# How the iPhone Drove Men and Women Apart

And what it means for the future.

**Hosted by Ross Douthat**

What would make you want to have more children? This week on “Interesting Times,” Ross Douthat speaks with Dr. Alice Evans, a social scientist who is as concerned about the global decline in fertility as Ross is. The two discuss why this isn’t just a gender issue — it’s “a solitude issue” — and whether there’s a way to bring relationships back.

Progressives Are Driving Themselves Into Extinction

What would make you want to have more children?

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**Ross Douthat:** From New York Times Opinion, I’m Ross Douthat, and this is Interesting Times.

Fifty years ago, the world feared a population bomb, an explosion of population growth that would yield famine, war and disaster. But for most of my career, I’ve been trying to persuade people that actually, population decline is now the greater peril. And in the last few years, the world has finally caught up with my once eccentric anxieties. We’re undeniably headed toward a period of global population collapse, one that threatens to maroon today’s children — mine, yours, if you have them, and by the way, you really should — in a world of emptying cities and slowing economies.

Our guest today has literally traveled the world studying this issue, trying to answer the hardest question, not just why birthrates have declined, but why they’ve declined so far and so fast in so many different places. Alice Evans, welcome to Interesting Times.

**Alice Evans:** Indeed. Thank you so much.

**Douthat:** So you’re a sociologist at King’s College London and you write a lot about and you’re working on a book about the key social forces shaping the decline in fertility around the world. And

those include, in particular, the failure of men and women to relate to one another and pair off. Those issues are part of why I'm especially interested in talking to you.

But before we dive into why population decline is happening, I'd like to try to quantify the issue a little bit and maybe help sound the alarm for some of our listeners who, unlike myself, haven't been obsessed with this issue for years or decades and may still assume that we're living in a world where the biggest problem is likely to be overpopulation.

So when we talk about declining fertility and population decline, what do we mean?

**Evans:** OK, so, fertility is collapsing everywhere, all at once. Perhaps with the exception of sub-Saharan Africa, where rates are still very high, but across Latin America, the Middle East, Northern Africa, all those trends are going sharply downward.

Economically, this has catastrophic implications for middle-income countries, because as you have an aging population, then older people typically have lower rates of labor force participation. They're less economically productive. It's the young people who are innovative, productive, starting up new companies. But as the entire economy ages, then it becomes more sluggish. And those younger people, either through savings or taxes, need to pay for elderly health care or pension costs or provisions.

That then creates a massive fiscal squeeze because governments or individuals need to spend a higher amount of their money, given those rising dependency rates. And if we are concerned with things like climate change mitigation, the governments just won't have enough money to spend on extra costs if you're spending more on old people.

And on top of this, if younger people are saving more, as they are in China, then they're going to be spending less. So that has a knock-on effect on the entire economy.

**Douthat:** And when did you become interested in the fertility crisis? You started out working on gender equality, the socioeconomic status of women in developing countries. How did this issue — which I should say it has long been the province of, to be kind to ourselves, right-wing cranks — how did this issue become a big part of your focus?

**Evans:** Fertility and women's choices and men's choices about how many children they want, that's always come up in my interviews because I'm always interested in: What do you want to do for your life? So I've got so much data on this going back for the past 15 years.

When I was in Zambia, women would always encourage me to have another baby. "Oh, you must have a baby. You must have a baby." That was so imperative for them.

**Douthat:** [Chuckles.] This is what I say to my colleagues too. So it's not just Zambia.

**Evans:** [Chuckles.] So I was constantly pestered. And then I think in East Asia, in South Korea, where I was looking at the data so intensely and I was having so many of my interviews and I just realized it was so omnipresent. And then I looked at the data more broadly. So I think going to South Korea is really what "fertility pilled" me, so to speak.

**Douthat:** Right, and a country like South Korea has a fertility rate of 0.7. That means that over the course of two generations, the population goes from 50 million to 20-odd million, let's say. Fifteen to

20 million — does that sound right? I'm just trying to give people a sense that, with the numbers we have now, when we talk about the reason you use a term like "population collapse," we aren't talking about a gentle slide from above-replacement fertility to slightly below replacement fertility, where you need to adjust the retirement age so that people stay in the work force five years longer. You're talking about cities being empty, buildings standing empty, economies grinding to a halt and just seeing a country that has gone furthest down this road.

**Evans:** Yes, absolutely. And you see it in Italy too. For example, when you get off the train in Rome, you see the pet store rather than the kids' store. It's glaring.

**Douthat:** We took our family to Rome and were trying to find a children's store, and it turned out that there was an important children's chain that had closed a bunch of its places. Also, when I traveled around Italy, the hill towns are empty. The rural areas are aging and emptying. The big cities — people move there, so they stay densely populated, even if they're having fewer kids.

So this can actually end up being kind of invisible, in an interesting way, because if you're in the big city, there are more people there than ever. And you think to yourself, well, how can there be a population crisis?

**Evans:** Yeah. I would say one more thing. I suppose one aspect of me as a sort of social scientist is that I teach on international development, so I'm very interested in economic outcomes and how we can all become richer — the sort of abundance idea. But I also study culture, so it's the interconnection between all these economic consequences of our cultural choices.

**Douthat:** So, OK, why is this happening? And before you tell us, I think it's safe to say everyone has a particular pet theory.

If you talk to people on the political left, for a long time they would insist that it's just a problem of the provision of public services. And they would say the developed world just needs to become more like Scandinavia in terms of paid leave and parental support. People on the right — conservatives — are more likely to talk about the decline of religion and a sense of moral obligation to the future.

You have people who focus right now, especially in developed countries, on climate change and say: Oh, the young people don't want to have kids because they're afraid of the human future. And you'll have people who say: Look, this is just about women's choices. Once you have a more egalitarian society, women understandably are less likely to choose to have kids and this is where we end up.

All of these arguments have problems. It's hard to fit them all to the general trend, especially since even places like Scandinavia have headed toward the cliff in recent years, generous benefits and all.

So what is your master theory of all of this?

**Evans:** So let me add on to the Scandinavia point. Left-wing progressives may say: Oh, Scandinavia is so family-friendly. There's universal child care, it's easier to be a working mother. But actually, the U.S. has higher fertility. So that signals to us that that theory isn't working.

As for the theory that it's all about women's choices and liberalism, how can that explain why fertility is crashing in Egypt, in Tunisia, in Turkey and in Tamil Nadu, which remained very conservative?

So something is happening very recently — maybe in the past 15 years — everywhere all at once, across vastly different economies, across vastly different governance and welfare systems and across vastly different levels of liberalism versus religiosity.

Certainly, those theories that you mentioned seem to do a poor job of the comparative analysis and the very recent global plummet. Going back to Sweden, for example, what there has been in the very recent years is a massive, massive rise in singles — hugely. There are more, more, more people living in single-occupier households. And this reflects a global trend.

**Douthat:** So this rise in singles, you frame it as a kind of crisis of coupling. Can you define that crisis for me and why it's, in your view, the leading explanation for the larger trends we've been talking about?

**Evans:** Absolutely. So if we look empirically at the data for a range of countries, we find that an increasing number of people are staying single. That is, they are neither married nor cohabiting.



So in the U.S., over half the people between 18 and 34 are neither cohabiting nor married. They're single. And that's the same case in much of Latin America, East Asia, in China, in South Korea. I chat to all my Chinese students, many single, with no expectations, no plans, no desires to be married. So that's a massive, massive global friction. So if people are staying single, that is closely correlated.

If we look at the data, the decline in people being married or a couple is almost one-to-one with the decline in children. It matches so closely, in both the U.S., in China, everywhere. This is more closely correlated than anywhere else and across multiple countries. The data is so strong.

**Douthat:** The coupling crisis writ large seems to be linked somehow to technology, right?

**Evans:** Yes, that's what I think. Certainly. I think we can say there could be locally specific factors that go on in each place. Each place has its own cultural idiosyncrasies and I don't want to ignore that. But yes, absolutely. The big shock that's occurred everywhere all at once is we've seen vast improvements in personal online entertainment. So we know, for example, in the U.S. —

**Douthat:** Podcasting. You know, I mean — [Chuckles.]

**Evans:** Yeah. All these charismatic podcasters.

**Douthat:** That's right.

**Evans:** So people are spending more.

No, but I think that's the thing. I mean, no offense, Ross, but I do blame charismatic people like you. If people want to socialize, to listen —

**Douthat:** This is a new podcast. It's played no role at all, yet — *yet* —

**Evans:** Oh, OK. You protest your influence. OK.

**Douthat:** — In distracting the young people of America.

**Evans:** OK, OK. You're totally innocent. OK. But we do have this big increase in personal online entertainment, whether it's watching shows on Netflix, sports bets — online gambling has become absolutely massive across Brazil and Latin America more broadly. You can go on PornHub. Online connectivity enables people to stroll on Instagram, play Call of Duty, World of Warcraft.

So we are all becoming — it's not just being single — we're all retreating into this digital solitude. I think that's partly because technology makes it nicer and easier to stay at home — you can work from home — and some of these apps are so hyper-engaging that you get distracted by the constant stream of dopamine hits as each app, as each technology company competes against others to keep its users hooked.

And effectively, the tech is outcompeting personal interactions. That's my fear.

**Douthat:** And that holds, then, as a global explanation, because even though there's tons of variation in internet access and so on, smartphone penetration is a global phenomenon. You go to India and Africa and you find people with smartphones.

**Evans:** There's the big difference that sub-Saharan Africa has much, much lower rates of smartphone penetration.

**Douthat:** So as the iPhone moves across sub-Saharan Africa, you would expect fertility rates to fall.

So you've just been talking about distraction and entertainment, that it's easier to play video games than go to a bar. It's easier to do sports gambling at home than meet a nice lady in a broad-brimmed hat at the racetrack, as one does. But how much of it is distraction per se, in your view, and how much of it is, you might say, digital segregation of men and women? Where men and women aren't just going online, but they're going online in distinct ways and not interacting with each other.

**Evans:** I think that male-female friendships are a really important driver of gender equality. You come to care about someone as a friend as you listen to their stories, as you hear about how their day was or the kind of things they don't like.

I was interviewing this guy in Catalonia in Spain, and he was telling me that they went to watch a football game at the bar and the women were saying that they didn't like it when guys were rowdy or aggressive, or when one of his female friends was approached by a guy and she said no to him, he called her a puta — he called her a whore — and she was saying to her friend that that was distressing and she didn't like that. Because he cared about his friend, he understood that and he empathized and he moderated his own behavior.

I think that building trust, rapport, understanding of what offends or — not even just offense, but having a sense of what matters to the other person, certainly, I absolutely agree that retreating into these digital spaces of solitude harms our understanding and also our solidarity more broadly. You know, the way that we care about other people.

**Douthat:** And one of the distinctive features of current politics around the developed world, certainly, is some kind of polarization of the sexes. It was, I think, less extreme in the end, in the most recent U.S. election than some people had anticipated.

But I wonder, too, if there's a feedback loop here, where the sexes don't interact and therefore are more likely to —

Marriage and relationships are themselves a moderating influence.

**Evans:** I definitely believe that.

**Douthat:** And so people don't have that influence and then they go online. And if you are on social media, where people are always performing their politics — and you see a lot of liberal women or a lot of conservative men performing their politics, and those aren't your politics and you have no relationship to those people — it just seems a lot easier to create a hostile generalization about right-wing men or left-wing feminists than if you're having any kind of interpersonal face-to-face interaction.

**Evans:** I think that's all true and I absolutely agree that intimate partnerships are a major important factor for building mutual understanding, common ground, etc.

That said, I don't think this is just about men not understanding women as a "men from Mars, women from Venus" story. Because if you look at some modern trends, say for example, the discourse of secular monks, whereby a young American man will go: I'm going to eat these specific macros, I'll have 200 grams of protein, I'll spend two hours on the bike — that's a guy with no friends. That's a guy who's prioritizing optimizing his physique. And he's not building friendships. He's not building rapport. He's not becoming a funny, charismatic guy.

This isn't just a gender issue, it's a solitude issue of people losing their capacity, losing the social skill to charm and make friends. And if you don't have a network that is socially active, then even if you wanted to go out, no one is. So it's all reinforcing.

**Douthat:** What about economic forces besides the smartphone? Digital life has entered into a world where young men are falling behind young women in education; men with lower levels of education are having a particularly hard time finding a mate or pairing off. If you look at trends, at least in the U.S., for marriage rates, college-educated women, the marriage rate is down a bit. Women without a college degree, the marriage rate is way down.

**Evans:** Yes, totally.

**Douthat:** One way to look at this is that men are losing a certain kind of status. They care about status. When they lose status, they become more sexist, more hostile to women, become less attractive to women by virtue of being hostile. That's one way to look at it, right?

**Evans:** Certainly. I think we can think about this in two ways.

As women increasingly enter the labor force and get higher skills, they can be more economically independent and they can choose to be alone. So they would only marry if a guy is charming — if they find love — but of course, the phones may be hurting that — or if the guy offers a desirable package of goods, whether that's attractiveness, entertainingness or money. Money is impressive for many of us.

I think that the most disadvantaged guys certainly may struggle to offer an appealing package. And, as you rightly say, the marriage rates are plummeting, chiefly among the most disadvantaged men. It's the

men who are earning the least, who are most likely to stay at home with their parents, to be single, who can't necessarily offer an attractive package of goods.

I should just say that it's not entirely that young men are getting less educated, rather, that the most disadvantaged men are struggling in education. So I certainly think that aspect is partly about economics.

**Douthat:** What do you think a man is supposed to do in this kind of situation? On the one hand, there clearly is a male reaction to this economic landscape that's very toxic, anti-female, misogynist lashing out. At the same time there's a cultural script that says: It's really good for women to be independent. You don't need a man.

And women still like male status. It's not just men who want status. Women like it. There's a lot of data that women like the idea of having a man who can potentially earn more than them — who can be a breadwinner — maybe not all the time, but if you're going to have kids, it's nice to have a man around who can be the primary earner for a period of time.

So it's not that women are really excited to enter into relationships with men who have less education than they do or who earn less than they do. Those men are in a trap that isn't just created by their own sense of masculine identity. It's also created by women's preferences.

**Evans:** A hundred percent — and created by the broader economic structure.

**Douthat:** Open-ended question: What can bring the sexes back together?

**Evans:** So I think that if it's the case that technology is the major friction, then we need to look at the political economy. Because each tech company, to be successful, they want to distract us and hoover up our attention for as long as possible, for as much as possible. So the market mechanism is really against coupling.

My concern is that tech companies are just becoming so much more engaging, more affable, more charismatic, more shocking — MrBeast! Oh, what's he going to do now that's so engaging? But what if tech outcompetes our social connections? That already seems to be happening, not just in coupling, but the wider rise in solitude.

I honestly don't know the answers, but here are a couple of things we could do. One is we could think about how do we regulate technology in some way? Jonathan Haidt has really done fantastic work in encouraging phones-free schools, for example. That would be important in enabling young people to actually talk to each other, to play in the parks, to chat, to make jokes, to learn how to make jokes, to become less anxious. I think that's really important. But it's clearly not a sufficient solution because us as adults are also vulnerable to just getting sucked into all these things.

**Douthat:** Right. This is what strikes me about his ideas, that it's very easy — I shouldn't say it's very easy, but it's relatively easy in a liberal individualist society to say: OK, we need to make a certain set of social changes that impose restrictions on kids, because kids are the great exception — they're not really part of the social contract. And he's gotten a lot of traction.

I think there will be — there already is, but there will increasingly be — an attempt to master the lure of the virtual, especially as it applies to younger kids. It's harder for me to see that once you get further into adolescence where so much of the adult life you're trying to get kids to join is online. And then it's really hard for me to see how, certainly, any kind of political restriction could — like, adults just seem very, very unlikely to accept it.

Now, maybe there'll be cases where people say: Ah, in the U.S., this sports betting experiment that we've done — bit of a mistake. [Chuckles.] Maybe it wasn't the best idea to put ads for sports gambling on every TV network that airs a baseball game. Maybe that gets walked back.

But it does seem harder to see how you get any kind of social restrictions on adult distraction. What do you think?

**Evans:** Absolutely. And politically it's very difficult. I think there are two tensions. One is both the demand and the supply. As humans become more hooked and dependent on this personal online entertainment, we want to protect those freedoms. Simultaneously, all the various companies — from Netflix to sports gambling — will lobby different political parties to prevent any kind of restrictions and regulations.

Then, even if, for example, one was trying to have a church-building program or a program to champion the church, the church is fighting against all those competing distractions. Or even if you're running something secular, like a community fair or festival, some people may well say, as they so often do: Hey, I'll rather just stay home in my pajamas and enjoy whatever's on TV. And you can choose exactly what you want on TV.

**Douthat:** What about culture apart from politics? Because, while it is the case that culture is determined to some degree by tech, the smartphone creates culture in its own way. It's also the case that the issue of declining birthrates is not one that much of elite Western culture has taken seriously. It's not something that's entered into the mainstream cultural mind the way that the threat of climate change has done. So you could imagine if it became a more important part of the cultural imaginary — some kind of self-conscious attempt to treat this as an important issue.

Let's say, right now people in Hollywood would feel bad if they were perceived to be not doing something to fight climate change or something. Hollywood used to make a lot of romantic comedies. It doesn't really anymore. There's still a few. But are there cultural scripts that could be written — whether in movies or TV or elsewhere — that you think could actually make a difference?

**Evans:** I think definitely, yes. And I think it would be wonderful if Hollywood promoted that and supported that. In fact, as a joke last year, I even wrote a comedy script about how Hollywood could support fertility and things like that.

Even though I'm totally on board with that — and I think that's very important — there are several frictions. One, it's very difficult to do cultural engineering today, because we have infinite options of entertainment at our fingertips — on Netflix and everything. So if you're not that interested in a romantic comedy — you know, in China, a lot of the most popular films are about divorce. So it's difficult to do cultural engineering. On top of that, as long as people are hooked on their smartphones, they might not have the social skills to do it.

I think another possible mechanism would be to use the tax system and to give massive tax incentives to people who have children, because that's a positive externality.

**Douthat:** Let's talk about that for a minute, because that's where people have naturally gone for a long time — people on the left, as I mentioned earlier, but also some people on the right. You have models in Eastern Europe, Poland and Hungary, of conservative or traditionalist governments trying to boost the birthrate or boost the marriage rate through incentives. Do those work?

**Evans:** That's a good question. The present evidence suggests that pro-natal incentives have not reversed the downward trend. So even when governments do give these goody bags, that doesn't seem to work.

It's possible, however, that if financial incentives were sufficiently large, that could change. So, for example, Hungary has recently suggested that women who have two children will not have to pay taxes again. That's a pretty big giveaway, but we also need to solve the coupling crisis. So that's one thing to explore. And governments — the Fed, etc. — could explore the taxation system.

**Douthat:** My impression, in part, is that these policies can work, but you have to spend in incredibly large sums to do it, which gets harder when your country is experiencing economic decline caused by falling birthrates. Also, your gains get swamped by larger effects. Hungary seemed to have some success pushing its birthrate, I think, from 1.3 to 1.6. So your investment is reaping marginal gains, which I think are worth it — it could mean hundreds of thousands of lives potentially — but it's not actually a fix.

What about religion? Overall it's the case that religious people tend to have more kids than secular people. Do those differential birthrates mean that, for instance, eventually the secular Western world will just become more religious, because only religious people will be having kids? What role does religion play?

**Evans:** Definitely, definitely. I think it's difficult empirically, descriptively, to deny that. For example, in Britain, Muslims have much higher fertility. So Britain will see a big increase in a larger Muslim, more politically active population. That will have huge political consequences. And if liberal secular people don't have kids, they will have less political influence. We see it in Israel too. The Hasidic Jews — the ultraconservative — I think they typically have six kids each. Again, that is changing the political bent of Israel's foreign policy. In every single country, these demographic implications are huge.

**Douthat:** But don't you need a certain kind of separatism to have big effects? The Ultra Orthodox in Israel are a fairly separate religious community. And my reading of the literature for Muslims in the U.K. and in Europe is that the more those communities integrate, the more their birthrates converge with the European norm. The same goes in the U.S.

I tend to be skeptical of prophecies of massive religious revival, although I will say that if birthrates are falling this fast, then suddenly the religious advantage looks more important.

And then, at maybe the opposite end of the spectrum of possibilities from traditional religion, you have reproductive technology offered as a response. There was a big pronatalism conference that was held

recently in the U.S. that attracted a lot of media attention because, of course, it was filled with a lot of very curious characters — some of whom are my friends, some of whom are not. What everyone who was there said is that it's this really weird mixture of serious conservative religious people and Silicon Valley people who are convinced that there's going to be a technological solution. Maybe the solution is artificial wombs, maybe it's a cure for menopause that extends female reproductive life deeper into middle age or something.

What effect has reproductive technology had so far? Has I.V.F. mitigated the trend?

**Evans:** That's a good question. I think in the vast majority of cases worldwide, a very small share of births are I.V.F. That said, were the technology to have greater success rates and be more accessible and more affordable, we might see greater uptake because it addresses a fundamental issue of expanding women's reproductive freedom.

If people want to spend their 20s finding themselves or focusing on greedy jobs, becoming ultra, ultra-demanding, climbing the career ladder and in their 30s they're still struggling to find someone, but maybe in their late 30s they do, lots of data suggests that people are coupling up a bit later. I can't predict that people are going to eventually couple up, but let's talk about that fraction of society who was single in their 20s, but finds the one at age 40. Then that's the real trouble: At age 40 — ticktock, and women's wombs are no longer at 100 percent. That's where, for that particular subgroup, I.V.F. could be really, really helpful in enhancing women's reproductive freedoms and enabling the couples that form later to have more choices and more freedoms.

**Douthat:** I.V.F. right now is very costly, difficult and obviously does not deliver guarantees of success.

**Evans:** Unreliable, yeah.

**Douthat:** And isn't there a danger — and I think you see this in some professional class circles — where it's seen as a reason why it's safe to postpone marriage and fertility? You have the companies offering egg-freezing services that are especially unreliable guarantors of fertility.

When I look at that landscape right now, I wonder if for every benefit to fertility you get from assisted reproduction, if there isn't a cultural sense that, "OK, I can put this off," which then ends in disappointment when it turns out that the tech is not all that people expect it to be.

**Evans:** Totally, I can understand that, let's call it a moral hazard, that if you pipe up a fertility solution, then people might put off children. That's theoretically possible. I don't want to dismiss it.

But if we look at the Pew data, for Americans under 35, you've got half of them saying they're single. And of those singles, the vast majority say they feel no pressure to couple up, no pressure to be in a relationship; they're perfectly happy with the status quo. I don't think those secular monks that we were talking about, saying: Oh, it's fine, I'll find a woman in 20 years and we'll do I.V.F. From my interviews at least, I don't think I.V.F. is entering into those calculations, partly because of what you precisely say: many people see I.V.F. as unreliable, costly, expensive.

If I.V.F. was currently cheap and everyone thought it was great, but we were all deluded and the scientists were deluding us and we were all overestimating its potential, then I think that explanation would have some credence. I think the hazard is possible; I don't think it's going on right now.

**Douthat:** But then by that logic, let's say you could reliably extend female fertility by 10 years. That doesn't actually solve the coupling crisis. Maybe it ends up meaning you have at least some more women who don't pair off, don't partner up, but end up having maybe one child. Part of the reality here is that in fact it's just harder to raise children on your own. Even if people who want children outside of a couple situation have a kid, they'll probably have fewer kids. And it just seems like you're still stuck in the same general trap, even if you can add a little bit to the reproductive life cycle.

**Evans:** So let me say that I think, given our recent discussion, each of these possible interventions has limited efficacy. Evidently there is no magic bullet. And given the enormity of the fertility crisis, what I as a researcher would really like to see would be so many different initiatives and pilot initiatives.

How can we build community groups? Let's go back to religion. One thing that I think that religions have done so well historically is building a sense of community. I spent a lot of time in small-town Alabama and I went to a local Bible study and I went to the churches and I chatted to the community. That's really, really important: In singing hymns together and praying together, that builds a sense of cohesion — those collective rituals — which also secular organizations could do.

So we can organize, we can try a hundred different things and let a hundred flowers bloom: Try all these little community events, perhaps see how we can regulate technology in some ways at some periods in some ventures, let's see how we can increase women's reproductive freedoms and let's see what we can do with the tax system and fiscal incentives.

I don't think any one of these things will fix it unilaterally, but I would like to see everyone — right and left — focus on this issue, understand the real driving forces and try to target those. But at present, we're not doing any of that.

**Douthat:** To the extent that you can tie all of that together, you wrote a fascinating paper recently about the Islamic religious revival. This is the broad trend across the Muslim world toward increasing piety and religious practice that helped define the late 20th century and was not entirely expected.

One of the arguments you make in the paper is that there is an element of prestige at work here, that a lot of Islamic schools and preachers and revivalists, if you will, did a really good job of making Islam seem prestigious, like it was something you wanted to be part of.

In a way, aren't we talking about a similar problem here? In the end, you are trying to make both coupling and kids — I think those things together — prestigious in a way that they aren't right now.

**Evans:** I agree. I agree.

**Douthat:** But can you do that?

**Evans:** As I said, cultural engineering is very difficult in a world of smartphones where everyone can curate their own echo chamber. So my total totalitarian aspirations are limited in the 21st century.

**Douthat:** Do you have totalitarian aspirations?

**Evans:** No, no, that was a British joke. Sorry. [Chuckles.]

**Douthat:** No, no. I mean, I guess this is one more interesting question: We're talking about this in the context of primarily of liberal democracies. But all of the trends that you describe apply to places like

the People's Republic of China. China's birthrate is headed toward South Korean levels. But China is — I mean, you can argue about how totalitarian it is — it certainly is an authoritarian society, with a state and a leadership class that thinks naturally in terms of five-year plans and social engineering. And they take the fertility crisis seriously.

Do you imagine that China is going to succeed in social engineering their way out of this?

**Evans:** Not at all. Not at all. I don't think they seem to understand it at all. And actually, even though I totally agree that China has masterminded massive success with electric vehicles, for example, or innovation, they can't seem to encourage people to couple up and have babies.

Let me give you two examples of the limits of their cultural engineering. When I chat to my students on Little Red Book, which is China's version of Instagram, if you type in "fertility" — and I'd encourage you to download the app and do it — you'll get all this anti-natal propaganda. I've previously blogged on this. It's really shocking. It'll be all these horrifying images about how your vagina gets destroyed and your body is destroyed and it's the most painful experience of your life. It's really horrifying and gory. And all these girls are saying: Oh my god, this is horrific. I never want to do it.

So despite all the censorship and the great firewall of China, all that exists. Young women will upload video blogs celebrating their independent life — look at my nice apartment, I'm going to cut this bit of food, I'm living as an independent person — glorifying and, in many ways, rewriting the script, challenging expectations of marriage, etc.

I don't know why this anti-natal discourse is passing the censors, but yeah, it is, and it's consistent with all my interviews with Chinese women.

**Douthat:** I want to stay on that idea of the pain of pregnancy and childbirth. This is more speculative. It's not that that anti-natal propaganda is inventing things out of a vacuum. It is fasting on a reality, which is that sex and reproduction are risky and painful and dangerous. Do you think there's a way in which virtual life makes physical, carnal, painful human life seem more dangerous than it would have? Just by virtue of: You're living in a phone. You're abstracted from your own body in a more profound way than usual.

I just wonder if this kind of propaganda about what reproduction does and how dangerous it is fastens more easily in minds that are already a little bit detached from their own embodiment.

**Evans:** Let me say, I think that's an interesting hypothesis, but I think you see young people still doing things that are painful — whether it's young women trying to get an Instagram face and having fillers and Botox and painful things, or men spending painful times at the gym being secular monks. People do painful stuff.

I think the more direct causal link is people spending time on their phones and then feeling anxious about chatting to people at the bar.

**Douthat:** Maybe not pain. Maybe it's more an idealized fantasy of youth. Because yes, people are willing to go through painful processes of calisthenic activity and facial surgery and so on, but both of those things for men and women are attempts to retain an eternal youth.

In that sense — sorry, I'm just trying to push us a tiny bit into the philosophical, but I had hair right before I started having kids, right? Entering into parenthood is inherently a confrontation with your own mortality maybe.

**Evans:** I certainly think that people seem to be wanting to extend the freedoms and the lack of responsibility in their 20s. Let's add that, for example, in my interviews with Latin American men, many are saying to me that they don't necessarily want marriage and kids because it comes with those responsibilities. I think this could be even more salient than the pain of pregnancy. Like, imagine you're a guy in a pretty crappy labor market with lots of informal labor, lots of insecurity, lots of massive financial shocks and crises and inflationary pressures and you're like: Do I want to commit to a woman and say that we're going to raise two kids together and feel all that strain and responsibility? Or do I just want to chill out and play Call of Duty?

I think that progressives have generally underestimated how much women benefit from, as you were saying earlier, making that commitment of monogamous permanent devotion and support. I think that, while feminists have historically championed freedoms and shared care, which are of course crucial to gender equality, the people that actually listen to those messages of freedoms, pleasure and shared care work are men who love, who are emotionally connected and who value companionship with their wives.

And now many men are saying: Eh, maybe I don't want those things. Maybe that's not everything I need. And that's a hugely important and under-told aspect of this global story

**Douthat:** We've been talking about solutions and responses. Overall, we're describing a problem to which there is not a single solution. There might be a large number of small-bore responses that make some kind of difference, but basically, the low-fertility future — the population crash — is going to happen in most places.

**Evans:** Yes.

**Douthat:** Almost certainly, there is not going to be a worldwide pro-fertility mobilization that suddenly reverses birthrates and takes these trends off the table. So I just want to speculate at the end: What does that future look like? What do you think the world looks like in 2080 if these trends continue?

**Evans:** So I'm reluctant to make predictions.

**Douthat:** These are not predictions, I want to be clear. These are imaginative speculations.

**Evans:** If fertility continues to decline and we are either ineffective or inactive, and simultaneously we do not have a large rise in immigration, which is super productive and super economically active, and simultaneously we do not see a massive boom in A.I. productivity — if none of those countervailing forces occur, then we are all going to become much poorer and perhaps politically, also, we might see some shifts with rising support for more conservative groups.

**Douthat:** Say a little more about the politics. What does it mean when you say more conservative?

**Evans:** So for example, in the U.S., it's Republicans who have more kids, so we should predict that Republicans will win more elections, just by virtue of fertility. In Europe, we will just all become much poorer. Our public services will continue to deteriorate and we will have less spending power.

So Europe is just in an economic doom loop. And the U.S. may be better because they'll get all the world's migrants, they'll get the most productive migrants, they'll get the most entrepreneurial migrants. But they should also become, if we're right, more conservative and more Republican.

**Douthat:** So there, it's just replacement: Conservatives have more kids, liberals have fewer, conservatives own the future.

**Evans:** Yes.

**Douthat:** I guess I'm wondering, though: Surely there are also political adaptations. You can see in Europe already, with some of the populist parties, this sense of, we're trying to protect the aging society and we want to keep out immigrants because immigrants threaten a culture that is disappearing. But the culture is disappearing because we ourselves haven't had enough kids.

**Evans:** Totally.

**Douthat:** People worry about the authoritarianism of that kind of politics — and I think there is a pull toward authoritarianism — but it seems like, in a weird way, the opposite of an aggressive 20th-century fascism that wants to make Hungary or Germany or Austria great. It's more like a cocooned authoritarianism. It seems like you will get novel forms of politics in this environment.

**Evans:** Well, I think certainly that if people grow up with a certain standard of living and a certain quality of public services, and then those deteriorate as a result of population aging and lower rates of economic dynamism, then people should get fed up and frustrated. Simultaneously, as people spend more time on their phones hooked on these echo chambers, polarizing differently — not just by gender, but polarizing — then the less time that we spend socializing with different other people, the less we develop understanding right across genders and across political groups.

As we become more illiberal, I would predict that would fuel political authoritarianism because "those guys" are the bad guys and we'll do anything to stop them from winning. We'll support our strongman to stop those crazy people from winning.

So I would expect lots of economic frustrations and lots of support for illiberalism. It's a bad future.

**Douthat:** It seems like a very dark future. And this is sort of the problem of a low fertility trap: Once a society gets old enough and it's a democracy, the older voters are just going to keep voting for benefits for older people.

**Evans:** Yes, exactly.

**Douthat:** And it's still going to be increasingly difficult to get the government to spend money on the young people, even if you need the young people.

**Evans:** Absolutely. Yes. So you'll have this political lobby group of old people who are directly concerned with pensions and health care rather than economic dynamism and frictions. Then it becomes harder to be a young person, so we go back to the disadvantaged man: It's harder to move upward as a disadvantaged man and harder to get a wife if the entire voting system is rigged by these old people who don't care so much about you.

**Douthat:** But then finally, just to keep being speculative, the world in this future will have a lot more empty spaces though, too. China has spent 20 years building all of these huge cities, and if China's population falls by half, those cities will be empty. Big rural regions of Latin America will be empty. And so on.

**Evans:** Yes.

**Douthat:** So when I'm trying to be optimistic — and I don't want to end on a super optimistic note, because the point of this show is that people should be alarmed and concerned by this — but there are ways in which a young person could look at that world and say: OK, the mega cities of Western Europe and North America are actually bad places to be young, but there's a reopened frontier in Uruguay or Eastern Europe or the hinterlands of China.

**Evans:** I don't think that's true. In China, when you talk about those cities, those big tower blocks, China is currently dealing with massive local government debt because so much of the local governments' assets are in buildings that no one is buying. So that's not a win. Those empty cities are in no sense a win. No one is moving to those cities because there's no jobs, no demand, nothing there.

**Douthat:** I guess I'm thinking more like: Imagine that you wanted to be a pirate. Imagine that you were a 19th-century would-be desperado.

I'm imagining a world of groups with high intentionality. This new world is going to reward people who are unusually intentional about things like getting married and having kids, but also maybe about building a community and trying to set yourself up in one of the spaces created by the retreat of the human race.

**Evans:** It would be amazing and I'd love to see it, if some community group forged a space in the U.S. and, like: OK, how can we arrange this community space? Maybe it's a hundred households. How can we arrange it in a pro-coupling, pro-fertility way? That would be fascinating to explore. But just because there's a plot of vacant land, I wouldn't expect anything to follow.

**Douthat:** Do you have kids?

**Evans:** No. No, I don't.

**Douthat:** OK. So, I have kids, and my kids are maybe tired of hearing their father mention to them just occasionally that the global population is going to collapse over the course of their lifetime. Normal children of New York Times employees are worried about climate change; my children are worried about the demographic cliff.

I keep trying to prod you toward optimism, but what would you say to the children of this future? Because, when I talk to my kids about it, I do try to frame it as an opportunity, like: Yes, the world is going to grow old, but you'll be young and you'll have agency and you'll have opportunities to shape a world in which there are fewer young people to compete with, and maybe your horizons will widen.

How do you think young people should think about this future, apart from, they should probably have some kids?

**Evans:** So two things on that. First of all, it's really important that the young people understand the economic implications, so they take it as seriously as we do climate breakdown, first and foremost. That's what I do in my lectures.

And then, given my realization that so much of this is driven by the rise of singles, I actually would pivot to say: So many young Americans are not happy. One of the richest countries in the world, and a lot of young people are deeply lonely and unhappy, and one of the most unique and wonderful things that we have as humans is to find people to love and care for and build emotional connections and devotion and support each other and understand each other.

Going back to the writing the Hollywood script, I would go back for those romcoms and celebrate the romantic love, because when people shift their focus from celebrating the freedoms or the secular monks of the 20s, to thinking more about: OK, how can I build friendships and romantic love? Then you get people finding love earlier, and that should encourage a higher rate of coupling.

The romantic love would be my optimistic, positive focus that I think would restore both socializing, friendships, mutual understanding, empathy, happiness and — down the line — fertility.

**Douthat:** OK, so we're ending on an agreement of a massive government program to subsidize a new revival of Jane Austen adaptations for the 21st century. On that note, Alice Evans, thank you so much for joining me.

**Evans:** Thank you.