

Demography and care in Europe: The impact of social relations*

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Economists – and economic policy makers – often assume away social trends and patterns as not immediately relevant for their concerns. But the symbiotic relationship between society and economy makes that a perilous approach. One case in point has to do with demographic patterns and the future of employment. If these are linked together without an analysis of the underlying (and changing) social patterns, it is possible for public policy to be hugely unprepared to meet society's needs.

In the context of growing concerns about poor employment generation in the world today, relational activities such as those in the care economy are increasingly seen as one way of ensuring that economies continue to create jobs. Nowhere is this more evident than in advanced economies, such as in the European Union. Economists looking at broad patterns of the evolution of economies tend to focus on the pure demographics of birth and death rates and the associated distribution of the population. This – especially in Europe today, as in other societies like Japan – tends to generate worries about a rapidly ageing population. The perception that this will generate additional demand for activities is related to the requirements of the growing numbers of elderly.

But this is an inadequate understanding of the nature of care work, which has been hugely influenced by social relations. Throughout history, the dominant part of care work has been performed within families and households, typically in unpaid fashion, and effectively determined by the social construction of gender that gives women (and girl children) the primary responsibility for its delivery. Under capitalism, this reliance on unpaid care work within families has provided a huge subsidy to capital and underwritten accumulation processes.

Insofar as care work has evolved into more marketed and paid formats, it is also increasingly globalised, so that the “global value chain” of migrant care workers now provide much of the care work within richer and even middle-class households in advanced countries. But nonetheless, the family or household remains the dominant unit for the provision of care.

But what if the nature of the family itself is changing, such that society (and governments) can no longer rely upon these convenient social relations that reduce the need for extensive public provision? This would mean that looking at pure demographic patterns is no longer enough: it is necessary to look at social relations and how they are changing if we are to come to an understanding of how care work is distributed and what the requirements for public provision will be in future.

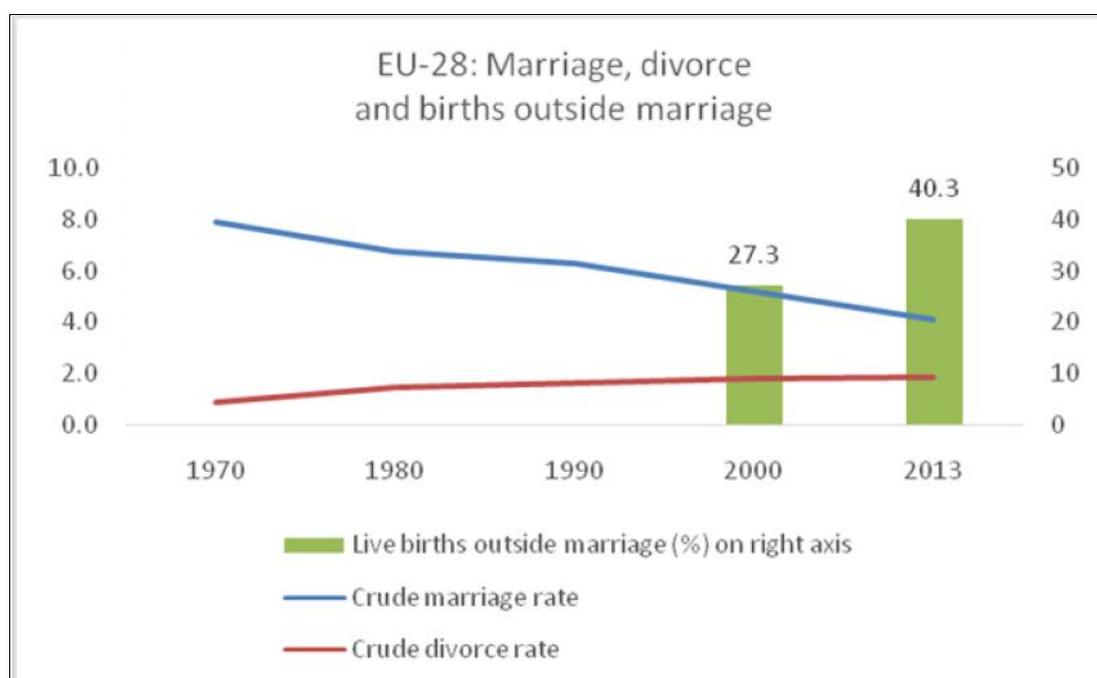
The decline of the extended family in most of the developed world is one obvious aspect of this, which has become so widespread that it no longer causes comment. In most advanced countries, the family is no longer the basic unit that can be relied upon for the care of the elderly – and this naturally requires a host of changes in terms of societal availability of facilities and care services for the elderly.

But what is now evident is that even the nuclear family is no longer something that can be taken for granted in public policy discourse. This becomes clear from an

examination of recent marriage and divorce patterns in the European Union, a region that is large and diverse enough to be indicative of advanced economies in general.

Chart 1 shows that in the 28 countries that currently make up the European Union, marriage rates are coming down even as divorce rates are going up. The data here refer to the crude marriage rate – that is, the number of marriages per 1000 population in that year; and the crude divorce rate – that is, the number of divorces per 1000 population in that year. These are obviously not indicators of the proportion of married or divorced people in the population, and they also do not tell us how many marriages end in divorce, etc. But the changes over time do provide some indication of the broader social trend.

Chart 1: Fewer marriages and more divorces in Europe – and more children born to unmarried parents



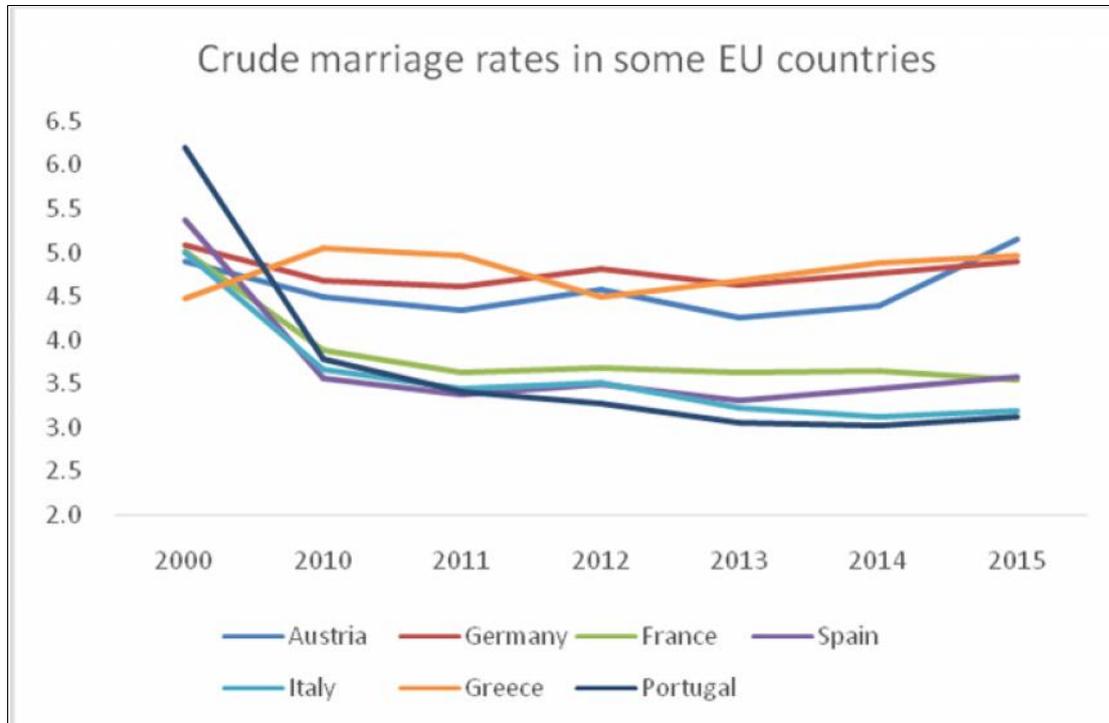
What is clear from Chart 1 is that in the European Union as a whole, less marriages are occurring over time, while there are more divorces. An even more striking finding could be that of the third variable – the proportion of children born outside legal marriage, which has increased dramatically so that it accounts for two-fifths of all children in the most recent year. These rates vary across countries, at nearly 60 per cent in France, Estonia and Sweden, and less than 10 per cent in Greece.

This suggests that the standard pattern of the nuclear family – which is still explicitly or implicitly assumed in so much public policy even within the EU – is less and less accurate in expressing social reality in Europe. And even though governments have yet to realise this, it means that patterns of social delivery of care must change as well.

What of very recent trends in particular countries? The data allow for an examination of whether economic changes (such as crises and subsequent fiscal austerity) have any impact on social relations of marriage and divorce. Charts 2 and 3 plot these for

some countries in the EU: some “core” countries that have been less affected, and some “peripheral” countries that have been strongly negatively affected.

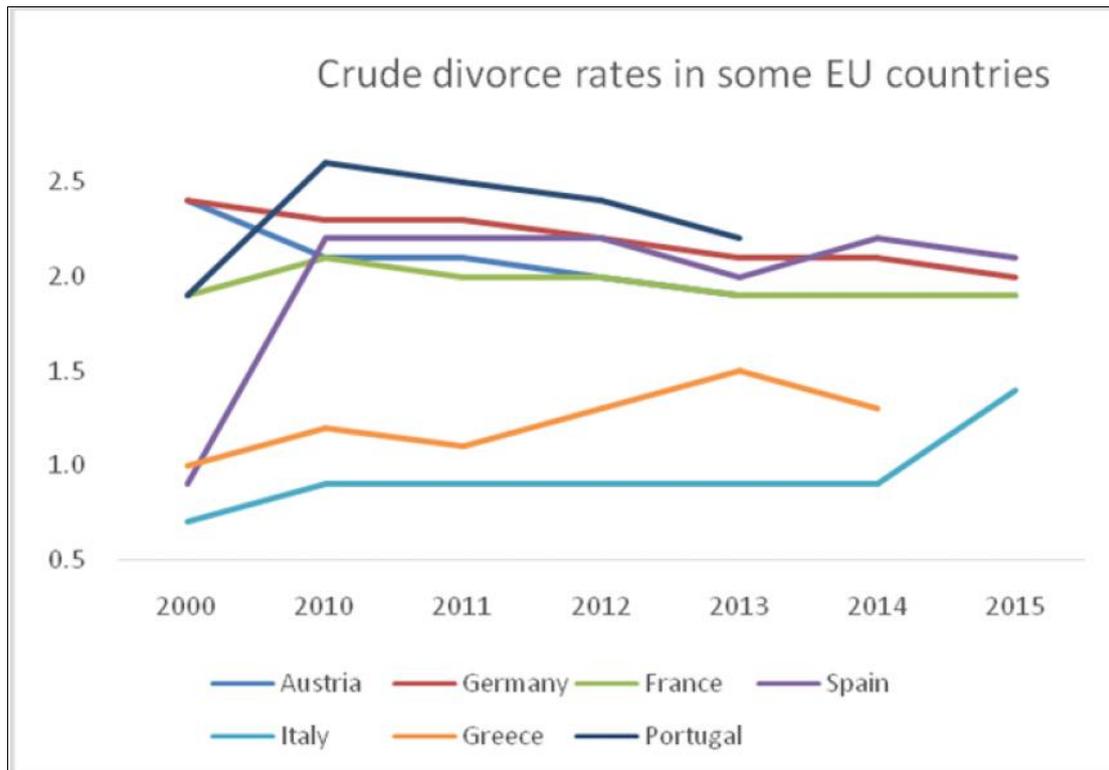
Chart 2: Crisis countries generally had fewer marriages.



Three countries that were affected by the crisis – Spain, Portugal and Italy – show sharp declines in marriage rates, while three countries in the core that were relatively unaffected (and remain surplus creditor economies) showed barely any changes. The exceptions are France – which shows a decline in marriage rates, even though it did not experience crisis but did go through fiscal austerity measures; and Greece – the country worst affect by both crisis and austerity, with massive declines in GDP, but where marriage rates have been largely stable.

Chart 3 reveals the crude divorce rates in these countries, and once again the differences across these groups do stand out. Other than Portugal (which showed a decline after an initial sharp rise) the other three crisis-hit countries all show some increase in divorce rates, but these were declining or stable in the other “core” countries.

Chart 3: Divorce rates increased in crisis countries



Of course it would be overly simplistic to link economic forces of GDP growth or decline alone with marriage and divorce rates, as so many other socio-economic and cultural factors play important roles in determining these. But situations of economic stress and reduced public provision do impact on people's choices about marriage and divorce. So in this respect, also, the interplay between public policies and social relations cannot be ignored.

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