Can Liberalism Last?
Demographic Demise and the Future of Liberalism[1]

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Abstract: Liberal political institutions have been an enormous boon for humanity. The free market aspect of liberalism has led to an explosion of innovation, ranging from new kinds of technology and novel forms of entertainment to advances in science and medicine. And the emphasis on individual rights at the core of liberalism has increased our ability to explore new ways of living and to construct an identity of our own choosing. But liberal political institutions around the world are facing two crises: low fertility and declining social trust. In particular, liberalism's focus on individual liberty rather than group cohesion can increase economic productivity by encouraging the free movement of people and capital, but this movement is associated with declines in social cohesion and fertility. While causation cannot be inferred from correlation, there are reasons to think liberalism tends to *cause* these problems and is ill-suited to solve them. In this essay, we hope to identify some key features of liberal political institutions and outline a set of challenges to the long-term evolutionary stability of liberalism. In other words, we raise the question: can liberalism last?

Introduction

Rather than discuss the obvious virtues of liberal political societies, we will focus on two negative consequences that threaten their long-run stability: declining social trust and sub-replacement fertility. We do not claim that liberal political institutions are sufficient to produce these outcomes. Indeed, historically, in 19th century America and England, liberal societies had strong fertility and probably a high degree of social trust and cohesion (O'Neill, 2021a, 2021b).[i] But we do think the liberal institutions of these societies helped create the conditions for their own long-run demise.

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[1] Forthcoming, *Social Philosophy and Policy*

According to the academic consensus, the chief commitments of liberal political societies are freedom and equality (Rawls, 1996). There are many different interpretations of freedom (Berlin, 1958) and equality (Sen, 1995), some of which seem to be incompatible. But most agree that for a society to be liberal, freedom of action should be the moral default, while government coercion requires justification (Gaus, Schmidtz, & Courtland, 2018). *Classical* liberals consider equality under the law to be the chief virtue of liberal institutions, whereas more radical *modern* liberals endorse something closer to equality of "fair opportunity" or even equal outcomes (sometimes called "equity").

Despite disagreements between liberals about how to flesh out their core commitments, liberal institutions that prioritize individual liberty, freedom of movement, and the free exchange of goods, tend to evolve in particular directions. For example, to the extent that institutions shape social norms, the liberal rejection of a comprehensive conception of the good tends to lead to a diversity of norms, including norms concerning how to live and work, as well as norms surrounding reproduction and family life.

Some diversity of norms is desirable. John Stuart Mill famously advocated "experiments in living," successful versions of which might be copied by other societies. But diversity can also lead to social strife, polarization, and distrust (Dinesen, Schaeffer, & Sonderskov, 2020). The *kind* and *amount* of diversity matters.

By removing tribe or tradition as important values, liberalism tends to erode religion and community, which are often connected with fertility. Traditional families and communities often put pressure on people to have children, whereas liberal institutions tend to promote personal achievement and financial success. It is possible, of course, to live a traditional life in liberal political societies. But people are social creatures, and liberal societies that emphasize free trade and individualism tend to create norms that direct us to pursue educational and financial success – to create a life for ourselves – rather than live traditional lives in which we are accountable to our community and encouraged to form stable families. These social norms lead to low birth rates and a tenuous attachment to community. In the following few sections, we hope to explain how this has happened. Our explanations extrapolate from patterns. They are not knock down arguments, and they certainly do not blame an abstract political philosophy called "liberalism" for all of the problems associated with modern life. But they do identify a couple of deep problems that have been neglected by scholars.

We begin by analyzing key phenomena in modern liberal democracies such as urbanization, mass immigration, and associated changes in character traits and social norms. Then, from an evolutionary standpoint, we focus on the long-term effects of these phenomena, concentrating on sub-replacement fertility and declining social trust. By doing so, we challenge the sustainability of liberal institutions.

a) The move to cities

Communities work well when the population that comprises them remains relatively stable and small. These are the conditions in which people know one another well enough to develop and share a common set of norms and social expectations. In especially large and heterogeneous groups, norms are difficult to police through informal sanctions, and the members of these groups tend to develop different standards of behavior. When large groups with different standards live in the same place, and there's frequent migration in and out of an area, coordination becomes difficult and trust declines (Ostrom, 2000).

Many people are shocked when they move to a large city from a small town. People are less polite, customs change, trust declines, and ethnic enclaves within the city form. This does not mean that cities are bad, or should be avoided. Instead, we are simply observing that the economies of scale that cities offer have a price. Cities are economically productive places, engines of innovation. And they seem to have network effects—at least up to a point—such that additional people can create exponential economic productivity. One reason for this is infrastructure. Laying the pipes and electrical grid to furnish a million people with water and electricity in a geographically concentrated city is much easier than laying down the infrastructure for 1,000 small towns, each of which has 1,000 residents. The environmental footprint and infrastructure costs are typically much larger per resident in 1,000 hamlets than they are in a thriving metropolis like London or Sydney (Meyer, 2013).

Similarly, smart or creative people who live around many other people who share their abilities and interests can bring their ideas together in a way that benefits all of them, and has positive externalities for the world (Ridley, 2010). This is especially true when the average IQ of a concentrated population is high, and when market forces incentivize people to share their ideas in clubs and universities and firms (Jones, 2016).

But the move to cities has a cost. These include a tendency for pro-social traits to be less rewarded than they would in a small and stable group. Getting people to cooperate without using force requires us to interact with the same people repeatedly, so that we can bear a reputation, find and reward trustworthy people, and punish free-riders (Bowles, 1998; Anomaly, 2017). This is especially challenging in large cities when we are less likely to see the same people over time, and when we are less likely to suffer social sanctions for bad behavior.

Apart from the challenge of establishing stable norms of cooperation in large and heterogeneous cities that have a steady stream of people moving in and out, cities can also be alienating. As population density increases, the price of desirable real estate rises, and people tend to live in smaller housing units with less access to nature and less of a sense that they belong to a neighborhood. They often feel less connected to anything that resembles a community. This is part of what social scientists mean when they say that social capital has declined in modern American cities (Putnam, 1995).

One effect of moving to cities is declining fertility. In modern liberal societies, people tend to move wherever they can make the most money. These are usually cities. That means people move to (and create the conditions for) places that have less social trust and social capital than traditional neighborhoods. Moreover, these cities lack the social pressure that traditional communities exert on their inhabitants to form a family rather than chasing financial success. And while such communities may exist within cities, they are not the norm. Cities make the cost of raising children higher. Fertility has indeed declined in every place where wealth and opportunities for women have increased (Kolk, 2019). But in wealthy countries around the world, fertility is way below replacement, and in cities with high population density fertility is significantly lower than it is in less dense neighborhoods (Kulu, 2011, Rotella et al 2021). Cities are probably the natural result of specialization and trade. They exist under liberal and illiberal regimes. But to the extent that liberalism encourages people to move out of communities and into cities in the pursuit of profit, this may be considered a cost associated with liberalism, even if this process happens to a lesser extent in all societies that are large and prosperous and have robust markets.

To prevent costs such as this one, governments sometimes discourage the move to cities. For instance, the Chinese government regulates internal migration into cities to prevent mass urbanization and to maintain a sense of social order. It does so through the removal of basic rights. As a result, Chinese people who reside in cities without governmental permission are *de facto* illegal aliens (Boquen, 2021). Liberalism, however, cannot resort to these measures without violating some

of its core principles, such as freedom of association and contract. So, while mass urbanization may affect all advanced economies, liberal governments have fewer policy mechanisms to regulate its undesirable effects – including alienation, decreased social capital, and low fertility – than non-liberal regimes.

b) Immigration

One of the most obvious trends in contemporary liberal societies is the move toward open borders. Mass migration began in the late 19th century in the United States, but most migrants came from Europe. After the second world war, and especially in the 1960s, mass migration accelerated and, for the first time, large numbers of people from outside of Europe – including Africa, Asia, and the Middle East – migrated to liberal democracies like the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Sweden, and other European countries. Mass immigration has never been a popular policy in the West, even if many citizens in European countries support modest levels of immigration among skilled workers and people fleeing war (Esipova, Pugliese, & Ray, 2015). But there is an emerging consensus among liberal theorists that freedom of movement, including the movement of people across borders, is a moral right, with restrictions of movement needing justification (Freiman & Hidalgo, 2016; Huemer, 2010; Vossen & Brennan, 2018). While there are liberal critiques of mass migration (Buchanan, 1995; Joshi, 2019; Wellman, 2008), it is increasingly common among liberal academics and progressive voters to support mass migration, even in the face of popular opposition by conservatives and nationalists.

Apart from arguments that derive from principles or ideology, liberalism as a political system tends to reward large corporations that import the lowest-cost workers they can find, even if they come from outside a nation's borders. Liberal institutions tend to concentrate capital in large firms (Coase, 1937). These firms then lobby governments to import cheap labor from abroad. This is good for the individual firms since they can pay lower wages. And it is good for consumers to the extent that it lowers the prices of consumer goods. But over the long run, the aggregate effect of mass migration on the country in which it occurs may be to lower social trust and social cohesion, apart from its employment effects on the native population.

One explanation for why mass migration can lower social cohesion is that we are tribal creatures who search for cues of trustworthiness. These cues can come from a common ethnicity, language, religion, or other salient feature. Just being a citizen of a large and diverse state is unlikely

to elicit much fellow feeling. Ethnocentrism is likely an adaptive trait (Axelrod & Hammond, 2006), even if it can have bad consequences in some contexts, such as motivating people to engage in genocide over disputed territory. While people are somewhat malleable in their ability to tolerate and cooperate with others who are unlike them (Buchanan, 2020), there are likely limits to toleration and cooperation. Liberal political societies have been testing these limits to such an extent that social trust has fallen in Western countries with especially high levels of immigration from poor countries (Dinesen et al., 2020). Indeed, recent evidence suggests that support for immigration falls when immigrants are ethnically distinct and poor (Schahbasi, Huber, & Fieder, 2020).

Despite popular opposition (Gorodzeisky & Semyonov, 2019), political parties in liberal societies tend to collude with corporations to import workers and voters.[ii] Policymakers in liberal democracies are strongly influenced by private corporations who finance their campaigns and apply pressure for policy favors. Corporate executives at large firms favor mass migration because this allows them to select workers from a larger pool (Facchini, Mayda, & Mishra, 2011). One consequence is an increase in highly skilled workers. Another is an increase in low skilled workers to whom firms can pay lower wages than they would have to pay natives if the immigrants are coming from poorer countries to richer ones. But corporations and policymakers often ignore the long-term demographic effects of migrant workers on the larger political society in which they live. These effects, whether positive or negative, are externalities – unintended byproducts of an otherwise mutually beneficial exchange between corporation and migrant worker, or between a political party and the beneficiaries of that party's policies.[iii] According to the "deep roots" literature in economics, patterns of migration shape the long-term prosperity of countries by altering institutions and the nature of the people who occupy them (Jones, 2022).

Immigration is not a uniquely liberal phenomenon, though. Policymakers in non-liberal regimes craft immigration to fit their interests and values (Natter, 2018). But because they do not necessarily have to worry about elections, they are not as dependent on short-run profits or the approval of profit-seeking firms. Nor do they always subscribe to principles of universal rights. Because rulers in non-liberal regimes govern for longer periods and often without democratic legitimacy, they have stronger incentives to pay attention to the long-term costs of immigration, especially costs that can endanger their rule, such as social instability and conflict. Moreover, because non-liberal regimes do not always offer political rights to immigrants, they can reverse immigration flows whenever they want to.

Another avenue along which liberal institutions encourage mass migration is that domestic and international laws recognizing universal rights tend to produce norms among citizens that encourage those rights to be indefinitely extended. Liberal political institutions seem to encourage people who think of themselves as good citizens to expressively support candidates who exalt the values of diversity and toleration, candidates who normally support mass migration.[iv] Whether liberal political societies tend to foster this kind of thinking, or it is just a fad in Western countries over the past few decades is hard to know. But once mass migration becomes a reality, it does seem natural that social norms would change in ways that reduce patriotic and nationalist sentiments, which signal a unique attachment to a people and place.

c) Character traits and social norms

In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche speculates that the *fight* for freedom tends to make people responsible, virtuous agents, but that attaining freedom makes them complacent and weak:

> *My conception of freedom.* – The value of a thing sometimes does not lie in that which one attains by it, but in what one pays for it – what it costs us. I shall give an example. Liberal institutions cease to be liberal as soon as they are attained: later on, there are no worse and no more thorough injurers of freedom than liberal institutions. Their effects are known well enough: they undermine the will to power; they level mountain and valley, and call that morality; they make men small, cowardly, and hedonistic – every time it is the herd animal that triumphs with them. Liberalism: in other words, herd-animalization.

> The peoples who had some value, who attained some value, never attained it under liberal institutions: it was great danger that made something of them that merits respect. Danger alone acquaints us with our own resources, our virtues, our armor and weapons, our spirit, and forces us to be strong. First principle: one must *need* to be strong – otherwise one will never become strong (Nietzsche, 1889, §38).

While this passage can be interpreted in many ways, a central idea is that a lack of struggle makes most men weak, and that weaklings lack the vitality needed to build and preserve the institutions that

allow us to prosper. If a lack of physical vigor and intellectual virtue results from *any* system that produces wealth and prosperity, Nietzsche's point is less about liberalism than it is about institutions that promote wealth and the vices wealth enables.

However, we may extend Nietzsche's conjecture from character traits to social norms. It is possible that because of its foundational commitment to freedom and equality, and the increasingly loose interpretations of these concepts, social norms weaken under liberal institutions. According to Patrick Deneen, "because self-rule was achieved only with difficulty…the achievement of liberty required constraints upon individual choice. The limitation was achieved not primarily by promulgated law…but through extensive social norms in the form of custom" (Deneen, 2018, xii). "Ironically," Deneen argues, "as behavior becomes unregulated in the social sphere, the state must be constantly enlarged through an expansion of lawmaking and regulatory activities" (Deneen, 2018, xiv).

Presumably, Deneen is thinking of social norms governing trustworthiness, honesty, and other social virtues that facilitate trade, community, and cooperation. When these norms are working well, they lower the cost of transacting with strangers and minimize the need for formal institutions like courts and police agencies to uphold order. But when norms that facilitate trust become attenuated, more formal sanctions are needed to fill in the void. And these can be more expensive and less effective at promoting human flourishing.

To be sure, Nietzsche's conjecture that the traits required to produce liberal institutions are undermined by those very institutions is speculative. And Deneen's idea that social norms are undermined by liberalism is a hypothesis that Deneen does not supply decisive evidence for. As Cass Sunstein reminds us in a rejoinder to critics like Deneen:

> Some people see history as a war of 'isms' – liberalism, conservatism, traditionalism, Marxism… The narratives they offer tend to be grand and sweeping (and to many people seductive, even thrilling). They see the movements of societies as a result of the triumph of some set of abstract ideas, without showing how those ideas actually produced those movements, and without paying attention to the need to identify micro foundations and mechanisms (Sunstein, 2020, p. 182).

This is an important point: to show that liberalism *produces* certain outcomes, rather than merely *correlates* with them, we need to identify specific mechanisms. No evidence in this realm can be as decisive as a mathematical proof, but we think some conjectures are more plausible than others.

One of the two claims we try to show in this paper is that liberal societies tend to alter social norms surrounding gender and reproduction in ways that threaten the sustainability of liberal societies. The freedom to form *any* kind of family, or to identify as any gender, is increasingly common in wealthy liberal societies. However one views traditional family norms, it is easy to see how radical permissiveness in this area – the sense that one is free to do anything, regardless of the social consequences – may contribute to sub-replacement fertility.

One way it seems to do so is by fostering permissive norms surrounding sex and marriage. To take one example, no-fault divorce laws are now widespread throughout the West. This may be seen as fair to the extent that it reflects the principle that we should tolerate different lifestyle choices. But it also has the consequence that divorce rates tend to increase, and more women enter the workforce and marry much later (Allen, 2006). These trends are in turn associated with low birth rates, late pregnancies, and single-parent households. Late pregnancies are often problematic for mothers, as health issues increase, and there are social costs to children growing up in single-parent households, including lower life achievements and emotional problems (Rector, 2014). Governments often need to deal with such costs by making new laws and offering financial support – which can, in turn, further incentivize single parent households by making welfare payments available to single women. These lifestyle choices are now commonplace in wealthy liberal societies. The no-fault divorce example shows how liberal changes in laws modify social norms, even when those changes allow people to keep their traditional (marriage) practices.

d) Unsustainable norms?

There is some historical evidence that wealth and liberal attitudes about family tend to depress fertility by increasing indulgence in maladaptive behaviors that are less available in societies with more scarcity and less safety.[v] Indeed, many authors have pointed out the parallels between the cultural malaise of modern Western societies and the decadence of the late Roman empire which saw more wealth, increased sexual freedom, and decreased fertility (Caldwell, 2004). The poet Juvenal explained the decadence of the Roman empire as follows:

Now we suffer the ills of a long peace. Worse for us than war

this luxury's stifling us, taking its revenge for an empire won.

No single kind of crime or act of lust has been lacking, from

the moment we were no longer poor: all vice pours into Rome.

(Juvenal, Circa 115 CE, 231-285)

It is not only maladaptive *behaviors* that wealth seems to invite. Our *beliefs* may also become exotic rather than accurate in times of opulence. Rob Henderson (2019) recently coined the term "luxury belief" to designate beliefs people form – or at least, publicly display – as signifiers that they are part of the intellectual elite. These beliefs are essentially costly signals, akin to luxury goods like designer clothes and jewelry. In order to be costly, though, such beliefs must be hard to form – for example, in some cases it requires high intelligence to form luxury beliefs in part because they conflict with reality itself and require cognitive dissonance. Anyone can believe the sky is blue. But it takes a clever person capable of a particular kind of mental gymnastics to believe there are no average differences between men and women, or that all humans have the same natural capacities, so that only oppression and injustice explain different outcomes. Yet these (and other similar) beliefs are now especially common among the intellectual elite in the USA and UK (Anomaly & Winegard, 2020). It is not that intelligent people are more likely to hold false beliefs. But they can justify their false beliefs better – to others and to themselves.

In all ages, people wish to distinguish themselves as members of some groups and not others. Inter-group competition is, after all, a key component of human evolution (Turchin, 2016). Notably, in wealthy liberal democracies with competing political cultures, some elites uphold liberal radicalism – in part – to build an identity and distinguish themselves from their opponents. They do so by signaling solidarity with certain egalitarian ideas. For example, it has become commonplace in modern liberal societies to hold that traditional gender roles should vanish because they are the product of patriarchal oppression, not of human reproductive imperatives – as traditionalists often argue. Faith in such radical ideas signifies membership in an elite class of people (Reed, 2018), and deviation is often punished through social sanctions in the workplace and censorship on social media (Patty, 2019). Certain beliefs allow people to signal their membership in powerful coalitions. Having the right beliefs is socially rewarded within those coalitions, even when it is clear to outsiders the beliefs are false (Williams, 2020). In this sense, expressing a false belief can be advantageous to the extent that it signifies one's membership in a specific group (Simler & Hanson, 2018).

The luxury beliefs held by many of the elite in modern liberal societies have at least two important consequences. First, they foster social polarization by radicalizing non-liberals – including nationalists and populists – which in turn lowers social trust and cohesion. Second, these beliefs can spread maladaptive norms throughout society, in particular among those who imitate the behavior and attitudes of liberal elites (Boyd & Richerson, 2005, Chap. V). Indeed, this seems to be taking place. In the United States, for instance, people who hold liberal beliefs have considerably lower birth rates than conservatives, a trend that is widening in recent decades (Stone, 2020a). As reproductive fitness is tied to biocultural continuity (Gintis, 2011), including institutional continuity, this trend puts a question mark on the long-term evolutionary sustainability of liberal institutions.[vi]

e) A maladaptive ideology

If liberalism fosters maladaptive behaviors within social groups, it will likely be replaced by more adaptive belief systems. This replacement occurs via cultural group selection, but ultimately has biological effects (Henrich, 2016). Belief systems and their rules function as cooperation mechanisms that help groups to be cohesive and resilient. Groups that are internally altruistic and capable of enhancing reproductive fitness tend to outsurvive competitors (Wilson & Wilson, 2007). Indeed, natural selection happens not only at the level of individuals but also at the level of groups – something that scientists now widely recognize (Birch & Okasha, 2014). Darwin put it simply, "there can be no doubt that a tribe including many members who … were always ready … to sacrifice themselves for the common good would be victorious over most other tribes; and this would be natural selection" (Darwin, 1871, p. 166). To be sustainable, then, liberal institutions would need to foster both group cohesion and reproductive fitness. And they would have to do it better than non-liberal institutions.

Few liberals defend liberalism by appealing to its fitness maximizing capacities or evolutionary stability. A prominent exception is Friedrich Hayek (1988). He argued that classical liberalism is the most sustainable political system because it enhances group fitness better than any alternative. According to Hayek, limited government, free trade, and state neutrality regarding the good life allows groups to increase their wealth, which in turn helps them to increase their reproduction and carrying capacity. Liberal groups, in his view, will tend to expand and replace groups with tribal norms via cultural group selection.

f) Low fertility and demographic challenges

However, current evidence does not support Hayek's theory (Faria, 2017). The populations of the most developed market economies – in particular, liberal democracies – have sub-replacement fertility rates. By contrast, many populations of underdeveloped economies, often living under non-liberal regimes, display remarkable demographic growth. A similar dynamic can be seen within the West. For instance, subcultural and religious groups like the Amish – who reject modern technology and lifestyles – have birth rates that allow them to double their population every 20 years (Boyd & Richerson, 2005, p. 180). Indeed, religious fervor is a strong indicator of population growth. Global demographic trends reveal that religious and non-liberal populations are increasing substantially relative to liberal and secular populations (Inglehart & Norris, 2011). If these trends continue, and if religiosity and political orientation are moderately heritable (Haidt, 2012, Plomin, 2018), non-liberal political institutions may very well displace liberal political institutions, even if they produce less wealth. And cultural selection strongly influences who reproduces, and consequently what kinds of people populate a society (Clark, 2006; Henrich, 2016).

To tackle the issues of sub-replacement fertility rates and labor shortages, Western governments often bring in immigrants from high fertility areas, such as sub-Saharan Africa – whose population may triple by 2100 (Cilluffo & Ruiz, 2019) – or from areas with large populations, like Asia or the Middle East. While Western governments may expect these immigrants to adhere to liberal norms of gender equality and individualism, it is unclear whether this will happen. Immigrants who retain fertility-promoting beliefs will have evolutionary advantages over low-fertility Western peoples. We should expect those who uphold fertility-enhancing norms to increase in size and political influence, thus challenging liberal institutions. Notably, the current rise in identity politics within the West reflects – in part – demographic changes, and such changes might bring the rejection of current institutions, which are often seen as oppressive to traditionalists.

Some scholars have argued that sub-replacement fertility rates in the West may be a temporary phenomenon (Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015). If so, liberalism is not under demographic threat. These scholars maintain that more gender equality can solve the fertility problem brought by female emancipation. They claim that with more equality between the sexes, or with more economic growth among women, we would be able to combine work and education with having children. Yet, when comparing societies across time, this view is not supported (Kolk, 2019).

The countries with the highest levels of gender equality, and highest per capita income, such as the Nordic countries, have not seen a substantial increase in fertility.

But liberalism could prevail if the increasingly smaller population of liberals maintains power. After all, minorities sometimes rule over distinct majorities. Perhaps liberals will remain wealthier, more knowledgeable, more resilient, and with better technology than high fertility groups. Yet, liberals cannot prevent others from participating in politics without abandoning their liberal democratic beliefs. And in democratic politics, voting majorities count. Moreover, the fertility problem remains. If liberals cannot overcome sub-replacement birth rates and demographic contraction, any other advantages they have will be insufficient to maintain institutional hegemony and sustainability.

Of course, low fertility is not an exclusive feature of liberal democracies. Worldwide, population growth is slowing down, with the exception of Africa, whose population continues to grow, especially in the poorest regions where food and medical aid from the West is converted into more children (Azarnert, 2008). Declining birth rates are usually attributed to the expansion of female education worldwide and to widespread access to contraception (Vollset et al., 2020). Overall, the rise of living standards and global markets increased women's freedom and weakened religious beliefs worldwide (Inglehart, 2021). Today, even the populations of some non-liberal regimes also have sub-replacement birth rates, notably Russia and China. In the case of China, the one-child policy contributed to low fertility. Despite being recently revoked, birth rates have not yet rebounded even as China remains an autocratic state (though the government has begun implementing non-liberal policies for increasing fertility, including promoting masculinity and severely limiting access to pornography, video games, and other diversions).

The post-war liberal order contributed to norms that lowered fertility and which were spread via diplomatic influence, media, movies, and other cultural means (Chong, Duryea, & Ferrara, 2012; Jensen & Oster, 2009). To counter the demographic consequences of these trends, both liberal and non-liberal regimes, such as those of modern Germany, Japan, and Russia, enact policies to boost birth rates (Brzozowska, Matysiak, & Sobotka, 2019). Notably, non-liberal governments in countries like Russia and Hungary tend to announce and promote those policies, while western liberal countries apply them discreetly. Such policies have had some success and contribute to halting cohort fertility decline, but they produce mostly short-run results. These policy efforts focus on material incentives, such as maternity leave, childcare support, cash transfers or tax cuts, and they have not changed the low fertility paradigm. Mere material incentives remain insufficient. Even easy

access to reproductive technologies – like freezing eggs – may not change the paradigm if people are unpersuaded by the prospect of having many children.

Religion and nationalism seem better equipped at tackling the low fertility problem than liberalism to the extent that liberalism prevents the state from promoting a particular ideal or aspiration, such as marriage and children.[vii] Religiosity is a key predictor of fertility, and worldwide reproduction patterns show that religious populations reproduce much more than secular ones (Kaufmann, 2011). Indeed, as Jonathan Haidt has argued "societies that forgo the exoskeleton of religion should reflect carefully on what will happen to them over several generations. We don't really know, because the first atheistic societies have only emerged in Europe in the last few decades. They are the least efficient societies ever known at turning resources into offspring" (2012, p. 313).

Nationalism, too, can have a powerful impact on reproduction. Israel, for instance, is the only developed country with high fertility, thus showing that advanced societies are compatible with elevated fertility (Brzozowska et al., 2019). The Israeli government not only promotes birth rates via financial incentives, but also enforces nationalistic duties – duties to defend the existence and autonomy of the Jewish people. It is, after all, a country with a strong sense of collective identity and under permanent threats from neighboring groups. In the end, while religious Jews in Israel have the highest birth rates, even secular Jews have fertility rates that are above replacement (Okun, 2016). Religiosity and nationalism are arguably more efficient than material incentives at boosting reproduction, for the former shape our moral compass, while the latter simply help satisfy desires that fall out of fashion in a liberal society. By shaping people's moral compass in ways that make them see reproduction as a good in itself, or as a duty, religion and nationalism make reproductive habits less sensitive to material conditions. Religion and nationalism can foster high birth rates under situations of scarcity and abundance, which produces long-term population growth, or at least population stability.

Liberalism's sustainability problem is, then, as follows: liberals cannot impose a fitness-enhancing vision of the good life without violating their commitment to pluralism and individual liberty, so they must tolerate ways of life that minimize fitness. Non-liberal regimes, by contrast, can experiment with many different views of the good life and enforce them on societies without liberal restrictions. While non-liberal governments of countries like Russia or Hungary have had modest success in raising fertility recently, non-liberal regimes may develop successful moral and legal frameworks in that regard. Some of those successful frameworks may be quite different from those now in place.

Of course, one may argue that there is more experimentation in liberal, open societies. If so, they should be better at developing solutions to their problems than non-liberal societies. Maybe so. But to better develop solutions does not mean that they can be implemented under a liberal framework. It is often difficult to implement certain restrictive solutions – from compulsory vaccination to governmental surveillance – while respecting individual liberties. Non-liberal governments, by contrast, have no such constraints. They can solve large-scale collective action problems by imposing novel codes of conduct from the top. Of course, such governments are also constrained in experimenting with novel codes, for if an experiment goes wrong it can end their regime. But the room for moral experimentation in politics is, by definition, wider in non-liberal regimes. They are not tied to specific values and can adopt new ideologies or religions to enforce novel solutions. A prominent example of this flexibility is the Chinese government's change from communism to market autocracy in the late 20th century, and its recent efforts to promote fertility by altering people's liberties in fundamental ways.

g. Freedom, fertility, and meaning

Political institutions can change mass beliefs and behaviors. This was the case, for instance, with the expansion of Christianity, which first relied on the structures of the Roman Empire and then on states and monarchs (Henrich, 2020). Likewise, liberal and secular beliefs are more widespread in liberal polities now than 200 years ago, presumably because of the effect of liberal institutions – as well as key developments in the sciences, which provided plausible explanations for our place in the world without involving supernatural forces. Some evidence indicates that the "secularized control of education … can account for virtually the entire increase in secularization around the developed world" (Stone, 2020b). If this is true, the expansion of liberal attitudes was strongly influenced by the growth of liberal institutions.

In particular, elite and institutional framing can shape people's preferences (Kahneman & Tversky, 1984). Cultural evolution in groups takes place largely through ordinary people imitating successful elites (Boyd & Richerson, 2005, pp. 12-13) or via diktat – where people internalize new values due to fear of punishment (Cofnas, 2018). Either way, the capacity of liberal institutions to produce adaptive cultural change seems limited. Not only do liberal elites exhibit beliefs and behaviors that do not increase fitness, but they also hold an ideology that – in theory – opposes rule

by diktat. If there are secular strategies that can produce high fertility better than religion, liberalism would be unable to enforce such strategies without contradicting itself.

Indeed, modern liberal societies seem to be suffering from a lack meaning of the kind that is often associated with religion, or with the parochial values of a tribe or community or tradition. While the liberal rejection of a specific conception of the good can be liberating for some people, it can also create an environment in which many fail to see themselves as part of a civilization that is worth sustaining. The Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote eloquently about the loss of meaning in modern Europe as religious faith began to wane. A character in Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* observes that:

> The secret of man's being is not only to live but to have something to live for. Without a firm conception of the object of life, man would not consent to go on living, and would rather destroy himself than remain on earth, though he had bread in abundance… Nothing is more seductive for man than his freedom of conscience, but at the same time nothing is a greater torture (1880).

Without a sect or tribe or tradition to fight for, it may be hard for many to see why they should bother having children or making the kinds of sacrifices required by a lasting civilization. Nevertheless, liberal polities cannot prioritize the formation of families over the satisfaction of any other desires or preferences. Instead, in order to remain liberal, a state must stay neutral between different conceptions of the good that form the basis of a meaningful life, and which often give us reasons to have children.

h) Declining social trust

Sheer reproduction, however, is not the only element that confers advantages to social groups. Although a larger group size is often a favorable adaptation (Wilson, 2002, p. 36), the ability to cooperate is also critical. Smaller groups can outcompete bigger groups if the former have better cooperation strategies. But how do we predict cooperation in social and political settings? One answer is *social trust*.[viii]

Social trust facilitates cooperation and represents generalized trust in strangers within society. Social groups with members who can trust one another can better solve collective action

problems – for example, voluntarily contributing to public goods and refraining from violating mutually beneficial rules when nobody is watching. Indeed, "individuals who lack faith in their peers can be expected to resist contributing to public goods, thereby inducing still others to withhold their cooperation as a means of retaliating" (Kahan, 2003, p. 72). Predictably, high levels of social trust are associated with greater economic growth, better technological implementation, less corruption and crime, and more stable institutions (Vallier, 2019).

If individuals are to cooperate without the state dictating the good life and punishing its deviants, liberal institutions must largely rely on voluntary cooperation – which in turn requires social trust. But social trust is in steep decline in the United States, which is the epicenter of liberalism. To take one measure, in the early 1970s, around half of Americans declared that most people can be trusted; today, only less than a third do (Vallier, 2020, p. 1). As Kevin Vallier (2020) argues, this decline is causally linked with political polarization, which is growing fast in America.

However, not all liberal democratic countries have seen sharp declines in social trust. Northern European countries such as Norway, Sweden, and Finland remain among the most trusting countries in the world. To complicate things further, autocratic China is also among the countries with the highest social trust (Ortiz-Ospina & Roser, 2016). Clearly, political institutions and their ideology are not the only factors that influence trust.

A crucial feature of high-trust countries is ethnic homogeneity. Although scholars disagree about the causes of the decline in social trust, it is well-established that there is a "statistically significant negative relationship between ethnic diversity and social trust across all studies" (Dinesen et al., 2020, p. 441). This suggests that demographic uniformity fosters social trust. Ethnic diversity experienced locally – in neighborhoods – has the strongest negative effect on trust, which also shows the limits of contact theory – the theory claiming that interethnic contact increases trust between groups (Dinesen et al., 2020).

Gene-culture co-evolution can explain why ethnic tribalism is so prevalent and resilient. Ethnicity comprises group traits such as phenotype, language, and mechanisms of social control, including religion and other sacred beliefs (Horowitz, 1985, p. 53). Humans use these traits as markers and mechanisms to produce within-group cooperation (Richerson et al., 2014). Because group traits are essential for cooperation, and ethnocentrism is likely adaptive (Axelrod & Hammond, 2006; Jones 2018; Feng, 2021), people in particular ethnic groups are often unwilling to give up on their cooperation mechanisms and markers. That is, they are reluctant to change their identities and abandon their collective interests. This unwillingness generates inter-group conflicts

(and distrust), especially when very different groups occupy the same space. The cultural mixing of different ethnicities often produces unclear norms and symbols, thus fostering a decline in social trust, including trust in one's own group members (Putnam, 1995). Tribalism may very well re-emerge in liberal societies as a response to this decline. *Parochial* altruism, which is one kind of tribalism, facilitates within-group cooperation in the context of genetic and cultural diversity (Giani, Heap, & Minos, 2021).

By allowing people to have freedom of association and political participation, liberal democratic institutions increase cultural and ethnic factions, which are associated with political polarization. These outcomes are not inevitable, though, at least not in the short run. A lot may depend on the population size and density, and the kind and degree of diversity. Switzerland, for instance, shows high levels of social trust while having several languages and ethnic groups within its liberal institutions. Swiss ethnicities display an overlapping consensus with historical roots that allows them to trust one another. Such a consensus can lead to larger coalitional groups, where smaller groups come together and form a larger identity. However, this consensus is often hard to achieve (Dinesen et al., 2020). It requires inter-group cooperation, which can be difficult to foster in liberal societies that reject a significant role for the state in fostering group identity.

Liberal institutions could try to prevent political polarization and assure demographic uniformity by curbing immigration. But, as explained above, these institutions have moral and economic incentives to increase diversity via immigration. Indeed, the US is perhaps the strongest example of this trend toward open borders, but western European countries increasingly rely on immigration too. As a result, most European countries have seen a rise in popularity of anti-immigration national-populist parties (Camus & Lebourg, 2017).

If liberals wish to foster inter-group cooperation in open societies with diverse populations, they need to promote some form of social solidarity, and enforce it. They need to engage in something like nation-building. Highly diverse societies, however, require more than the simple promotion of "openness" and "toleration" to foster cooperation. Indeed, not every culture that emerges in liberal societies (or arrives via immigration) will value openness and toleration, and a mere commitment to toleration is unlikely to motivate and bind people in ways that a religious commitment or a patriotic connection to a national destiny can. Moreover, liberal governments – if they are to remain liberal – need to punish deviants in ways that do not violate their fundamental commitments to freedom and equality, to toleration and openness. We already see strong signs in liberal countries like the USA that governments and large corporations (Amazon, Google, YouTube,

Facebook, and Twitter) often collude to silence and punish people who express opinions that deviate from liberal orthodoxy (Patty, 2019). Ultimately, the level of punishment necessary to unify vastly heterogeneous populations under the same polity may be too high even for most non-liberal worldviews – such as communitarianism or conservatism. It would likely take extremely repressive measures to iron out cherished ways of life, enforce a common identity, and prevent the formation of identitarian factions in the absence of a common understanding.

Liberal societies, then, seem to inevitably create polarization and low social trust. And, as Vallier points out, "as people trust each other less", polarization "creates a vacuum the state will fill. When trust dies, it's replaced by coercion and control" (Vallier, 2021). As such, it is difficult to see how liberalism can endure if it cannot impose a way of life that fosters across-group cooperation within society. In effect, to prevent political dysfunctionality, liberal governments may have to replace vague hopes that very different kinds of people will cooperate with a coercively enforced vision of the world. As cooperative groups tend to outsurvive dysfunctional groups (Wilson & Wilson, 2007), liberal societies are unlikely to have long-term stability.

Liberal states are thus at a disadvantage when competing against more cohesive states in the international system. Without invoking evolutionary considerations, John Mearsheimer summarizes why the liberal order is likely to fail:

> The liberal order's tendency to privilege international institutions over domestic considerations, as well as its deep commitment to porous, if not open borders, has had toxic political effects inside the leading liberal states themselves, including the US... Those policies clash with nationalism over key issues such as sovereignty and national identity. Because nationalism is the most powerful political ideology on the planet, it invariably trumps liberalism whenever the two clash (Mearsheimer, 2019, p. 8).

Conclusion

Liberalism seems ill-prepared to deal with the long-term challenges it faces. These challenges include mass urbanization, mass immigration, and the adoption of maladaptive values. Such values in turn lead to sub-replacement fertility – which prevents biocultural continuity – and declining social trust – which hinders sociopolitical cooperation and weakens the competitiveness of liberal states in the international system. While non-liberal collectives also face some of these problems,

they can solve them by experimenting with evolutionary strategies at large scales, namely, by implementing moral codes that violate values like freedom and equality, openness and toleration. Yet, most of these strategies are not available to liberal governments – which are, by definition, precluded from imposing communitarian notions of the good life on their populations. We can imagine a liberal polity that, through an emergent cultural process, happens to be oriented toward nationalism and natalism. But we have argued that liberal political societies tend to undermine these values in the long run, and thus that the twin crises of declining social trust and declining fertility in modern liberal societies are likely part of a broader tendency.

Religion and nationalism are powerful forces. They can lead to conflict within and between groups. But they also seem to promote fertility and adaptive cooperation better than liberal political societies do. Ultimately, the winners in the evolutionary game of life are those who reproduce the most, not merely those who accrue the most power or resources at a particular moment in time.

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[i] Data on social trust only becomes available in the 20th century (Ortiz-Ospina & Roser, 2016). And much of the recent literature is already out of date – social trust in the USA, for example, has fallen dramatically over the last few years.

[ii] Liberal democracies in East Asia, such as Japan and Korea, have restrictive immigration policies, though. Loose immigration policies seem to require WEIRDness, that is, a collective belief about the moral goodness of universal individualism, which, according to Henrich (2020), exists in the West only. Asian liberal democracies may emulate western liberal political institutions, but arguably reject universal individualism.

[iii] In 2020, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau of Canada and President Joe Biden of the USA even adopted the slogan and agenda of The World Economic Forum, an international organization of corporations: "Build Back Better." They endorsed it using the covid pandemic as a reason to strengthen global trade and global institutions.

[iv] According to the expressive theory of voting (Brennan & Lomasky, 1993), *voting for* or *publicly supporting* a policy can be cheap even if, when the policy is enacted, voters pay unwelcome costs. For example, it is easy to vote for more immigration, but few liberal citizens are willing to bring low skilled immigrants into their house and support them with our own money. Expressive voting happens in large democracies because each individual has little ability to influence an electoral outcome with a single vote. Thus, one votes not by carefully thinking about one's interests or the total consequences of an action, but often votes in ways that symbolically express one's allegiance to abstract moral goals.

[v] Joseph Schumpeter (1942) made the somewhat analogous observation that capitalism would inevitably fail because of its material success. Capitalism, he thought, gave rise to disaffected intellectuals who had the wealth and leisure to grouse about how unfair their lives are because ordinary people fail to recognize their intellectual worth.

[vi] We should emphasize that many self-identified conservatives in the West hold classical liberal beliefs. But the broad label "conservative" as contrasted with "liberal" tends to include nationalists, populists, and traditionalists who emphasize the value of family and community, of tradition and hierarchy, over individualism, freedom, and equality.

[vii] On our view, nationalism is the view that the primary obligations of a state's leaders are to promote the interests of its citizens, even if nationalists acknowledge obligations toward people in other states. Nationalism is not *necessarily* anti-liberal. Indeed, some use the phrase "liberal nationalism" in contrast to "liberal cosmopolitanism" (Buchanan and Powell, 2016) to contrast liberal polities that prioritize their own citizens over those that think we have the same obligations toward people in all countries. However, on our view nationalism tends to diverge from liberalism to the extent that political leaders concerned with promoting the interests of their citizens above those of others will tend to rely on parochial values, including the view that a unique tribe or tradition is better than others, in order to achieve their ends effectively.

[viii] Political scientists also use the term *social capital*, which refers to networks of relationships, shared norms and understandings that allow groups to function efficiently. Yet, as Francis Fukuyama notes, "social capital is a capability that arises from the prevalence of trust in a society" (Fukuyama, 1995, p. 26), so social trust is critical for the formation of social capital.