

# Discussions with a child: The birth deficit in Greece

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Mr. Tharretos

Times change and with them change the concerns of children. It is completely justified that the questions of many contemporary children are different to those posed by my generation in our childhood. Today's children experiences, new technologies and the higher standard of living has vastly expanded the subject matter of their inquiries. I talked with a child, mature in thought and try to give answers to his concerns, but sometimes I forget myself and introduce my own troubles in the conversation. 50 years ago he would have called me "old timer" but today I am "Mr. Tharretos"

Thank goodness, I think to myself, because I don't really like the sound of "old timer". I seem to be caught somewhere, without observing the course of a life which has started to set and see the days and months go by beside me. Let's move on to the conversation with the youth, concerning the question of the Birth Deficit in Greece.

Why, Mr. Tharratos, do todays parents have less children since, as I have heard, your parents had more children even if they had smaller incomes, smaller houses, far fewer comforts and the country was poor and weak. What changed in such a small period of time?

Let me tell you: PROSPERITY is one of the main reasons which caused the great problem of low birth rates in recent decades in Greece. The wellbeing today is sought after not so much with the increase in production and productivity, but mainly with a restriction on having children, which leads to the birth deficit. The "idea of the good life" was cultivated and developed, shifting the perception for one's purpose and meaning in life, according the traditional notion, away from the biological and natural context. The frenzied effort of young couples to secure material goods for a better life, as they saw it, was attained usually by chasing a consumer model, which was not in line with their level of income. In this frantic struggle for wellbeing, the first victim is not having many children, a phenomenon which is also found in other, so called developed countries.

Apart from prosperity there are other contributing factors to the appearance of this phenomenon, like the employment of women, their careers, studies, various economic reasons, the housing problem, problems of communication in many couples etc. As far as couples are concerned, there seem to be a degree of uncertainty towards marriage in particular from the side of women, who feel economically independent since they are working, something that gives them a sense of freedom, to the point that, quite often, they are apprehensive to having children. It is also an important fact that the average age of marriage has increased. Thus the creation of a family begins at an older age, limiting the possibility of a couple having more than one or two children. Add to this stress, environmental pollution and other factors that cause health issues to women and men and affect fertility.

Generally, the demographic problem today in Greece is mainly due to what can be referred to as the "family crisis". Life now has more demands and young couples don't have the fortitude nor the patience to raise many children. In the past the older children would help raise their younger siblings, since the mother would be tending to the fields or doing other household work. Today children are busy with their school work, education is compulsory as opposed to

what was happening 40 and more years ago, when girls education usually ended with primary school and they would help around the house.

Pardon me Mr. Tharattos, but in other conversations you described for me the difficult way in which children were brought up in villages – in your childhood years – and I remember you telling me that infants were barefoot and half naked and that mothers fed them porridge, so as to save some milk and an egg or two to sell and make ends meet. You also said that children in those days (and the whole family), ate meat on Christmas, Easter and a few other times. Many children never finished primary school going instead to work in the fields and tend to the folks. Many houses dint have beds and children would sleep on the floor. Children would bathe in tanks of water heated in tin can and even that was a luxury. There were no real bathrooms and they used newspapers as toilet paper and even leaves and weeds from the fields. Don't you consider this to be a bad upbringing by today's standards? Can they even be compared?

Let me tell you. The life of people today in Greece is obviously more comfortable than the one of my childhood years. The substantial improvement in the standard of living has a negative consequence, low birth rates, which causes many problems and even threatens the very existence of the country. Greece is faced today with population shifts that are clearly negative. With problems not just from neighbouring nations (Turkey, Albania etc.) who stiflingly press for space, but also from immigrants from Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Asia, who because of poverty in their own countries come illegally to Greece.

In 1975 the fertility rate in Greece was 2.34 and fell to 2.1 in 1980 and 1.4 in 1990. In order to sustain population numbers at steady levels there needs to be just over 2 children for every woman. In other words 100 women need to have more than 200 children. In a study done in 1987 by the Academy of Athens it was noted: "Greece is ageing" because each year less children are born than there are people dying, while senior citizens are increasing (50.000 less young people and 1.012.000 more senior citizens from 1951 until 1987). From studies it is estimated that by 2030 our country will have a population of about 8.000.000 while Albania will be 16.000.000 and Turkey 100.000.000. It is obvious what this means for Greece surrounded by countries with territorial claims and who seek outlets to the sea. The problem becomes even more serious since in 2010 we had nearly half the available conscripts compared to those available in the 1950s. Our country will be inhabited in the future mainly by elderly and middle aged Greeks (apart from the immigrants) and the army will have even less manpower. Two Greeks will need to work for every pensioner, not knowing if they themselves will ever see a pension.

May I interrupt you Mr Therratos? I recently read something that impressed me by one our ancestor the great historian, Polybius: "the childlessness of a nation will lead them with mathematical precision to being enslaved by another nation".

I agree. That is a historical inevitability, of national importance, resulting from our birth deficit. On the other hand we can't but point out that a large family is usually the source of boundless joy, as long as there are the basic means for providing a proper upbringing and standard of living for our children. I believe it is imperative for the state to take effective economic and social measures aimed at supporting the traditional Greek family with 3 and more children. Like for example the promotion of large families in media, school books etc. as the typical family unit. It should be pointed out that Greece the Turkish yoke because about 70% of Greek families were large. It's because of these large families that the Greek race was not wiped out, albeit the countless genocidal atrocities committed by the Turks, either with killings or the

with the Devşirme blood tax. Today however could the Greeks muster the strength to save Greece from a similar fate, in a time when large families have dwindled and make up just 3%? It's doubtful!

Our effort should therefore be to safeguard at all costs the family as an institution and not to forsake one another, since there might come a time when we don't just feel like strangers amongst ourselves, but strangers in our own land... This is what I had to say to the troubled child about the problem of low birth rates in Greece and I did not try to make a sociological study out of it as I am by no means an expert on the matter.

**SOURCE:** <http://www.servou.gr/2013-06-%2023-10-30-27/grafipatrioton/78-%20arthrakaistoxasmoi/1417-2010-%2003-17-11-55-08>