economic processes indicates that the welfare and well-being of the generations to come is endangered due to inadequate and irresponsible demographic, socio-cultural, political and economic decisions. In my opinion, the most promising direction for study is an approach which tries to explore these issues in the perspective of the coherence and continuity of culture. This framework – most often associated with cultural sciences or cultural studies – seems to be most promising in explaining the paradoxes we are observing currently. At the same time, the existing literature in this field does not often engage this perspective. If at all, it appears mainly in the works of such authors as Ronald Inglehart, Ron Laesthaghe, Daniel Bell or Peter L. Berger. My analysis to an extent follows the research path chosen by Daniel Bell, the author of the book *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, who offered an interesting proposal for exploring and understanding the challenges and difficulties faced by Western capitalist systems in the second half of the twentieth century. According to him, Western societies are undergoing serious perturbations and are losing their potential to develop due to conflicts in the sphere of culture. It means that the society is organized not by one value system but – in case of the West – by three colliding orders which contradict each other [Bell 1976, pp. XXX–XXXI].

The purpose of my article is to continue and develop this line of research in the context of the beginning of the twenty first century and the question of the influence of current decisions and actions on the life of the next generations. That is why I am proposing a thesis which claims that Western civilisation loses its cultural coherence and continuity due to collision of competing value systems and lack of the ability to place current processes in the long-term perspective. This all creates some kind of ‘irresponsible civilisation’ which seems not to care about consequences of its actions and its future condition. It becomes already evident within societies we are part of that they are more atomized and individualistic, and less caring about communities – especially primary groups such as family or neighbourhood. This observation was made by different scholars [Putnam 1995; Beck, Beck-Gernsheim 2004]. One of them, Robert D. Putnam wrote in the context of social capital importance, that

the most fundamental form of social capital is the family, and the massive evidence of the loosening of bonds within the family (both extended and nuclear) is well known. This trend, of course, is quite consistent with – and may help to explain – our theme of social decapitalisation

[Putnam 1995, p. 73].

In this article, this thesis is illustrated and verified by the problems of: (1) rejection of responsibility for others which is evident in the increase of such phenomena as divorces, broken homes, out-of-wedlock births, single-parent families; (2) rejection of engagement in long lasting commitments such as traditional marriage and raising a family (which also suggests a lack of willingness to take responsibility for others);

(3) decreasing solidarity and support between generations which are manifested through such actions as euthanasia or abortion.

In terms of explaining the roots of the situation analysed in the article, I intend to explore the following assumption: present and future intergenerational tensions and conflicts are and will be the result of the socio-economic crisis which is caused by demographic decline and cultural – meaning here spiritual and moral – crisis.

When it comes to terminological aspects regarding the relation between concepts of culture and civilisation, I will understand “culture” as norms, values and beliefs, and “civilisation” as the material realisation of a given culture.

2. Why responsibility for future generations?

One of the most important questions that can and should be raised here is the problem of responsibility for future generations. At first it may not seem obvious that this responsibility not only exists but also refers to people living now. This appears to be a profound and complex problem demanding separate discussion, which cannot be presented comprehensively here. All that can be done here is to depict some interesting and insightful voices from this field which confirm that embracing this kind of approach towards the future is indeed necessary.

When it comes to the origins of the reflection on this topic, one should mention Hans Jonas, the author of the influential work *The Imperative of Responsibility*, who argued that the growing scientific and technological potential together with the influence of human beings on the environment, society and their future condition calls for renewed reflection. In his view, new possibilities introduce new challenges and potential risks which were unknown to previous generations. That is why it is the duty of our times to develop the analytical and ethical tools for addressing future issues and consequences of contemporary actions. According to Dieter Birnbacher, who summarized Jonas' views,

even though the 'world of impacts' and the 'world of perception' still differ enormously and we can barely foresee the consequences of our present acting, the more historical experiences we make, the better backed up ideas we get of chances and risks of our interventions in nature and the human world

[Birnbacher 2009, p. 75].

The first step in the concept of responsibility is to ensure that the future society will exist. Jonas explains this, saying that

it is this sort of duty that is involved in a responsibility for future mankind. It charges us, in the first place, with ensuring that there be a future mankind – even if no descendants of ours are among them – and second, with a duty toward their condition, the quality of their life

[Jonas 1985, p. 40].

Here, Jonas discusses the issue which may seem to be obvious, although current fertility rates and the advancing depopulation of the West prove that this knowledge is still not widespread enough. What is more, we should be really alarmed and

concerned by it – not only because of our responsibility for those to come but also for ourselves with the prospects for our own old age and retirement, as it is us who will be in need of care and support. Each of the situations included here present one important characteristic of responsibility, which is a kind of asymmetrical relationship. It is important to understand this, because today we are so immersed in the sphere of symmetrical, market-like, interactions in our contemporary societies. This phenomenon has been analysed previously by different authors and is known e.g. as the process described by Jürgen Habermas as the colonisation of lifeworld.

Asymmetry means that both parties in the responsibility relationship are not equal in their potential and power. This is well expressed by Jonas, who wrote that

(...) the future is not represented, it is not a force that can throw its weight into the scales. The nonexistent has no lobby, and the unborn are powerless. Thus accountability to them has no political reality behind it in present decision-making, and when they can make their complaint, then we, the culprits, will no longer be there [Jonas 1985, p. 22].

This asymmetrical character of responsibility also means that there is no reciprocity – or even possibility to expect it in the interactions – between us and those to come. And what is quite interesting, this lack of symmetry characterizes these relationships which are most important in terms of the functioning of society and its long-term continuity. This is confirmed by Gilder who writes that,

capitalism begins with giving. Not from greed, avarice, or even self-love can one expect the rewards of commerce, but from a spirit closely akin to altruism, a regard for the needs of others, a benevolent, outgoing, and courageous temper of mind [Gilder 1993, p. 21].

In this context, it is well-justified to point to the non-market sphere of primary socialisation, which, according to Charles H. Cooley, is mainly realised within family, neighbourhood or peer groups. This is especially evident in the functioning of the family, where this asymmetry is natural and unavoidable. The most spectacular of such relationships is parent-child bond, described by Jonas as the archetype of any responsible action (see [Jonas 1985, p. 101]).

It seems that the more popular and dominant symmetrical relations in our contemporary world become, the more important it is to discuss this nature of responsibility. This happens mostly through a process that can be called the marketisation of public and private life, where more and more often people behave as partners or consumers and treat human relationships as contracts.

It is possible to observe in the domain of marriage and family where the indissolubility and stability of these institutions seem to be ignored by growing number of people, who treat these bonds as a subject to ongoing negotiation and their duration depends only on individual satisfaction and separate decisions of both parties. This kind of relationship is called a “pure relationship” by Anthony Giddens [1992]. As a consequence of this individualistic – and hedonistic one must admit – orientation developing in the sphere of intimate relationships, responsibility becomes marginalised.

In this perspective the phenomenon of growing irresponsibility for future generations can be seen as breaking off what is called the ‘intergenerational contract’, which underlies the functioning of the social order in the temporal perspective and regulates the relations between generations.

3. The irresponsibility epidemic and some examples

Societies do much better if they face facts rather than ignore them.

[Roback-Morse 2001, p. 27]

The problem I call here, namely the ‘epidemic of irresponsibility’ – which may sound like an exaggeration – is closely linked to the socio-cultural and technological transformations that took place in the twentieth century in the West. The most significant period of these was the sexual revolution which acted as a catalyst for many changes and processes that started earlier – also due to the scientific and technological revolution in the household domain (see: [Cowan 1976]). It accelerated and legitimised many profound shifts not only in the sexual culture of Western civilisation but also, among others, started to change relations between generations. In its various aspects, one can see a common element, namely the departure from responsibility as the foundation of human interactions.

As was mentioned in the Introduction, to illustrate this problem one may point at three issues, which are somehow connected. The first of these refers to existing marriages and families and the problem of increasing dissolution and disintegration of these fundamental bonds for the functioning of the society [Berger, Kellner 1964, p. 5]. For the purpose of this analysis, I propose to treat this phenomenon as a rejection of responsibility for others, which leads to such consequences as divorces, single-parent homes, lower-quality socialization, the feminisation of poverty and blended families. The second one refers to rejection of engagement and commitment in long-term relationships such as marriage and stable, intact families, and the third issue is connected with the sphere of procreation and the approach to human life. I am going to describe these issues in the following points.

3.1. Irresponsibility and marriage – divorces, single parenthood, the feminisation of poverty, blended families and intergenerational relations

When it comes to matrimony, which can be described as one of the most important regulatory institutions of the West (see: [Berger, Kellner 1964]), it is certainly experiencing a crisis and downturn. This means that more and more marriages break-up – spouses split and families are fragmented. According to Eurostat, almost half of the marriages in the European Union and United States end in divorce [Eurostat 2017; National Center for Health Statistics 2016].

Leaving aside different explanations and analyses, one can treat this shift in general as a decreasing will to accept and bear responsibility for the relationship and the life,

well-being and welfare of other, in this case the people. These days, there is abundant data showing that the family disintegration has diverse serious consequences, especially for children [Albertini, Garriga 2011, p. 271]. Firstly, it is necessary to say that divorces weaken the stability of marriages and families in general, and also decrease fertility [Alesina, Giuliano 2006], and secondly, they negatively influence not only development of children, but their whole life as well [Wallerstein et al. 2000]. What is more, divorces are directly linked to single parenthood which has a serious influence on outcomes in children. This happens because of the decrease in potential parental investments. According to Heckman,

intact families invest greater amounts in their children than do single-parent families (...). The evidence on disparities in child-rearing environments and their consequences for adult outcomes is troubling in light of the shrinking proportion of children being raised in intact families

[Heckman 2011, p. 33].

One of the problems connected with marriage break-up is the feminisation of poverty, which means that women are more likely to experience a worse material situation after family dissolution. This will be explored in greater depth further below.

When it comes to blended families, which are formed by spouses who were divorced earlier, it may also cause some disadvantages in terms of the welfare and well-being of children living in such a new situation. An interesting explanation is offered by Lisa A. Gennetian, who writes:

in a two-biological parent family, children may be considered collective or public goods and it is efficient for both parents to invest in a child's well-being. When parents separate, investment in a child decreases, as children are no longer viewed as a public good (formalized by Weiss and Willis 1985). Thus, in a single parent family with no contact with the nonresident parent, children may be considered a private good and only one parent efficiently invests in their well-being. Under fairly general conditions, (...) the optimal level of investment in a child who is a public good is strictly greater than that in a child who is a private good

[Gennetian 2005, pp. 417-418].

There is also interesting data showing that in the case of their ability to complete more years of schooling, children from intact families had better results on average. This means, among other things, that the likelihood of graduating from high school and the chances for good performance in college and completing this level of education were greater in the case of children from intact families than for their peers living in blended or single-parent families (see: [Ginther, Pollak 2004, pp. 671-696]).

Finally, it is worth looking at the influence that divorces have on intergenerational relations, especially understood as those between parents and children. In the research on the consequences of divorce, there are at present two declining effect hypotheses. According to the first one, the negative effects of divorce decline as children's age

increases. In the second hypothesis, it is claimed that the more frequent divorces are in a society, the more the negative consequences of parental split-up decrease [Albertini, Garriga 2011, p. 261].

In their analysis, Marco Albertini and Anna Garriga have found no support for either of these hypotheses [Albertini, Garriga 2011, p. 273] and showed that in fact intergenerational relations deteriorate through divorce. They argue that

(...) divorced parent-child dyads are less likely to have daily or weekly contact than married parent-child dyads. Furthermore, the proportion of dyads for which the relation is absent or almost broken is significantly higher among the former group [Albertini, Garriga 2011, p. 273].

This is all the more important in the context of data which shows that contacts between elderly parents and children are crucial from the perspective of avoiding the social isolation of older people, and more important than functioning networks of elderly individuals (see: [Albertini, Garriga 2011, pp. 257-258]). This seems to be a very useful finding in the context of ageing populations and the serious challenges it brings, such as social isolation.

3.2. Rejection of long-term commitments – cohabitation, out-of-wedlock births, extramarital sex and sexually transmitted diseases

In this section, I wish to discuss phenomena, connected with the transformations of marriage and family life discussed above, which show profound changes of the preferences of people in Western societies.

The first one is cohabitation, which is growing more and more popular as the desirability of marriage decreases. In this case, it is evident that those engaged in this kind of relationship are not interested in such serious commitment and responsibility as is usually in the case of matrimony. First important feature of this form of quasi-family life is its lower stability which – as has already been indicated – influences the development and achievements of children and may also foster the feminisation of poverty. The research also shows that the stability of marriage in the case of earlier experienced cohabitation decreases [Waite, Gallagher 2000, p. 46]. There is also a greater likelihood of infidelity between cohabiting partners [Wellings, Field, Johnson, Wadsworth 1994, p. 116; Steinhaiser 1995]. Finally, it has been shown that cohabiting couples do far worse in terms of accumulating wealth than married couples [Waite, Gallagher 2000, pp. 111-114; Akerloff 1998: pp. 299-303].

When it comes to out-of-wedlock births they are more numerous these days. According to Eurostat, *in 2012, 40.0% of live births in the EU-28 were outside marriage, which is 12.7 percentage points higher than the share of 27.3% in 2000* [Eurostat 2015]. According to the data for 2016, it seems that this trend is stable [Euronews 2018].

In the case of births outside marriage, it is also worth recalling that they often lead to single-parenthood, as described above. Let me just present a statement by George A. Akerlof, Janet L. Yellen and Michael L. Katz, who wrote in their article that

rising out-of-wedlock birthrates are of social policy concern because children reared in single-parent households are more likely to be impoverished and to experience difficulties in later life [Akerlof, Yellen, Katz 1996, p. 278].

In the discussion about out-of-wedlock births it is useful to mention an important change in the sphere of sexual behaviour which occurred in the second half of the twentieth century and is also connected with technological shifts in the area of birth control. According to Akerlof et al. [1996, p. 278], *a major role in the increase in out-of-wedlock births has been played by the declining practice of ‘shotgun marriage’*. *Until the early 1970s it was the norm in premarital sexual relations that the partners would marry in the event of pregnancy*. Since that time, this custom – a kind of mutually binding contract – started to disappear and according to Akerlof et al.; the reason was introduction of abortion and contraception which have become legalised and more easily available. This transformation seemed to improve the situation and – speaking in economic terms – the ‘competitive advantage’ of women, but the results were different. In fact, it was men who became the ‘beneficiaries’ of this new situation when the ‘shotgun marriage’ contract was no longer in force. From now on, it was technology not man who was deemed responsible. It is well concluded by Akerlof et al. who write that *the sexual revolution, by making the birth of the child the physical choice of the mother, makes marriage and child support a social choice of the father* [Akerlof et al. 1996, p. 281].

As a consequence, even though it was expected that accessibility of contraceptives and abortion would decrease the number of out-of-wedlock births, they started to grow. At the same time – due to this technological and other general changes in sexual mores – the expectation to engage in premarital sex without obligations started to become more common [Greenwood, Guner 2009, p. 1]. As we read in the book *The Hidden Epidemic* published by the Committee on Prevention and Control of Sexually Transmitted Diseases, *by the twelfth grade, nearly 70 percent of adolescents have had sexual intercourse, and approximately one-quarter of all students have had sex with four or more partners* [Eng, Butler 1997; p. 10]. This means that young people are especially at risk when it comes to contracting venereal diseases. The publication mentioned above discusses the issue and calls it ‘hidden epidemic’ which has huge costs for society. We read there that

sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are hidden epidemics of tremendous health and economic consequence in the United States. (...) Of the top ten most frequently reported diseases in 1995 in the United States, five are STDs. (...) Approximately 12 million new cases of STDs, 3 million of them among teenagers, occur annually. The committee estimates that the annual direct and indirect costs of selected major STDs are approximately \$10 billion or, if sexually transmitted HIV infections are included, \$17 billion. Along with the human suffering associated with STDs, this cost is shared by all Americans through higher health care costs and taxes. STDs represent a growing threat to the nation’s health and national action is urgently needed [Eng, Butler 1997, p. 1].

Speaking of costs, it is also worth considering other evaluations of the consequences of family fragmentation and changes in sexual behaviours in terms of the financial burden for the whole society. According to estimates of the authors of the report *The Taxpayer Costs of Divorce and Unwed Childbearing*, the cost of divorces and out-of-wedlock births for taxpayers in the United States amounts to at least \$112 billion each and every year, or more than \$1 trillion each decade [Scafidi 2008, p. 5].

3.3. Decreasing intergenerational solidarity and support

The last, but not least important issue that will be presented here is the phenomenon I call decreasing solidarity and support between generations which are manifested through such actions as euthanasia, abortion and contraceptives. Some aspects of this approach have already been indicated, and here I shall devote some more space to illustrate the problem.

These practices jointly communicate that human life is not unconditional, which means that fundamental features of Western culture such as respect for every human life and the dignity it deserves no longer seem to be in force. More and more often they are being replaced by a utilitarian and pragmatic approach – combined with social Darwinism, where such criteria as utility and quality of life become prioritised. Paradoxically, this approach which stresses the effectiveness, productivity and profitability of human beings has not resulted in real growth of welfare and well-being in the West. This has been signalled among others by Robert E. Lane, the author of the book *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies* (see: [Lane 2000, pp. 3-4]).

Another paradox is that the West suffers from very low fertility and depopulation and at the same time does not respect human life by denying the right to live of the weak, sick or unwanted for whatever reason (see: [Black 2003]). In practice, this means that the right to life is not unconditional and becomes subject to individual subjective decisions of those who are in power.

When it comes to current demographic problems of the West, one can describe this civilisation as highly unsustainable in terms of caring about future welfare and well-being. This problem can also be analysed from the perspective of human capital which is becoming a scarce good these days.

It is worth examining the research conducted by Henry Potrykus and Anna Higgins, the authors of the article *Abortion: Decrease of the U.S. Population & Effects on Society*, who offer an evaluation of the loss of human capital caused by abortion in the United States. They claim that the analysis of social and economic consequences of forty years of legal abortion is important because it influenced society in many ways. According to their calculations,

(...) approximately 10 million workers have been eliminated by abortion. Of these 10 million, approximately 5 million would be of age to actively participate in the labor force today. Without legalized abortion, over 5

million additional people would be part of the current labor force. This is a substantial fraction of the present labor force of 150 million workers

[Potrykus, Higgins 2014, pp. 4-5].

After estimating the number of missing employees that were not allowed to be born, the authors try to evaluate the work they would perform in case they had lived. The final result is the loss between 70 billion and 135 billion dollars every year in the United States [Potrykus, Higgins 2014, p. 5].

This numbers certainly should be considered and inspire reflection on the means and ends that the West chooses on its path to the future. Undoubtedly, our civilisation pays more and more for achieving its goals which no longer guarantee not only a safe and happy life, but respect and dignity for everyone.

4. Conclusion

The analyses presented in this article were intended to show how Western civilisation is abandoning the idea of responsibility for future generations. This becomes evident on the basis of all of the three areas described, to a large extent interrelated, which have one common feature. All of them show growing individualism and lack of responsibility for others, which put at risk not only the current functioning of society, but also its future continuity and success. In various behaviours and decisions, one may observe more and more often people who do not want to care about and support each other. This means that intergenerational solidarity, understood more broadly than accepting financial duties in terms of pension systems, which underlies the social contract, is endangered.

When it comes to the nature of this crisis, one should admit that first of all it is cultural. Even though we mainly observe the socio-economic symptoms of it, we already understand well that its background is demographic, but its roots are spiritual or existential one might say. The possible explanation of this dramatically depopulating civilisation may be that it has lost its sense and desperately seeks to find one. The only problem is that the West is looking for it in the wrong place, because the modernity and postmodernity may be misleading in this case.

Historically, one can see that this kind of inspiration for culture and its civilisation used to be placed in the long-term perspective, reaching far beyond the scope of one or two generations. This means for the West that its unique development and civilisational achievements were the results of accomplishing goals more profound than just earthly welfare and well-being. It means that it is possible to explain the limitations and impotence of the modern and postmodern project through their secular inclinations which shorten the civilisational horizon of actions and aspirations. It is well expressed by Takeshi Umehara, who wrote that, (...) *if there is nothing beyond death, then what is wrong with giving oneself wholly to pleasure in the short time one has left to live? The loss of faith in the 'other world' has saddled modern Western society with a fatal moral problem* [Umehara 1999, p. 46].

I must admit that I am committed to the diagnosis offered by such authors as Umehara and David P. Goldman, who point to secularisation as the reason for this situation. According to Goldman, *without the hope of immortality we cannot bear mortality. Cultures that have lost the hope of immortality also lose the will to live. Culture is the stuff out of which we weave the perception of immortality* [Goldman 2011, p. 351].

This would confirm the hypothesis about the cultural roots of our crisis and explain well the paradox of the wealthy and healthy West which is underperforming in terms of demographic reproduction and is heading towards decline (see: [Goldman 2011, p. 15]).

One can think of many different solutions to this situation. Perhaps it would be reasonable to recommend that economics must give way to ethics, e.g. in terms of permanence and the responsibility for the future and to understand that the role of non-economic cultural factors cannot be ignored in the process of social reproduction. In terms of social and demographic policy, it would certainly be wise to assume responsibility for those to come and simply let them come, because we will need their care and support in the future.

All of these remedies may seem useful, but I am afraid that they will work only if we rethink the shape and essential components – norms, values and beliefs – of Western culture which ignited the unprecedented developments and achievements in the past. It is also necessary to admit that without them our civilisation will return to the state of irresponsible barbarism it once overcame.

I believe the West is able to take this responsibility for the future.

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