

More Old People; Fewer Children

So Dr. Thompson Sees America in Thirty or Forty Years

Sociology—Economics

By Warren S. Thompson

THE United States has entered upon a new era of population growth since the war. Not only is immigration being regulated more strictly than ever before so that we now get but about one-quarter or one-fifth the net annual immigration of the decade before the war but the birth rate has fallen to levels which certainly were not anticipated a few years ago. In 1928 the crude rate of natural increase was only about seven per thousand per year, which is just about one-half of what it was in 1913.

But this is not all, for the crude rate does not give us a very clear notion of what is likely to happen during the next twenty or thirty years. We now have a population so constructed as regards the proportion of people at different ages that it should have a relatively high birth rate and a low death rate, i. e., we have a relatively large proportion of young adults. When the children who have been born since the war reach the age to raise families they will be relatively fewer than those now in the reproductive ages and the birth rate will decline still further even though every mother has as many children as at present. Also the death rate will be higher because we shall have more old people. The statisticians of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company have calculated the true rate of increase today at about 2.3 per thousand per year which is only about one-third of the crude rate. Calculations made by the Scripps Foundation on a somewhat different basis give an even lower rate. We may, therefore, look forward to a time, possibly not more than thirty or forty years hence, when the number of births in this country will only equal the number of deaths and there will be no natural increase. At this time our total population will prob-

ably not exceed 160,000,000, if, indeed, it is that large; it will be only about one-third greater than at present.

When that time comes we shall be quite a different people in certain respects from what we now are. In particular we shall have proportionally fewer children and young people under twenty, and more older people over fifty. Children will be relatively about three-fourths as numerous as now and old people will be nearly twice as numerous. It will be as though we took about one-fourth of our children today and by some hocus pocus transmuted them instantaneously into men and women who had passed their fiftieth year.

Now it is very clear that such changes in our population and its rate of increase as I have just indicated, cannot take place without necessitating very profound adjustments to them on the part of most of our social and economic institutions. If the total number of children born this year is fewer than the number born in 1920 our elementary school population a few years hence may actually be smaller than it is today. Obviously our school plant and our whole educational system is going to have a chance to catch up with the needs in the education of youth which it has never yet had. But just as obviously we are going to have a more difficult problem of adult education to meet than we have had hitherto. For we are hearing a great deal today about the difficulties older men and women are having in securing employment because they lack the ability to adapt themselves to changing industrial processes and commercial practices. The re-education of older people so that they can carry on in their present jobs or in the new types of jobs that are being created, is already becoming a serious matter and when we have about doubled our



Dr. Warren S. Thompson, who is director of the Scripps Foundation for Research in Population Problems at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, inaugurated a new series of radio talks presented by Science Service over the Columbia Broadcasting System, to be given every Friday afternoon at 3:45. Here is Dr. Thompson's talk in full.

present number of older people it will become one of the most serious problems of our civilization. It would also appear that many of our businesses which now refuse to hire older workers will have to adopt new employment policies. They will have to take their share of workers who have begun to slow up a little and who have not the highest degree of adaptability, or they will have to pay a large premium for the younger workers who are speedier and more adaptable. It may well happen that the more socially minded employers will undertake to give their older employees a training in new methods and processes so that they can continue with the firm even though the nature of the work they must do has been considerably changed. But we cannot count on this adjustment taking place automatically and must prepare for a very marked increase in old age dependency unless the community as a whole organizes to make effective use of the lessened productive power of our older people.

Conversely the same amount of effort spent on child welfare thirty years hence as is being expended today should come nearer meeting the physical needs of the child than we are now doing. It may even be that some of our children's homes can be converted into homes for the aged. This will not (*Turn to page 219*)

America Growing Older—Continued

lessen the total amount of dependency but it will change the nature of the problem very markedly. Indeed it seems rather probable that the support of dependents will absorb an increasing share of our national income for some time to come unless we begin to plan ways of making better use of the labor of our older people. The present tendency is certainly all in the direction of discarding the worker as soon as he begins to slow up. It needs no argument to convince any one that our national prosperity will be seriously compromised if we do not find profitable employment for this rapidly increasing group of older workers. Think what it will mean to our economic life to have an increasing proportion of old people who are dependent and whose purchasing power is therefore very low. They would be poor customers, indeed, while what we need if we are to continue to be prosperous in our present system is better customers rather than poorer ones.

We must remember, too, in connection with maintaining our prosperity that in all probability the rate of increase of our population will not be much more than half as great between 1930 and 1940 as it has been this last decade and that in actual numbers the increase of our population will probably be from five to seven millions less than in the decade just completed. It requires no prophet to foresee an increasing intensity of competition in many aspects of our business life. As long as population is growing by leaps and bounds business grows in like manner and customers are not wanting. With the slower increase in the number of customers in the future our business has a new situation to meet. It cannot depend as much as formerly upon mere increase in number of customers. It must begin to plan how it can improve the quality of its customers. It would seem on the face of things that there is but one way to do this. The purchasing power of the mass of the population must be increased. This should not be particularly difficult of accomplishment, for such an increase has been going on for several decades, but our economic leaders must give increasing attention to this phase of our economic life in the future if we are not to suffer in our pockets from the slackening growth of population. There

is no doubt that the purchases of most people are only limited by their incomes, hence if salaries and wages can be increased sufficiently there will be no difficulty in taking up the slack in purchasing power that may arise from the slower growth of population. Here is a situation which challenges both the good will and the ability of our business leaders.

In closing I would call attention to the probable growth in economic and political conservatism as the average age of our population increases.

American business has been noted for its daring. This aspect of our economic life is very widely noted by foreigners. But daring and progressiveness are the qualities of youth, and of youth with but little property at stake. Will our economic enterprise be as daring and progressive when its actual control passes into the hands of older men who are capitalists and bankers rather than enterprisers and engineers? One cannot say, but to judge from the frequent complaints lodged against the control of industry by older men on the part of young technicians it seems rather probable that an aver-

age increase of ten years in the age of men in the key positions in our industrial and commercial life may have a very marked effect upon the adaptability and progressiveness of our whole business structure.

There is also a probability that there will be an increasing conservatism manifest in our political life as a larger proportion of the electors pass into the group of fifty and over. If this should happen it will undoubtedly induce a like increase in various types of radicalism, since it is undoubtedly the relatively good opportunities for young men to rise to a higher economic status which have prevented the formation of strong radical groups in this country in the past. Radicalism is the natural response of youth to increasing economic and political conservatism.

Finally I wish to say that the changes which are now taking place in the rate of growth and the make-up of our population are among the most fundamental social changes of our day and it behooves all of us, but particularly business men, to keep close tab on them.

Science News-Letter, April 5, 1930

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