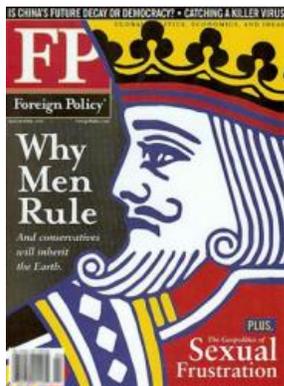


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# Fatherhood and the Future of Civilization

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Will the world soon experience a return of patriarchy? That is the question raised by Phillip Longman in the March/April 2006 issue of *Foreign Policy*.

The magazine's cover features a rather stunning headline: "Why Men Rule—and Conservatives Will Inherit the Earth." That headline would be surprising in almost any contemporary periodical, but it is especially significant that this article should appear in the pages of *Foreign Policy*, published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. The publication of this article set a good many heads to spinning.

Phillip Longman is Bernard L Schwartz Senior Fellow at the New America Foundation. He is a well-respected author and researcher, whose books have included *The Empty Cradle: How Falling Birthrates Threaten World Prosperity and What to Do about It* (2004). In his previous works, Longman has projected how falling birthrates throughout advanced societies will lead to financial, political, social, and demographic decline.

In this article, he pressed his argument to the next stage—announcing the return of patriarchy—the concept of male leadership—as essential to a recovery of higher birthrates and reproduction.

“With the number of human beings having increased more than sixfold in the past 200 years, the modern mind simply assumes that men and women, no matter how estranged, will always breed enough children to grow the population—at least until plague or starvation sets in,” Longman explains.

“Yet, for more than a generation now, well-fed, healthy, peaceful populations around the world have been producing too few children to avoid population decline. That is true even though dramatic improvements in infant and child mortality mean that far fewer children are needed today (only about 2.1 per woman in modern societies) to avoid population loss. Birthrates are falling far below replacement levels in one country after the next—from China, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea, to Canada, the Caribbean, all of Europe, Russia, and even parts of the Middle East.”

Throughout human history, a persistent fall in birthrates has served as a harbinger of cultural decline and a warning of cultural collapse. The reasons for this are many, but center in the fact that the cause of falling birthrates is often a loss of social cohesion and confidence and the effect of falling reproduction rates is a decline in economic prosperity and erosion of the social structure.

Put simply, a significant fall in birthrates means that, in the next generation, there will be fewer workers, parents, consumers, and contributors to the common welfare. As societies age, a greater percentage of the population tends toward the older end of the age spectrum—representing greater dependency and less economic contribution.

As Longman explains, many countries have attempted to address falling birthrates with aggressive encouragement for couples to have multiple children. Singapore offers “speed dating” events to citizens, intended to encourage young people to marry and have children. In Europe, the government often seeks to incentivize children by offering tax incentives and state-financed daycare systems.

In the end, these efforts seldom work. “As governments going as far back as imperial Rome have discovered, when cultural and economic conditions discourage parenthood, not even a dictator can force people to go forth and multiply,” Longman observes. “Throughout the broad sweep of human history, there are many examples of people, or classes of people, who chose to avoid the costs of parenthood. Indeed, falling fertility is a recurring tendency of human civilization. Why then did humans not become extinct long ago? The short answer is patriarchy.”

Longman’s short answer is sure to attract attention and spark controversy. His very use of the word “patriarchy” will set many teeth on edge. After all, the elimination of patriarchy has been one of the central goals of the feminist movement. According to feminist ideology—shared by vast segments of the population—patriarchy represents the institutionalized form of male domination. Therefore, the liberation of humanity from the last vestiges of patriarchy has been a central feminist goal.

Nevertheless, Longman argues that the return of patriarchy is almost assured, given the social crisis that will be produced by a catastrophic fall in birthrates.

“Patriarchy does not simply mean that men rule,” Longman explains. “Indeed, it is a particular value system that not only requires men to marry but to marry a woman of proper station. It competes with many other male visions of the good life, and for that reason alone is prone to come in cycles.”

Longman understands the simple fact that a great deal of cultural capital is required in order to encourage young men to marry and men of all ages to fulfill responsibilities as husbands and fathers. The normative picture of the “good life” for men, at least as presented in the dominant media culture, does not include the comprehensive responsibilities of fatherhood. When men are not stigmatized for failure to be faithful as husbands and fathers, young men will take marriage and parenthood with little significance, as many will avoid marriage and fatherhood altogether.

To some extent, the statistics tell the story. Almost twenty percent of women born in the late 1950s are nearing the end of their reproductive lives without ever having had children. Longman’s assessment is blunt: “The greatly expanded childless segment of contemporary society, whose members are drawn disproportionately from the feminist and countercultural movements of the 1960s and 70s, will have no genetic legacy.”

Beyond this, the falling birthrate contributes to many other social ills. “Falling fertility is also responsible for many financial and economic problems that dominate today’s headlines,” Longman asserts. “The long-term financing of social security schemes, private pension plans, and health-care systems has little to do with people living longer. . . . Instead, the falling ratio of workers to retirees is overwhelmingly caused by workers who were never born.”

The effects within the society are psychological as well as demographic, political, and financial. As Longman understands, declining birthrates can also affect what he calls “national temperament.” He attributes the fact that the American voting population has become more conservative in recent years to anxiety over falling birthrates. Beyond this, we must now add the fact that millions of voters, who would have been raised by more liberal parents, were simply never born.

For some, the political dynamic will attract the greatest interest. “Among states that voted for President George W. Bush in 2004, fertility rates are 12 percent higher than in states that voted for Senator John Kerry,” Longman reports. That statistic is nothing less than shocking. A twelve percent differential in data like this is highly significant and troubling. Looking to the future, Longman projects a “demographically driven transformation” of many cultures. “As has happened many times before in history, it is a transformation that occurs as secular and libertarian elements in society fail to reproduce, and as people adhering to more traditional, patriarchal values inherit society by default,” Longman argues.

But, why is patriarchy so important? Longman answers that question with great care. “Patriarchal societies come in many varieties and evolve through different stages,” he explains. “What they have in common are customs and attitudes that collectively serve to maximize fertility and parental investment in the next generation.”

A culture of patriarchy directs men to their responsibilities as husbands and fathers. Men who fail in these responsibilities are seen as inferior to those who are both faithful and effective. Furthermore, a patriarchal structure holds men accountable for the care, protection, discipline, and nurture of children. In such a society, irresponsibility in the tasks of parenthood is seen as a fundamental threat to civilization itself.

Longman quotes feminist economist Nancy Folbre, who observed: “Patriarchal control over women tends to increase their specialization in reproductive labor, with important consequences for both the quantity and the quality of their investments in the next generation.” As Longman explains, “Those consequences arguably include: more children receiving more attention from their mothers, who, having few other ways of finding meaning in their lives, become more skilled at keeping their children safe and healthy.”

Clearly, decisions about reproduction are made in connection with many other decisions and priorities in life. Research conclusively indicates that a couple’s ideological commitments are correlated to reproduction. Longman summarizes the data this way: “The great difference in fertility rates between secular individualists and religious or culture conservatives augurs a vast, demographically driven change in Western societies.”

Longman understands that his proposal will be controversial. After all, many persons associate patriarchy with either male superiority or brutal misogyny. Longman understands that these are exceptions rather than the rule. Pointing to the patriarchal excesses of Taliban rebels or Muslim fanatics in Nigeria, Longman states: “Yet these are examples of insecure societies that have degenerated into male tyrannies, and they do not represent the form of patriarchy that has achieved evolutionary advantage in human history. Under a true patriarchal system, such as in early Rome or 17th century Protestant Europe, fathers have strong reason to take an active interest in the children their wives bear. That is because, when men come to see themselves, and are seen by others, as upholders of a patriarchal line, how those children turn out directly affects their own rank and honor.”

Longman’s logic comes down to this—men are far more likely to assume and fulfill these responsibilities if the society values the role of fathers as leaders in the home, as breadwinners, and as protectors of the larger family structure and of civilization itself.

A truly Christian response to this argument must go further than cultural concerns alone can sustain. In the biblical vision, patriarchs establish a trans-generational vision for their families, looking to generations beyond with the promise that the father will give himself to the task of fatherhood and leadership in order to perpetuate the promise and establish the line.

Beyond this, Christians should understand that the Bible reveals a form of patriarchy as the norm—with men called to lead within the marital union and the family, as well as the church.

The publication of this article within the pages of *Foreign Policy* should send a very clear cultural signal. Something serious is afoot when one of the nation’s most influential journals directed at questions of foreign policy takes up the return of patriarchy, especially among conservative Christians, as an issue of major consideration. Throughout his article, Longman is careful to argue for what he observes, rather than what he may or may not advocate. His verdict is clear—societies that follow a patriarchal pattern tend to reproduce at a higher rate and advance, while those who devalue the role and responsibilities of men as fathers find themselves in decline.

The very fact that this argument has now found its way into the pages of a journal like *Foreign Policy* represents a genuine cultural development. Where this leads is yet unclear, but signs point to Longman’s thesis being proved right.



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Article updated from 2006.

