

2

Sweden: Socialist Engineering in Family Policy

1. The Present Situation

The main characteristics of family formation in Sweden in recent decades are:

- declining marriage, more divorce, and rising cohabitation;
- first partnerships are formed at successively younger ages;
- a growth in people living alone;
- steady growth in one-parent families;
- serial monogamy and serial cohabitations are increasingly common;
- the percentage of births outside marriage is rising rapidly, and remains the highest in the EU;
- fertility rates vary sharply, in response to pro-natalist policies;
- suicide rates are among the highest in the EU, exceeded only by Finland.

Family structure

The family of a married couple with one or two children is the most common type in Sweden. In the 1990 census, about 67 per cent of families with children were married-couple-families, and about 15 per cent were unmarried couples. Lone-parent families were around 20 per cent. Of individuals born between 1892 and the mid-1950s, about 85 per cent grew up with both biological parents until 16. Death was the main reason for not growing up with both parents. However, 24 per cent of children born in Sweden during the 1960s and around 29 per cent of those born in 1970-76 no longer lived with both biological parents by age 16.

Living alone has increased: by 1995, 21 per cent of those aged 16-74 were living alone.

There is virtually no adoption in Sweden. The state looks after children who cannot live with their family, since professional educators and carers are preferred to parents. The link with the family of origin is preserved as far as possible.

Marriage

Marriage in Sweden has become a pattern of serial monogamy and serial cohabitations. The marriage rate in Sweden increased in the first half of the twentieth century and up to the 1940s. It began to fall in the late 1940s, and in 1967 a dramatic decline set in. In five years, marriages decreased from 60,000 per year to 40,000. Between 1966 and 1996 the annual marriage rate per 1,000 single women dropped by about a third. The marriage rate shot up in 1989, due to a change in widows' pension rules. (Widows' pensions were abolished to stop women depending on men, but women could still get them if they were born before 1944 and married by 1989.) The median age at marriage has increased by more than six years since the mid-1960s—in 1996, it was 32 for men and 29 for women. In one in ten marriages in the 1950s and one in five in the 1980s, the woman had been married before.

In the 1970s, it seemed that replacement of marriage by cohabitation was taking place and there was no overall decline in partnerships. Indeed, first partnerships were formed at successively younger ages. In 1980, 78 per cent of women aged 20 to 24 in a union cohabited. Of women aged 30-35 this was 28 per cent. Among women born in 1949, about 19 per cent

married when entering their first union, while only eight per cent of those born in 1964 married directly.

The propensity for younger women to enter any union increased up to the 1990s, and then levelled off. While women often married after cohabiting for a short time, women in more recent cohorts are now more likely to separate than marry. The dissolution rate for cohabitation is estimated to be two or three times higher than for marriages.¹ While about 20,000 marriages dissolve each year, the number of cohabiting couples separating has increased from about 25,000 in 1981 to 30,000 for 1986-1991. Comparisons of stable cohabiting couples with those who separate reveal little or no socio-economic selection.²

The increase of non-marital unions is contributing to 'partnership mobility', in Sweden as elsewhere. These usually last for a short time (shorter than was the case some years ago), and are often followed by successive unions. The Swedes have the highest proportion of women aged 35-39 who have had three or more live-in 'partnerships'.³ By 1994, about 40 per cent of all new unions involved at least one partner who had been living with someone else before. However, the time between unions means that more people remain unpartnered over the long term. However, cohabitations still last longer than in Britain. It has been calculated that, for women in the age range 20-39 years, dissolved cohabitations had a duration of 29 months, compared with 19 in Britain. Cohabitants that led to marriage had a duration of 48 months, compared with 17 in Britain.

Fewer low-status men are married and more are excluded from family life.

Fertility trends

During the 1930s, Swedish fertility fell to a TFR of only 1.7 children per woman. In the 1940s, birth rates rose to replacement level. In the 1960s, when birth rates were very high in the Anglophone world, the Swedish rate fell back to just above 1.6. There was a dramatic upturn in the late 1980s and 1990s, as the TFR rose to 2.14, the highest in Europe. Women had more children and had them earlier, after policy changes allowed women to stay at home on generous allowances during the children's early years. In 1980, the mother (or father) could stay at home with a child for a longer period of time if another child was born within 24 months of the last one. In the 1970s, a woman only had the right to a second period of maternity leave without returning to work if the interval between births did not exceed 12 months—although it had already lengthened with holiday and sick leaves. By the time the period was extended to 30 months, many parents could have two or three children reasonably close together to take advantage of all the benefits and easily remain on paid leave for five years or longer. This meant more births as well as reducing the interval between births, with a big boost in second and subsequent births as the last child reached two years of age. Women in their thirties had a fertility rate higher than those in their twenties. The fertility rate of younger women then started to rise as well, as several cohorts first put off childbearing and then compensated for this, or brought births forward.

Birth rates fell back to a low level by the mid-1990s. The reason may lie partly in cutbacks on wage replacement policies and other adverse economic developments that threatened wages. Also, as in the UK in the 1970s, the very low birth rate may have been due partly to the fact that young women had already brought their birth plans forward and had their children. There was a reduction in the number of couples having third children and a postponement of the birth of the first child. The fall proved to be as temporary as the artificially induced peak, for by 2000 the birth rate had recovered to 1.65—very slightly higher than the UK.⁴

Unwed births

Sweden already had a high illegitimacy rate at the end of the nineteenth century (ten per cent) compared with other European countries, partly because there was a surplus of women, as men migrated, and a very late age at marriage, as people waited to inherit land.

In 1979, 35 per cent of births were out of wedlock compared with less than ten per cent in Britain. Over 50 per cent of births are now outside marriage, overwhelmingly within cohabitations. More first births are within cohabitations than marriages. There appear to be fewer 'single' unwed births than in Britain, where the unwed birth rate is higher than might be expected from the rates of cohabitation. The overall proportion of women who had a child prior to any union was seven per cent in Sweden in 1995 and there has not been the upward movement seen in Britain. On the other hand, there has been an upward movement in Sweden in first births post first partnership.⁵

There is also the role of cohabitation in driving birth rates down. As elsewhere, cohabiting couples have fewer children than married couples. The formation and disruption of these unstable relationships absorbs time in which children might be conceived and born.

Abortion now deals with nearly 70 per cent of pregnancies out of wedlock in Sweden.

Lone parents

Sweden had one of the highest proportions of lone mothers in Europe in 1979. The increase was greater in the UK in the 1990s, and it has now overtaken Sweden. There is a much lower proportion of young lone mothers in Sweden, with only eight per cent under 25 years old. As elsewhere, lone mothers have fewer children than married mothers (63 per cent have only one child, compared with 37 per cent of married mothers in 1995).

However, more single cohabiting mothers marry than in Britain. France and Britain have the lowest proportion of single, cohabiting mothers who marry, at around one-third, while in Sweden it is 56 per cent within five years, and 70 per cent in Italy.⁶

A high proportion of lone mothers are foreign born, or 20 per cent by 1995. Figures for 1990 show there are more children with lone parents in blue-collar families (25 per cent live with a lone parent) compared with white-collar families (17 per cent). As elsewhere, lone mothers are more likely to be the less educated, low-ability women. Not only do women with higher education have a considerably lower propensity to become lone mothers, but higher earnings before the first child also reduce the risk of entering lone motherhood.⁷

Divorce as a springboard

Overall, the number of individuals experiencing family disruption (from all sources) annually is 140,000-150,000 adults and children. The increasing risks of union dissolution for women born after the late 1950s, in contrast to women born before, is probably due to cohabitations increasing the separation rate. Until the late 1980s, divorce was the main route into lone motherhood.

There was a gradual, continuous increase in divorce from the beginning of the century. The divorce rate increased dramatically in the 1970s following a change in the divorce law in 1974 that allowed divorce on request and at short notice. No reason has to be given, and there is no wait unless there are children (where there is a six month consideration period). Public interference occurs in the case of property and custodial settlements if the couple cannot agree. The annual divorce rate increased immediately by almost 70 per cent, from 8.6 per 1,000 in 1973 to 14.5 per 1,000 marriages in 1974. As elsewhere, after the legal change, the divorce rate dropped somewhat but settled at a far higher level than before. In 1988, the Swedish divorce rate had dropped back to 10.8 per 1,000 married women to rise again by the mid-1990s. Other countries have similar rates: Norway 9.4, Australia 10.8, England and Wales 12.7 in 1989, New Zealand 12.0 in 1990, US 21.0 in 1988.

A factor in the divorce rate is unemployment: as elsewhere, women expect men to be the main breadwinner and reject men who cannot offer much financial support. Amongst children born into marital or cohabiting unions that subsequently became marital unions, there is little difference in the chances of children seeing their parents' relationship break up by their fifth birthday. This is unlike Britain and the US, where children with parents who married from cohabitation are more likely to see their parents split than those born into marriage.

Cohabitation as a springboard

As elsewhere, because cohabitation has such a high dissolution rate compared with marriages, and because cohabitation has become a common way to live, it becomes a leading engine behind the expansion of lone parenthood. According to the cohort study using the Fertility and Family Surveys, 93 per cent of marital unions survive five years after the birth of the first child, compared with 75 per cent of cohabitations (compared with only 48 per cent in Britain).⁸ Moreover, previously cohabiting mothers are much less likely to enter a new union compared with those who have been married. Contrary to assumptions about Sweden in the UK, cohabitations have not become equal to marriage in longevity and stability.

2. The Historical Background

These trends paint a picture of increasing social fragmentation. Nonetheless, Sweden has the reputation as the beacon of enlightenment and progress in Europe. One demo-legend has it that Sweden is living proof that cohabitations are as durable as marriages. Another has it that Swedish experience proves that lone parents and their children are more than equal to two-parent families and their children in all outcomes, so long as they get proper support. Sweden 'proves' that young children do better when they go to day care, rather than being reared by mothers at home, and so on. Policy analysts turn to Sweden 'as a widely touted example of modern family policy, a system that recognises the social transformations made necessary by the commitment to gender equality and the full industrialisation of social life... the purest model for a regime of day care, progressive schooling, paid paternal leave... which reconciles the need for human reproduction with the drive for gender equality.'⁹ Sweden's welfare state is the model to emulate. The present bias is to classify welfare/fiscal or family policies in such a way as to juxtapose the ideal of the dual-career family who share household duties with the horror of the male breadwinner family and its rigid role segregation. Policies which do not aim to engineer the former are seen as setting out to subjugate women in the latter. The only enlightened policy has become one which gives women equal access to jobs in the labour market, financial independence and high quality subsidised childcare services, so that they never have to choose between a job and having children. This perspective is promoted by Swedish social scientists (as well as policy-makers), who 'have devised several classifications of welfare states that always place the modern Nordic welfare state at the apex of typologies, as the best practice model'.¹⁰ They demand that it must also be exported everywhere else, and it has long been favoured by UK establishment feminists, in and out of government. In 1996, Allan Larsson, Director General of DGV (Directorate General V, responsible for Employment, Industrial Relations and Social Affairs) in the European Commission, complained that women's work-rates in the EU were still lower than men's. He insisted that the days of the male breadwinner had gone and dismissed the 'old social contract' with a division of responsibilities between spouses as 'no longer valid'. Effectively, he demanded that the 'traditional' sexual division of labour must be outlawed, and the Swedish model extended to all in Europe, irrespective of preferences.¹¹

Sweden has been cast as the prime example of the 'maximalist welfare state'. Its project is to 'put people's lives straight by defining the content of the good life and controlling the

institutional instruments leading to it'. There is even an official list of names from which babies must be named.¹² The justification for such far-reaching intervention and attempts to shape people's fundamental choices in life rests on assumptions that someone knows better than the individuals concerned what the good life is and how it can be achieved. Not least, this has involved the comprehensive political control of family life, where Sweden has made just about the most concerted attempt in history to engineer the freedom of women from child-rearing responsibilities and the demise of the traditional family through economic manipulation, social pressures, and massive public re-education.

In 1968, Sweden became the first country in the world to frame a government policy of achieving equality between the sexes by changing the role of men as well as that of women. In a statement to the United Nations that year the Swedish government had declared that it was not enough to guarantee women their rights. All legislation and all social policy must support a shift from man-the-breadwinner and woman-the-homemaker to a society of independent individuals and of partnerships in which all tasks were shared.¹³

In the new century, the remaking of the sexes has been joined by the attempt to equalise 'sexualities'. Books and other media marketed to Swedish schools containing 'unsatisfactory or discriminatory passages concerning homosexuality or bisexuality' are destined for the bonfire. To this end, the National Academy for Education is conducting an extensive review of all schools to determine how principals choose and use textbooks. Schools are now 'empowered' to 'integrate gender equality and sexual orientation issues into their operations and everyday tasks'. As any criticism or objection to the complete normalisation of homosexuality is tacitly defined as psychological abnormality, research is meant to focus upon how 'norms and attitudes make homophobia possible' even where there are 'no statistics or consistent studies which can pinpoint discrimination due to sexual orientation'.¹⁴ Making what may be regarded as offensive statements about homosexuality or homosexuals merits a prison term.

One of the last places in Europe to give anyone the franchise, Sweden is essentially an authoritarian, culturally (and genetically) homogeneous, and small-scale society, with traditions of strong, centralised government, and minimal citizen participation. The cultural and racial homogeneity are largely a function of its small size. As shown in Tables 1 and 2 (pp. 7-10), Sweden is one of the six smallest countries in the EU, whereas Italy and Britain are among the four largest. Historically, little or nothing in the way of intermediate stages or groups developed between a fairly egalitarian and primitive clan-based peasantry and the monarchy. There have been no autonomous trading cities, no merchant classes, no nobility to challenge the state, whose position of power and direct hold over the people has no counterpart elsewhere in Western Europe. This all endowed the expansion of the state and its educative pretensions with a natural legitimacy, and furthered the introduction of collectivist perspectives which demanded strong institutional uniformity and subordinated the rights of the individual to the best interests of the community.¹⁵ Sweden quickly took to twentieth century collectivist notions of the rule of 'expert' elites, possessed of a superior knowledge, of how best people should live.

Added to this, the 'mature industrialism' which took root in the early twentieth century was a 'paradoxical and highly unstable combination of market and command economy'. In 1870 three-quarters of the population were engaged in fishing, farming and forestry, and only nine per cent in manufacturing or crafts. (In Britain, 45 per cent of the labour force were in industry at that time.) Sweden had no coal, but developed hydro-electricity, which led to very rapid economic growth. The 'big factories of mass production were veritable plan and command economies in miniature. Their organisational principles were strictly hierarchic and their top-down chain of command as explicit as in military organisations'.¹⁶ The commanding organisational rationality of big business helped inspire the 'social Fordism' that was repudiated in the USA, but favoured in Germany, the Soviet Union and Sweden, or countries

with more corporatist and hierarchic traditions. The Swedish welfare state was to develop along lines which reproduced the centralist and standardised principles of mass manufacturing big industry, the happy factory, or cybernetic Utopia.

Like democracy, Sweden came late to many developments in sexual equality and family law. 'Modernisation' meant the telescoping of the two phases of reform that elsewhere occurred between 1880 and 1900 and then between 1960 and 1975, with Sweden being much later with some and much earlier with other measures. Until 1920, married women had no control over their own earnings, which belonged to the husband. Until 1909, there was no civil marriage. However, illegitimacy as a legal entity was abolished in 1917, not out of radicalism, but because of the ways in which stigmatisation was adding to the problems surrounding children born out of wedlock and their mothers. Liberal divorce laws were introduced in the 1920s and extended in 1974. Homosexuality was decriminalised in 1944. Compulsory sex education was introduced into schools in 1956.

Pronatalism

The impetus behind the family policy measures of the 1930s-1960s was population maintenance, given the low birth rates of the pre-war period. Over a million Swedes left the country between 1860 and 1914, mainly for the USA. There was concern over population shrinkage, as the net fertility rate fell below one in 1927—although it is now alleged that the fertility decline was overstated.¹⁷ The low birth rate resulted, to a not inconsiderable extent, from a low marriage rate and a high proportion of unmarried women. The same was true of the illegitimacy rate. Migration, plus the need to inherit land before marrying, depleted the supply of marriageable men, reduced further by the Great Depression.¹⁸

Swedish pro-natalism owed much to Alva and Gunnar Myrdal's 1934 book *Crisis in the Population Question*, which provided a pertinent analysis of reproduction in a capitalist society.¹⁹ They argued that, since having children was (irreversibly) voluntary, and based on a living standard criteria, birth rates would probably continue to fall unless something was done to equalise the financial status of those with and without this burden. Those who produced children were massive contributors to the upkeep and perpetuation of the nation, in whom it should invest heavily to secure its future. The Myrdals spoke prophetically of how the long-term development of the proposed welfare state, which would include provisions for the aged as well as children, might add dramatically to anti-family pressures which discouraged the birth of children by passing massive resources and influence to the elderly.

Old age pensions stripped children of economic value and reversed the incentives structure. It had become rational for people to avoid the expense of children, while hoping that others will be foolish enough to rear the children who would later pay for everyone's retirement. Young people were required to support the retired and the needy through the welfare system as well as the children to whom they gave life. Consequently, they reduced the number of children because it was the only factor over which they had any control. In contrast to the neo-Malthusians, who saw increased living standards as the result of population decline, it was argued that an aging population would mean more medical and welfare costs falling on a decreasing number of economically active people, as the economy contracted with falling demand and less capital formation. Also to consider as the aged inherited the earth, was the prospect of the debilitating and stultifying power of the elders.

The Myrdals wrested the population question away from conservatives and nationalists and turned it towards the service of socialist goals. 'With exquisite timing, the Myrdals offered the [Social Democratic] party a wildly popular, politically effective, scientifically justified response to what had been seen as an unsolvable problem, and they went on to reshape their nation.'²⁰ As transformers of the Swedish state, their achievement knows few parallels. They epitomised the collectivist social engineer who manages society according to scientific principles for constructive ends. To the elite expert, existing social life was just 'the

illogical result of human choices; at any moment we could decide whether to maintain or change it'. Distinctions 'between facts and values were blurred and jargon became a convenient cover for political goals'.²¹ As the Myrdals pursued 'social revolution they foreclosed other options and possibilities and so served as progenitors of the post-family welfare state'.²²

Calling for a 'forced march into modernity as the only hope for families and children', the Myrdals linked voluntary parenthood, sex education and birth control to the feminist theme of women's full engagement in the labour market and thence to the nationalist desire to ensure population stability. Gunnar Myrdal himself had an authentic desire to increase the birth rate, while Alva was more committed to a gender role revolution, achieved through the use of the population issue as a political tool. Both saw the radical-conservative consensus on the population question as the crowbar for the socialisation of Sweden. Only sex would be left to individuals and the hope was that this would secure enough children to fund the whole enterprise.

Importing the revolution

Before it erupted in the West in the late 1960s, the doctrinal base for sexual liberation and gender equality was laid in Sweden by the same body of feminists influential in the early Soviet Union's programme for sexual freedom. Both communists and social democrats, supported by Alva and Gunnar Myrdal, were part of the interwar functionist movement which attacked the garden cities of England and the workers' apartments of Europe as incompatible with women's employment and freedom from 'household drudgery'. Even if it was 'inspired by socialist sympathies', the low-cost housing built in Western Europe between the two world wars did not have as its goal the remodelling of the family or society, but the amelioration of an ugly by-product of capitalism—the squalid slums of the industrial cities. 'The [limited] goals were space, hygiene and fresh air.'²³ Embracing Le Corbusier's 'machine for living', the Myrdals and other policy-makers wanted the 'collective house' to house the new people, with the women at work, the children in care centres, and social workers and educators overseeing everything. The family dilemma in Western society would be resolved—on Friedrich Engels's terms—by the development of more 'efficient' forms of child-rearing better suited to the industrial age. Daycare and summer camps would be less expensive than supporting the antiquated and maladaptive family where children were exposed to a damaging psychological atmosphere. The 'falsely individualistic desire' of parents for the 'freedom' to raise their own children was unhealthy. It was 'based on a sadistic disposition to extend this "freedom" to an unbound and uncontrolled right to dominate others'.²⁴ In the collective nursery, small children would be cared for twenty four hours a day by highly trained personnel, in hygienic conditions, with pedagogically correct playthings. (This is not far from the 'children's centres' envisaged by the Blair government as an outcrop of the Sure Start programme, where children can stay from early morning to evening while the parent works.)

In these conditions, women would have more children. If there were not enough jobs, then public works, sound economic planning and a growing economy would create enough for everybody. The blueprint was for communities where 'property was owned jointly, work was shared, food was prepared in common, and children brought up together'. Men and women would then 'be equal and independent, and sexual morality... not defined by legal norms'. The 'aim was to break the bonds that private property and conventional family ties imposed on the development of the individual in a free society'. Collective housekeeping was 'not just a convenience for women but... part of the structure necessary for creating socialist relationships'.²⁵

In turn, reducing the time together in the home would undermine the influence of parents on their children's development.

For the reformers, a rational allocation of resources meant benefits in kind, or as ‘social consumption’ rather than cash. Otherwise, family allowances might be added to the main family budget, rather than spent directly on the children. Society must assume most of the child support function, financed by taxes on the whole population, and dispense free meals, free medical care, clothing, infant care, ‘modern, hygienic furniture’ and so forth. Such collectivised programmes would prove cheaper, more effective and adequate in meeting need, than individual choice, and allowed for social transformation through the removal of independent action. Ordinary people lacked the sense to know what was good for them. Consumption, the last economic function left to the family, must be socialised.²⁶

The Myrdals dominated political and social discourse in the interwar period to the extent that to engage in sexual intercourse was ‘to Myrdal’ and a sofa was a ‘Myrdal couch’.²⁷ But the reform programme, with its daycare for children, went beyond the confines of Social Democratic policy-making and opinion in the 1930s and 1940s. Actual family policy reforms included free maternity care in public clinics, rent rebates according to family size, child tax allowances, marriage loans and employment protection for mothers. In 1948, family allowances for all children were introduced to replace child tax allowances. Many of these measures existed in the UK, such as maternity care and child health measures; family allowances were introduced in Britain in 1943, and ran alongside child tax allowances until 1979. Policies supporting full employment through Keynesian manipulation were also common pro-family measures throughout the post-war Anglophone world—as in Australia and New Zealand. However, in Sweden, a more explicit pro-natalist population policy, allied with Keynesian counter-cyclical public expenditure policies, specifically legitimated the expansion of the welfare state. The goal was to increase fertility by 25 per cent, and to improve the quality of the next generation by improvements in child welfare. As elsewhere, pronatalism and the preservation of the nation were not then deemed to be racist or fascist.

From the time that Swedish welfare programmes were first constructed in the 1930s, there was much concern, not just with horizontal equity, but with the vertical redistribution that was eschewed in the Anglophile world. The welfare state was seen as an instrument of equality, rather than simply a device for easing pressure at various points in the life cycle.

Social engineering: the feminist paradise

By the 1960s, the goal of achieving a real redistribution of wealth, or even a reduction in income differentials through full employment and measures for non-earning members of society, seemed even further off. Inequalities had widened. Opportunities for advancement went to those who already had opportunities, while grants, loans and tax breaks for enterprise increased the wealth gaps. Victims of a ‘new poverty’ were principally those with children, and especially lone parents, big families and immigrants. What was ‘redistributed’ back to parents was little compared with what they paid in taxes to finance benefits and services (plus the administrative costs) that went primarily to others—especially the retired. By 1958, pensioners were receiving a higher income than members of families with dependent children.

Sweden saw much the same upsurge in crime in the 1960s as other Western countries; lower than the UK, France and the Netherlands, but higher than Germany, Italy and Austria.

The contemporary counter-cultural upheaval in the Anglophone world was re-cycling feminist and socialist perspectives from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century—perspectives that already had greater prominence and success in Sweden.

The debate on class equality was joined by a re-vamped gender debate, dominated by progressive sociologists and psychologists. By now, ‘social parenting’ was a definite prerequisite for a liberated sexuality which was incompatible with child-rearing based in marriage. With reformers preoccupied with class and gender equality, the aim was a society where individuals, undefined by sex, marriage, or parenthood, were never dependent upon

anybody else, and in continuous full-time work regardless of marital and parental status. The Erlander Report,²⁸ adopted by the Swedish Social Democrats in 1964, and supported by communists and liberals, insisted that government powers over industry and education were to be used to eliminate sex discrimination, sex-determined choices of occupation, and to set up childcare. In comparison, moves to diminish the conflict between work and family merely perpetuated the idea that women's task was homemaking and the care of children. There must be no 'right to choose' between home and career at any time in life, and men and women must unavoidably have the same obligations. People did not know their own minds; they were just 'culturally conditioned' and frozen into an impoverishing mould.

With the goals being the sameness of contribution and equality of outcome, attained by the break-up of the sexual division of labour in the home, and equal opportunities and affirmative action policies outside, the Social Democrats' women's organisation got them incorporated into the party's 'Programme for Equality', adopted in 1969. It involved a sleight of hand and was never really debated publicly. The programme was presented as having something for everyone, so the inclusion of women, or the social engineering of the new women and new men, remained largely implicit.

Everybody working

The reduction of poverty was sought through wages policy, in the context of the pursuit of full employment. This is not the 'living wage' policy pursued by governments and trade unions in Anglophile countries from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century—the aim of ensuring male breadwinners an income sufficient to keep a smallish family at a modest but adequate living standard. Instead, with the aim of keeping all parents in employment there had to be the same remuneration, as well as employment and family work patterns, for both sexes. Twinned with the goal of reducing gender inequality was one of equalising income between family types. This itself was part of ensuring equality across classes. Labour shortages dictated that all women had to work, to avoid the need for immigration, with its consequent social problems. (Other countries, like the UK and Germany, imported labour from less developed countries.)

To engineer these outcomes, unmarried and married couples were treated alike in respect of tax assessment, housing allowances and child benefit. Individual taxation of spouses replaced joint taxation in 1971. The principle of family equity as applied fiscally—that income be taxed in proportion to the numbers dependent upon it—was annulled on the grounds that nobody should rely on anybody else, and children were preferably reared by the state.

'Social democrats sacrificed one of their most hallowed principles... in order to force a tax on the imputed income of the homemaker and to drive all mothers into the marketplace.'²⁹ As an added penalty on mutual support, a family with only one earner received a lower housing benefit than one with the same net income earned by two. Housing benefit is paid per person. Since 1995, a 'partner' with no income is not entitled to any housing benefit, so that the couple will have an income limit under a half that allowed a lone parent.

With very high progressive taxation, it became impossible (as intended) to live on one wage, and more economically advantageous for the woman to work, than for the man to work longer hours or get more remunerative work. The resultant high female work-rates have been interpreted as reflecting women's preferences for paid work over family work and for financial independence over interdependence with a spouse.

All in the crèche

To put further pressure on both parents to work, subsidised day-care became the main form of 'help' for families. The state took on, and socialised, many family responsibilities to a degree unseen outside of the Soviet bloc, not least the rearing of children in crèches (ideally)

or with minders.³⁰ To rid the world of sex roles was not only an educational endeavour, it also demanded intervention into personality development and attitudes. Given assumptions about the overwhelming role of early experience, pre-school care offered the opportunity to combat early differences in the personalities of the sexes while parents were occupied at work.³¹

Parenthood was separated from marriage, and the word 'custodian' adopted to designate the person immediately responsible for a child. These custodians are acting for the state which 'is not only the supervisor but also the agency which creates the conditions under which mothers and fathers are acting as parent'.³² An 'aspect of the integration of paid work and parenting is that in child development and education, parental work must be shared with paid professionals. The professionals do their job as paid work, which means that the rules of their working organisations and labour unions set certain limits on parental influence'.³³

While parents are expected to go to meetings at daycare centres 'to be informed about the situation and the plans for the daycare centres and the children... Parents are generally not supposed to interfere... In school there are even fewer possibilities to influence the way children are taken care of and the education they get. All in all, there is a loss of parental control over the development of the child.'³⁴

The public care system, introduced in the 1960s, covers about 50 per cent of children aged six or under (school starts at seven years of age), and about a third of under-threes are cared for in municipal nurseries or by salaried childminders. Fees at day-care centres are heavily subsidised and amount to around 10-15 per cent of the actual costs. They are determined separately in each municipality. A place in a centre cost about two thirds of the average gross wage by the mid-1980s. Lone parents have generally had priority for places, even if they do not work, at reduced rates. The proportion of children in public daycare is higher for lone- than for two-parent families. By the 1990s, almost half of children with two parents used municipal childcare compared with three-quarters of children with lone parents.

Childminders have to look after at least four children full-time, or eight to ten part-time, to get their salary. One reason so many children still go to childminders is that many municipalities only admit children needing full-time care to nurseries, since nursery places are too costly to use part-time. Another reason is the need to meet targets for daycare coverage, which has meant registering unofficial or 'black day mothers' as salaried childminders (many are women trying to finance the rearing of their own children by taking in other people's at a knock-down price). The local authority hires the mother by inserting a subsidy into the system that helps her to pay her taxes while staying at home. Unlike the nurseries, childminders only have to meet minimal standards to be approved.

There has been some conflict between local authorities and the central government over the expansion of institutional daycare, and in some municipalities by the 1990s lone mothers only had priority for places if they were employed. The availability of 'socialised' childcare has been patchy compared with both aspirations and proclamations, not least because it turned out to be the most unimaginably expensive and inefficient way to look after children. The necessary resources, not least in terms of trained personnel, were simply not there. Although daycare became the largest single item on many municipal budgets by the 1970s, and the construction and staffing of a network of care facilities proceeded apace (the number of nursery places increased ten-fold between 1970 and 1980), the timescale for national coverage of all pre-school children was continually revised.

There are objections to the removal of childcare from unemployed parents on the grounds that this violates the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is seen as discriminatory that children are denied something as fundamental to their development and freedom as childcare purely because of their parents' work status.³⁵

The benefits system

Benefits in kind, or as 'social consumption' rather than cash, allowed for social transformation through the removal of independent action and choice. Applications to deal with child poverty by paying municipal family allowances (a tradition in the Germanic and Scandinavian world) to 'unfavoured' families (i.e. those without a working mother), which might in part compensate for the daycare subsidies they had paid for but did not use, were disallowed.

A strict 'availability for work' test has been applied to the unemployed, with no allowance for lone parents or anyone's childcare responsibilities. (In Britain, there are relatively weak work tests, so a lone parent does not have to work until the youngest child is 16.) In Sweden, parenting is allowed for in the employment programme, but it is a break from a career. Work is not supposed to be fitted around a family. Instead, allowances are made for families in employment.

Public transfers are strongly income-redistributive, and many services are heavily subsidised or free of charge. Transfer and insurance schemes are usually universal. Unlike other redistributist welfare regimes, real or aspirational, policy has generally avoided means-testing, or has not focused on it. The few means-tested benefits, like the housing allowance and social benefit, have not been a big aspect of the welfare system and, unlike elsewhere, do not have so much impact on labour supply. There is a universal child allowance, with a supplement for the second child. Child allowances have largely kept pace with retail prices, adding about five per cent per child to the gross earnings of the industrial worker. In 1996 the amount was reduced. By 1997 the level of family allowance and the supplement for the second child were restored. At the time of writing the family allowance is €105 a month, with a €28 supplement for the third child, €84 for the fourth child, and €105 for each subsequent child.

However, payments in kind and, particularly, income replacement during maternity/parental leave account for more than 65 per cent of all family benefits in countries like Denmark and Sweden. Cash family benefits account for only 30 per cent of all child/family benefits, compared to well over 50 per cent in Italy and the UK.³⁶

Parental leave

Parental leave income replacement programmes were introduced in 1974. In 1989, the duration of paid leave became 60 weeks. Payment during leave was 75 per cent to 90 per cent of earnings for 48 weeks, and then a minimum guaranteed amount. The rate for the first 48 weeks fell to 85 per cent in 1995 and to 75 per cent in 1996; to return to 80 per cent in 1998. The 'eligibility interval' also expanded, so that if a woman bears the next child within this interval, she is entitled to exactly the same benefits that she received for her previous birth. The interval rose from 12 months in 1974-77 to 30 months in 1986. In the 1970s, a woman had only the right to a second period of maternity leave without returning to work if the interval between births did not exceed 12 months—although it had already lengthened with holiday and sick leaves. With the period extended to 30 months, many parents could have two or three children reasonably close together to take advantage of all the benefits and easily remain on paid leave for five years or longer.

Since after-tax income does not allow one parent to stay home with children, the economy of the family is very much dependent upon the woman having a paid job—the insurance money from parental leave is aimed at refunding the income lost from paid work, not for having children to look after.

In 1995, one month of Swedish parental leave was earmarked for the father, since mothers were using most days (90 per cent or more in 1993-96). Despite all the propaganda and various pressures, men do not usually take parental leave, and role reversal is very rare.

Men's use of parental leave is also low elsewhere: one per cent in Norway, two per cent in Denmark, three per cent in Iceland, with a maximum of 13 per cent in Finland. Most mothers prefer not to share the care of a newborn with the father.³⁷ So men are being made to 'care', like it or not. Three-quarters of mothers and fathers were opposed to compelling men to take parental leave.³⁸ The new rule made little impact. By the late 1990s, fathers were still taking only 11 per cent of leave days, and half took none at all. Most of those men who took it worked in the public sector and had wives in high-status jobs. Despite all the enthusiasm for Swedish role reversal in the UK press, it is not a reality even in Sweden, only rhetoric.³⁹ The work environment is hostile to workers in key posts or with special skills taking so much time off.

The parental leave system is used by more two-parent families than lone parents. In 1993, this was 93 per cent compared to 55 per cent. Until the child is 12 years old, parents are allowed to take time off work to stay at home when the child is ill, at the rate of 75 per cent of earnings, up to a maximum of 60 days per year.

In January 2002, the parental leave scheme was changed, to add a second daddy-month, on top of the existing allowance rather than at the expense of the mother's allowance. In January 2003, the income guarantee level was raised again. The objectives of the reform were to enhance an early and close contact between father and child; to reduce employer discrimination against fathers and mothers on parental leave; and to promote a less unequal division of household and childcare responsibilities in order to achieve less unequal labour market outcomes. It was believed that increasing daddy-months in parental leave would have the long-term effect of reducing occupational segregation and the pay gap. Evaluation studies show a slightly increased fathers' use of parental leave, although this still remains very low, at 17 per cent of all the leave available to couples—a very slow increase from seven per cent in 1987. However the biggest effect was to persuade most fathers to take at least a few days' leave, rather than none at all. Before the change, over half of all new fathers took no daddy-leave days off work. After the change, total non-use was reduced to 20 per cent. One-third of new fathers took one month off work. Surprisingly, the change had no impact at all on fathers' propensity to take time off to care for a sick child. Many fathers simply used the extra leave to top up their summer holiday and Christmas holiday allowances. Peak times for the use of daddy-leave days are in August and late December, especially as they can be taken at any time up to the child's eighth birthday.⁴⁰ Anecdotal evidence suggests that fishing trips are more popular than changing nappies. Undeterred, the government is considering whether to force fathers to take one-third of all parental leave. However, it is reluctant to push through the change, because it could be sufficiently unpopular to be a vote-loser.

Double income for lone mothers?

A problem with these arrangements is that equal pay and employment for men and women results in a living standard based on double incomes. This defeats the aim of equalising outcomes for lone- and two-parent families—since lone mothers only have one income to rely on. So the state makes a 'child maintenance advance' for lone parents, paid by the Social Insurance Office, which tries to claim a proportion of it back from the absent parent. The payment is additional and above the rate of child allowance.⁴¹ The government recovers about a third of the expenditure from fathers—something that became a matter of some debate in the 1990s. There are no such guaranteed payments in Britain, although they are an aim of the lone-parent lobby (and were proposed by the Finer Committee⁴²). In Sweden, as in Britain, mothers on public assistance do not benefit from maintenance unless the payment lifts income above the benefit line. Giving lone mothers double incomes means that couples on one wage are going to be worse off than lone parents. With two children and average earnings, a lone parent in Sweden in 1996 was 35 per cent better off than a one-earner couple

on average earnings. However, on a half of average earnings, the lone parent would have 92 per cent of the net income of the couple.

How much has it cost?

In order for the state to provide services socially that otherwise would be privately provided in the family, many ordinary, everyday personal services must be reckoned in monetary terms, tax revenues raised to finance them, and complex rules and conditions imposed to limit undesirable side effects.⁴³ In 1960, ‘real social expenditure’ in Sweden was around 16 per cent of GDP, just above average for OECD countries. In 1981, ‘real social expenditure’ accounted for almost 34 per cent of GDP, exceeded only by Belgium and the Netherlands. In the years 1975-1981, real social welfare spending increased four times as fast as the economy as a whole, and twice as fast as the OECD average in that period. Sweden’s general government outlay as a share of national output amounted to 59 per cent by 2003—a rise of nearly 28 per cent from 1960, with an estimated restrictive effect on output of 390 per cent.⁴⁴ By the late 1970s, a skilled worker on the average wage paid 50 per cent income in taxation—down to over 40 per cent in the late 1980s (34.2 per cent in 2000/2001 at an average production wage and 42.6 at twice average earnings).⁴⁵ Employers still pay around 40 per cent payroll tax for social welfare. The Swedish tax take has been overtaken by Denmark, Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands in the twenty-first century (if the employer’s social security liability is excluded).⁴⁶ In practice, only a limited portion of what is paid as tax is redistributed between different groups; the ‘greater part really goes into a whirligig which transforms our money into political power over ourselves’.⁴⁷ By 1990, the public sector accounted for 37 per cent of the labour force—more than manufacturing industry (20 per cent). Similarly, in Denmark the number of female homemakers declined by 579,000 between 1960 and 1982, as the number of employees in the public sector grew by 532,000, with most of the growth in daycare, elder care, hospitals and schools.⁴⁸

The Swedish system has been characterised as a system where the private sector maintains nominal control over its capital and labour, but the returns on the factors of production are so heavily circumscribed by regulations, directives and taxes that the state, or public sector, ends up effectively controlling them. A ‘sham form of mixed economy’, it has traditionally been associated with Fascist regimes. This kind of *gelenkte Wirtschaft* (joined up) economy is popular with politicians and bureaucrats because all sectors of society are forced to keep on good terms with the state and its functionaries if they are to remain in business. Such ‘Third Way’ economies seem to be capable of generating good growth in their early years, as GNP is boosted by the public spending component. They eventually slow down and seize up as investors become aware of the ways in which their returns are being expropriated. All the regulations and controls create inefficiencies that, in turn, lead to more controls, until a point is reached when deregulation becomes necessary if the system is to survive.⁴⁹

A perennial justification for putting all women into the labour force and into more productive work than childrearing is that this will make everyone richer: ‘To the extent that female participation remains at depressed levels due to market failures and policy distortions, (*sic*) removing these could lead to higher levels of welfare.’⁵⁰ In Sweden, between the mid-1970s to mid-1990s, disposable income increased by around 18 per cent, reckoned per consumption unit after taxes and transfers. Most of the increase is attributable to the roughly equivalent rise in employment rates among women, with rising incomes concentrated among joint households, particularly middle-aged (30-64 years) and childless households.⁵¹ But there was little growth in real incomes for full-time employees (three per cent). People have simply been made to put more labour onto the market. They expend double the effort and are disabled from cooperating to exploit any division of labour or to specialise. If Swedish

women take care of each other's children in exchange for others taking care of theirs, how much additional output can come out of this?

3. Have the Policies Worked?

Has Sweden solved the 'lone parent' problem?

In the UK, as throughout the Anglophone world, lone parents tend to rely heavily on public assistance, to be disproportionately economically inactive and to have a high proportion of their number under, at, or around the poverty threshold. It is repeatedly claimed that lone parents could be self-supporting if only they had the childcare and the jobs. Only lack of these is stopping them from working full-time, which they are supposedly desperate to do. Indeed, some have gone so far as to claim that the state could make a profit from providing childcare, which will get mothers off benefits and paying taxes instead.

Sweden has done more or less everything every good progressive says it should do to put mothers into work, abolish lone-parent poverty, rid them of dependence on the state or means-tested subsidies and ensure equal outcomes for different 'family forms'. It allows us to test the hypothesis that it is marriage and children that make women poor. In this view, lone parents are not at risk of poverty because one person has all the parental functions. Instead, it is the family and its division of labour that are the main cause of the high poverty among lone mothers. Their plight mirrors and concentrates women's difficulties as an economically disadvantaged group compared with husbands and fathers. Society could easily arrange to pass babies onto a child-rearing agency. This would get rid of women's caring penalty (that is, all the money lost while looking after others), and enable them to accumulate greater income for themselves.⁵²

So has the Swedish model lived up to expectations?

The growth in poverty

Compared with their position elsewhere, Swedish policy on lone parents is a success, since their poverty rate is low. In 1982-87, there was no significant difference between lone and couple-mothers in the prevalence of poverty. At this time, 23 per cent of children in lone-parent families lived in homes with below 40 per cent of the adjusted median income. This drops to two per cent when post-tax and transfer incomes are compared. For children in two-parent families this is 1.5 per cent. In the USA, at the same time, 54 per cent of children with lone parents experienced both low post-tax and transfer incomes.

In Sweden and Norway, lone-parent families had 85 per cent of the adjusted (equivalised) disposable income of members of two-parent families in 1995. In Germany, France and the UK it was between 65 and 76 per cent, and below 60 per cent in Australia, Canada and the US. The difference was due to the universal child allowance, an advanced maintenance benefit, subsidised childcare and parental leave insurance. A strong contributory factor for lone parents' low incomes in other countries is that means-tested benefits serve as negative incentives for employment, or (for those in employment) for moving from part-time to full-time work, or otherwise increasing earnings.

However, a large number of Swedish lone mothers have incomes only slightly above the poverty line. In the 1990s, Sweden saw a rise in poverty rates for lone mothers from four to ten per cent. Poverty has increased for both lone and couple-mothers, but from 1988-91 and up to 1995, lone mothers were more likely to be poor than couple-mothers, their situation having deteriorated after the late 1980s, both relatively and absolutely.

On the one hand, equivalent disposable income in the early 1990s developed more unfavourably for couples, compared with lone parents, since transfer payments cushioned the decrease in market income more for lone than couple-families. However, the mid-1990s

saw general cuts in the benefit system, with rising costs for housing, childcare, health and social insurance. This affects those who are net receivers of transfers, principally lone mothers, even if they are still better protected by the benefits system.

On all indicators of economic security, the percentage of children living with lone parents who experienced insecurity was roughly double that of children with two parents in 1995. Various groups were analysed in a report from the National Board of Welfare⁵³ on the situation of vulnerable groups in relation to having three or more problems concerning housework, employment or earning a living. Among lone mothers aged 25-64, 27 per cent had three or more problems compared with ten per cent for the whole population. Among lone mothers aged 25-34, 36 per cent had three or more problems, rising to 51 per cent when they lived in big cities. Families generally had more economic problems. Overall, 28 per cent of all children aged 0-15, compared with 17 per cent of the population as a whole, lived in families which had difficulty in meeting expenses for food, housing and other basic requirements during the year preceding the interview.⁵⁴

While there was some recovery by the end of the century, poverty rates for lone mothers without work were still 34.2 per cent in 2000, and 5.6 per cent for those working. For two-parent families, the rates were 13.7 per cent where there was no worker, and 1.6 per cent where there were two—but a higher rate of 8.2 per cent where there was one worker.⁵⁵ This testifies to both the precarious position of lone parents in the labour market, and the lack of support for one-wage, two-parent families, compared with the big subsidies going to lone working parents.

Declining employment

In 1979, Swedish lone mothers were more likely than couple-mothers to be employed: 83.5 and 79.3 per cent respectively. In the mid-1980s, employment was 85 per cent for both groups. Reversal happened in the 1990s. In 1994, the participation of lone mothers in the labour market was 70 per cent and for married and cohabiting women it was 79 per cent. Similarly in Britain, the proportion of lone mothers who were employed declined to 42 per cent compared with 65 per cent of couple-mothers in 1992-5. Long-term unemployment increased for both lone and couple-mothers, but rates of unemployment increased among lone mothers from 4.8 in 1979 to 11.9 in 1992-5. Lone mothers have a three-times higher risk of unemployment than couple-mothers.⁵⁶ The proportion economically inactive was also higher in lone than couple-mothers; peaking in 1992-5 with 8.3 of lone mothers and 3.6 of couple-mothers. Between 1990-95, the proportion of children living with two gainfully employed parents, married or cohabiting, decreased from 84 to 67 per cent. The proportion of children living with a lone mother who was employed declined from 72 to 58 per cent between 1985 and 1995, and with a full-time employed lone mother from 36 to 31 per cent.

Lone mothers are part of a trend whereby the proportion of people finding themselves outside the labour market increased over the 1980s and 1990s, despite a shortage of manpower. The risk of unemployment falls with rising education and lone mothers have poorer educational levels compared with married mothers. However, even with the same educational attainment, the 'risk' of unemployment is double for lone mothers. Lone mothers may have a weaker bargaining position in the labour market,⁵⁷ and face more discrimination, even in Sweden. They consider themselves to have less secure jobs than married mothers, and report less understanding attitudes towards their parenting role if, for example, they have to stay at home with a sick child. Sympathetic employment in the private sector is precarious, and the limits to public sector employment have been reached.

An egalitarian wage structure and taxes, rather than the welfare state's negative effects on work, savings and investment via means-tested benefits (as in the UK, Australia and New Zealand), undermine Swedish women's incentives to work more hours, or to upgrade and

invest in skills. Scandinavian public employment offers good pay and security, but imposes a growing tax burden. With high rates of productivity growth the system can be sustained; when productivity or private investment is sluggish, severe cost problems emerge. Sweden in the mid-80s faced declining fiscal capacity combined with rising pressures on public job creation and/or income maintenance. Wage differentials have since grown, and adjustments to benefit entitlements have aimed to reduce disincentives and high absenteeism. Replacement rates for sickness, parental leave and unemployment benefits have been trimmed, and the second tier pension system overhauled. Pension contribution years have been extended and benefits are now more tightly related to contributions.

The fiction of self-sufficiency

Tendencies to decreasing workforce participation levels, decreasing disposable income, and vulnerability to poverty as well as welfare dependency, suggest that the position of lone parents is precarious in Sweden, as elsewhere, and raise questions about the capacity of Swedish policies concerning lone parents to make them self-supporting, if not affluent.

Making lone parents 'self sufficient', let alone economically equal to couples, means that their incomes are maintained with immense subsidies from the state. Couples are positive or net contributors to the public purse; lone parents are massive recipients of transfers. Transfers ensure that the adjusted income for lone mothers is approximately 85-87 per cent of the corresponding income for intact two-parent families. If no income redistribution occurred it would be 55 per cent, given the same labour market participation. All in all, adjusted disposable income is higher than the factor income for lone mothers, and substantially lower for intact families with children (who are making the big transfer to lone mothers). By 1985, public transfers of different kinds accounted for 40 per cent of the overall net income of lone mothers, compared with eight per cent for families with two earners. Even so, transfers only covered two-thirds of the gap between divorced mothers and intact families. By 1993, in more difficult times, lone-parent families received 55 per cent of their gross income from the market, and 45 per cent as transfer payments. The proportions for couples with children were 79 per cent and 21 per cent respectively.

Dependence on transfers makes lone parents vulnerable to cuts in programmes. The recession during the early 1990s resulted in frozen or reduced levels of state benefits, and a stricter policy towards social welfare assistance. As workers, lone parents are one of the first groups to be affected by adverse macroeconomic developments, even if they have low levels of poverty in Sweden compared with other countries. The decline in their fortunes was detectable by the end of the 1980s as their position in the labour market deteriorated, and they faced decreasing real wages and rising childcare costs, as childcare institutions were forced to reduce staff and raise costs. This has had a knock-on effect, since universal benefits, for sickness, unemployment, etc., are based on labour market performance.

Growing welfare dependency

The proportion of households that are dependent on social assistance, whether at any time or for long periods, has grown, particularly for lone mothers.⁵⁸ Over time, they are six times more likely to receive social welfare and twice as likely to get unemployment benefits. In 1970, 25 per cent of lone mothers received social assistance, and by 1995, this was more than every third lone mother, compared to around five per cent of couple-mothers. As such, 70 per cent of lone mothers received means-tested allowances or transfers of some sort, like housing assistance, compared with 22 per cent of couple households. While means testing in Sweden has been comparatively limited compared to the UK, the proportion of lone mothers receiving a housing allowance was 81 per cent in 1993, compared to 20 per cent of couples with children. High participation in the housing benefit system means that a lone mother

considering increasing her labour supply faces reduced housing benefits, with composite marginal tax rates reaching 90 per cent.

As elsewhere, lone mothers, along with immigrants, are far more likely to be long-term welfare recipients. During the period 1983-1992, nearly 14 per cent of lone mothers received social assistance for three out of ten years, compared to just over five per cent of couple-mothers. The picture was worse for lone fathers, at 19 per cent.⁵⁹ All in all:

...data... indicate that the 'feminisation of poverty' is now emerging as a phenomenon in Sweden as it has in many other countries. Low-paid jobs are a part of this picture, as is the increased precariousness of lone mothers' attachment to the labour market and discrimination against them—particularly when they have small children.⁶⁰

The growth of welfare dependency is part of a pattern of growing drop-out from the labour market and increasing housing segregation, where the dream towns of the urban planners have become, as elsewhere, sinks of disadvantage. The pattern was spreading in the 1980s, a time of high overall employment and economic growth, and was decisively reinforced by the recession of the early 1990s. Between 1988 and 1997, employment among young people aged 16-34 fell off by about 400,000; only a minority of this was due to educational expansion. In 'disadvantaged' districts, or areas where low-income earners are at least ten times as numerous as high-income earners, nearly one-third of all households with children in 1990 were lone-parent families, compared with one-tenth in areas of high income. In some districts, nearly half of the children and young people were recipients of social allowance.

Given the persistence, and even growth, of problems, despite the assumption that all family forms are equal, or made so by progressive policies: "The national discourse on lone mothers in Sweden could be interpreted as moving from an emphasis on lone mothers as part of a lifestyle change, towards lone mothers as a social problem. Lone mothers are increasingly portrayed as one of the groups that have fared less well than others during the restructuring of the economy in Sweden since the 1980s."⁶¹

By the 1980s, claimants for social assistance also included a high proportion of single, young and often childless people, a situation now emerging in the UK. Sweden has one of the biggest unemployment gaps between the majority population and non-European immigrants of all industrialised nations. At seven per cent, the poverty rate among non-elderly households without children was higher in Sweden than in the UK. The reasons lie in alcohol/drug abuse, and mental or physical illness, plus refugees from outside the Nordic area and assorted drop-outs who do not fulfil the criteria for mainstream benefits and who cannot, or do not want to, work. Single men without children make up about a third of Sweden's welfare caseload.

There has been some reduction in welfare dependency since the late 1990s, and in 2001 a target for 'social justice' was set substantially to reduce the numbers whose income is lower than basic subsistence, halve the sick leave rate by 2008, and cut dependence on social assistance by a half by 2004—an ambitious programme involving a reduction on the level of 1990.⁶²

Divorce is disadvantageous—even in Sweden

Divorce still disadvantages Swedish women. They earn less than men, and, given economies of scale, the division of the household into two implies that an increase in total income is necessary to maintain former living standards. If there had been no welfare benefits or other programmes, the income of divorced women would have been only two-thirds that of individuals in intact families in 1990. After divorce, men contribute less to supporting their children and former spouse.⁶³ The situation of Swedish women without children is even worse after divorce than it is for mothers since they do not qualify for the income transfers.

As much as lone parenthood is still disadvantageous in Sweden, so marriage remains advantageous. In all countries, from Japan to the USA, married couples see income and wealth grow over time, compared to lone adult families and households. Analysis of the *Swedish Level of Living Survey*, from 1981 to 1991, showed how divorced women with children had significantly poorer income growth than intact couples. Couples improved their adjusted median income by 24 per cent whereas the lone mothers increased theirs by four per cent. All the fiscal manipulation cannot compensate for the ways that value is added and well-being increased within families by co-operation, a division of labour, specialisation and economies of scale. Dividing up households will always have a negative effect on living standards,⁶⁴ even when governments strip marriage of all fiscal support. Larger households have higher living standards. This benefits everyone, as can be seen with international comparisons. In Southern Europe, the situation of young people is favourable compared to age-peers in the North, since they share in the parents' living standards by remaining in the parental home until relatively late in life. Elderly people on small incomes also have a higher material standard since they are more likely to share with adult children.

Insofar as couples pool their resources, a divorce or separation by necessity implies a decline in economic circumstances, particularly for the partner who contributes the smaller share of income. Moreover, a divorce will affect the economic circumstances of both parties due to a loss of economies of scale and social capital. Even in Sweden, lone parents have more problems reconciling work with family responsibilities (34 per cent compared to 25 per cent of married mothers), presumably because, despite all the childcare, they have no help at home.⁶⁵ While much is made of the importance of paternal leave from work to care for children where there are couples, the implications of the loss of help at home for lone parents appears to be completely ignored. And, while Sweden is supposed to be a model of co-operative parenting, whether or not the parents are married, more than 50 per cent of lone mothers complain that the fathers take little responsibility for their children.⁶⁶

In recent cohorts, the socio-economic and educational differences between married and divorced households owe much to downward mobility. Disruption is associated with declining housing standards as well as income loss. Most lone mothers rent their homes, while 80 per cent of 'partnered' women own theirs. Downward mobility effects are also an explanation for the socio-economic differences between households with an unmarried couple and those where two previously cohabiting adults have separated. High numbers of people living alone also mean high levels of low-income households, or over 30 per cent of working-age, one-person households in 2001.⁶⁷

Men as well?

For men, the negative effects on income from the loss of the partner are cancelled out by the positive effects of not living with children and having responsibility for them. However, income growth for a large minority of divorced men is relatively poor. In one large-scale study, half of the divorced men had a rise in income comparable to that of other men, but a quarter had a real factor income in 1990 that was two-thirds or less of what it had been ten years before. Some men had income drops from high levels, but others worked less or not at all; most of these were under 55. This points to the same loss or absence of the work ethic seen for single, separated and divorced men elsewhere.

Everywhere, male cohabitants with children have rates of economic inactivity and attainment that resemble those of single and divorced men and, again, Sweden is no exception. Analysis based on data collected by the *Swedish Commission on Educational Inequality*⁶⁸ shows non-married two-parent households to have markedly lower occupational and educational attainment compared to married parents. This is only partly because cohabiting couples are, on average, younger than married parents.

Less well-being

The 1990s saw a marked deterioration in mental health for all age groups before retirement, with almost twice as many women sufferers as men. Young people, especially young women, saw the biggest decline. Sick leave rates have generally increased for all illness, but the increase is most marked for mental illness. There is a fourfold higher risk of divorced men acquiring a psychiatric record, compared to comparable married men and two-and-a-half times the risk for divorced women.⁶⁹ On every mental health indicator, lone mothers report negatives more frequently than couple- or married mothers, and make more suicide attempts.⁷⁰ As many as a quarter of Swedish lone mothers say that they have feelings of inadequacy and are often tired. This is surprising, considering that the lone mother sample was skewed towards younger mothers, compared to the married sample.⁷¹

There is little evidence that divorcees are selected out of marriage by having a permanently lower psychological well-being, or that this accounts for more than a small amount of the increased risk.⁷² In turn, decreased well-being was only partly explained by economic circumstances, time allocation, frequency of contact with friends or relatives and access to social support; something seen in other studies.⁷³ Research from elsewhere suggests that the adverse psychological effects increase over time more for men than for women following a divorce.⁷⁴

The physical health of lone mothers is poor in Sweden as well as in Britain, and the size of the gap with couple- mothers is similar in both countries (using a comparative analysis of 17 years of the *British General Household Survey* and the *Swedish Survey of Living Conditions*).⁷⁵ For lone mothers, poor health runs at nearly double the rate for couple-mothers, and rates of limiting long-standing illness are between 50 per cent and 60 per cent higher.⁷⁶ The prevalence of less than good health increases over time among poor lone mothers, while rates decline slightly for poor couple-mothers, widening the health gap between the two, and suggesting factors buffering the effects for poor couple-mothers. Among lone and couple-mothers who were not poor, there was no change. Lone mothers who were not poor had a significantly higher rate of limiting long-standing illness than non-poor couple-mothers. Poor health was also significantly higher among employed lone mothers than among employed couple-mothers, with prevalence among lone mothers increasing over time.

Differentials in mortality as well as in health for married and unmarried people are observed in Sweden as elsewhere, despite all the attempts to engineer equal outcomes. Single Swedish men and women are at a higher risk of dying, largely due to heart and circulatory disease, than the married.⁷⁷ Whilst smoking and alcohol abuse are more prevalent amongst divorced men, even non-smoking and non-alcoholic divorced men still have twice the mortality rate of married men.⁷⁸ On the assumption that the poor socioeconomic status of lone mothers contributes to higher mortality, as well as health selection factors, one study analysed the mortality of 90,111 lone mothers compared to 622,365 'partnered' women.⁷⁹ The differences were only reduced by the controls, and increased with the length of lone parenthood. In particular, couple-women had the smallest risk of dying from suicide, assault, homicide, or alcohol-related causes, while mothers without a 'partner' had almost a four-fold risk of committing suicide and a five-fold risk of being a victim of violence or dying from alcohol-related causes. Cases of assaults on women have risen with a general rise in violent crime. Lone mothers are the most vulnerable to threats and violence, particularly where they have other welfare and health-related problems.⁸⁰

Since Swedish policies support parents who work, and work full-time, it is claimed that any 'additional social and economic pressures lone mothers may have because they are the sole breadwinner and carer for the family, can become hidden or made invisible'.⁸¹ Contrary to the continual reiteration in the UK of the mantra that lone parents problems will be solved if they all went to work, observers of the Swedish situation suggest that lone mothers should be given the chance to work less—which must imply more welfare dependency.

Children of lone parents in Sweden

Since there are a sufficiently large number of one-parent families to provide reliable comparisons on outcomes, studies of the life-chances for children in one-parent and two-parent families are relatively easy in Sweden. They can help answer the question as to whether goals of equal life-chances for children in one-parent and two-parent families have resulted in equal outcomes. It is confidently asserted that 'Swedish evidence suggests that if there is any difference between the children of lone mothers and those in couple-families with the same social and economic circumstances, it is that the former are more mature and self sufficient'.⁸²

So Swedish lone-parent children have *superior* outcomes? Assessments of overall and all-cause mortality between 1991 and 1998 of a million Swedish children showed that those of lone parents had a higher risk of death than those with two parents, which was most pronounced for those aged 13-17.⁸³ The risk was more than 50 per cent greater for boys with lone parents than for boys with two parents. Boys of lone parents were more than five times more likely to die from drug or alcohol abuse, more than three times as likely to die from a fall or poisoning, and more than four times as likely to die from violence. While the overall death rate for girls of lone parents did not differ much from that of girls with two parents, girls with one parent were more than twice as likely to commit suicide, and more than three times as likely to die from drugs or alcohol abuse, than girls with two parents. Furthermore, contrary to myths spread by child-protection lobbyists in the UK, Sweden does not have Europe's lowest number of deaths from child abuse as a result of being the first country in the world to ban smacking. Figures from Unicef show that deaths from child maltreatment during a five-year period in the 1990s occurred at an annual rate of 0.5 or 0.6 children per 100,000 aged under 15 in Sweden, compared with 0.4 or 0.9 in the UK, depending on whether or not unconfirmed cases were included.⁸⁴ The countries with the lowest child maltreatment death rates are mainly Catholic and traditional countries like Greece, Italy, Spain and Ireland, that have had low rates of both lone parenthood and government supervision of families. Smacking has not been criminalised in any of these countries.⁸⁵ Sweden saw a 489 per cent increase in physical child abuse cases classified as criminal assaults from 1981-1994, and a fivefold increase in child-on-child criminal assaults between 1984 and 1994.⁸⁶

Mediators (intermediate paths through which lone parenthood might affect children's health and well-being, like welfare receipt, renting or owning a house, number of children), and confounders (factors which might independently affect outcomes, like the age of parents and children, country of birth, place of residence, socioeconomic status, psychiatric disease and addiction of parents), reduced the connections by less than half. It seems that family structure has about the same importance as socio-economic affiliation as a predictor.

As well as increased mortality, children of lone parents also had more than double the risk of psychiatric disorder, suicide attempts and injury, and more than three times the risk of addictions.⁸⁷ Just as they had higher risks than girls from all-cause mortality, boys with lone parents also had higher risks than girls for psychiatric disease and drug-related problems.

According to the Swedish Commission on Educational Inequality (which studied 120,000 students between 1988 and 1992), children who had been through family dissolution showed lower educational attainment at 16 than those in stable two-parent families. The children of lone parents did better than those living with two unmarried adults, and the children of widow(er)s better than those of divorced parents.⁸⁸ Indeed, children's attainment is markedly lower in reconstituted families consisting of non-married adults than in lone-parent families. It seems that children of divorced parents, or those with reconstituted families and those whose parents are cohabiting, are less likely to continue schooling after the compulsory level, and even if they do, are less likely to continue to the upper secondary level than are children whose parents are married. Children whose parents are married are more likely to choose an

upper secondary education than are other children, so this is attained by 38 per cent of children of married parents born into the unskilled manual working class, but only 31 per cent of those with single parents. All this is likely to impact on socio-economic circumstances in later life.

As elsewhere, leaving school early predisposes youngsters to form early 'partnerships' and early parenthood. In turn, these are associated with an increased risk of later separation or divorce, as part of intergenerational patterns of family fragmentation.⁸⁹ Women who experience the separation of their parents are more likely to cohabit than those who have not—even given Sweden's high rate of cohabitation. The proportion of women aged 20-39 who have ever cohabited is 61 per cent for those whose parents had divorced, compared to 50 per cent for those whose parents remained married.⁹⁰ In turn, Swedish women who leave home early have—throughout childhood and adolescence—more strained family relations, poorer adjustment, higher rates of school problems, lower educational aspirations, more drinking and drug taking, earlier sexual activity, and more sexual partners, than their peers who leave home later. It is not so much that early home-leaving disrupts educational plans, but that low educational aspirations are part of a pattern set in motion long before leaving home.⁹¹ The greater tendency to leave school early for children of lone-parent, cohabiting and 'reconstituted' families is related to poorer performance in school as well as to educational decisions at given levels of performance.

Income explains very little of these family type variations in Sweden, where income differences and dispersion are anyway smaller than in, for example, the US. Cohabiting parents and reconstituted families are also characterised by lower social and educational attainment, even if their disposable income per household unit is similar to that of married couples. Downward social mobility, through losing the parent with the highest education and class position, explains more of the differences for lone-parent children. When educational and occupational attainment is low for custodial mothers but high for absent fathers, children are most negatively affected by a separation. However, after controlling for these conditions and also housing characteristics and number of siblings, there still remains a statistically significant difference between children with married parents and those in other family types. Especially for early school-leaving, there is a substantial net effect of family dissolution. It replicates the results of an investigation of early home-leaving in America (based on the 1988 *National Survey of Families and Households*), which showed how children in non-intact families seek early independence and are less likely to attend higher education, irrespective of the parents' economic status.⁹²

Longitudinal studies also indicate that staying with a continuously lone parent is more beneficial to the child's schooling than the parent's remarriage, given the lower attainment in step- compared to lone-parent families. Conversely, the departure of a step-parent has a positive effect on educational attainment. A new adult may not only mean more disruption, but the quality of parenting may be lower in step-families compared to families with two biological parents, or even one parent. Children involved in family reconstitution may have to take second place to children born to their own parent and step-parent or be displaced by their step-parents' own children.⁹³ In UK and US cohort research, many step-parents show little or no interest in children's progress, want the children to leave school at the earliest possible opportunity, and have the lowest aspirations for employment. Moreover, 're-partnered' mothers may be comparatively uninterested in their children, especially where they have sons, being less involved and sharing fewer activities, with their time and allegiance monopolised by the new husband or boyfriend.⁹⁴ This difference in investment probably explains the way that offspring of mothers who remarried had lower educational achievement (by over one year) than those whose mothers did not remarry in the *US Study of Marital Instability over the Life Course*.⁹⁵

Long-term effects

Indications are that Swedish individuals who experience family disruption, hardship or dissension in childhood have poorer outcomes in terms of illness and mortality. Those whose family backgrounds were characterised by severe conflict go on to have the lowest well-being as adults in terms of mortality and mental and physical illness. After controlling for the effect of socio-economic and other variables and other types of childhood problems, their relative mortality was 52 per cent higher.⁹⁶

These results for Sweden are consistent with research on other western countries. For example, in one US study parental divorce took an average of four years off the life expectancy of adult children whose parents divorced before they were 21.⁹⁷ A longitudinal study that tracked a white, middle-class, high IQ sample, found a significantly higher mortality rate among those whose parents divorced. Forty-year-olds from divorced homes were three times as likely to die from all causes as 40-year-olds whose parents had stayed married.⁹⁸ Another study found that the mortality difference was enhanced when the divorce took place before the child's fourth birthday.⁹⁹

Intergenerational effects are not only present in the propensity for women who experienced the separation of their parents to have more casual and disrupted relationships in later life, but greater dependency on means-related benefits. The 1992/3 *Swedish Family Survey* showed that 30 per cent of women who grew up with a lone parent received social assistance at least once during the period 1983-1992, compared with 15 per cent of women who grew up with two parents.¹⁰⁰ Rates are even higher for men who grew up with a lone parent at nearly 40 per cent. Unemployment benefit receipt shows a similar, but smaller, differentiation by family background. This is not explainable in terms of earning capacity. The finances of those growing up with lone parents are, like their private lives, more fragmented.

Equality for women?

Sweden's pro-natalist policies have always been presented in a 'gender equality' gift-wrapping. So it is appropriate to assess the success of these policies by their impact on women's position in society and the labour force.

As the proportion of working women with school-age children rose, an estimated 85 per cent of mothers of under-sevens were in the workforce by 1984. Sweden had become the leader of the Western world for women's work outside the home. Or had it? What Sweden had was a high percentage of women working part-time or only nominally in the workforce. By 1981, 46 per cent of women employees worked part-time. Whereas earlier it was chiefly older women who worked part-time, most of the increase under the equality programme was among women aged 25-35. The average number of hours worked by all women actually dropped. This was accounted for by mothers taking on part-time work after the birth of a child, instead of giving up work as they used to, and then remaining in part-time work when a second child was born.

Their jobs were often poorly paid and irregular. The increase over time of Swedish women in better paid and higher status employment, as elsewhere in the twentieth century, was largely a function of the absence of dependent children, either throughout, or at both ends of the working life. It is misconceived to imagine that childcare, or the transfer of domestic tasks to the market, or collective sector, could ever put mothers on an equal footing with childless women or men.

Until parental leave enabled women to stay at home for long periods, another unintended effect was the increase in the number of women who relinquished motherhood entirely. As in the old Soviet societies, the necessity for two wage-earners simply pushed down family size. A half of Swedish families had one child; the average woman had only 1.63 children in 1983,

and about 25 per cent of pregnancies were aborted. Yet, a family of two was favoured by a majority of women of all ages, with one child preferred by only ten per cent, and 25 per cent desiring three or more children.¹⁰¹ It would seem that women made the best compromise they could between the minimum amount of paid employment consonant with maintaining a reasonable living standard, and the number of children they could care for while balancing a job with running a home. This both restricted mothers' job opportunities while they had young children, and their ultimate family size.

Sweden has a more gender-segregated workforce than the USA, the UK and Germany. Indeed, it is more gender-segregated than Asian countries like China, Hong Kong and India. Only the Islamic Middle East and Africa, and certain developing countries, have similar or higher levels of occupational segregation.¹⁰² The expansion of welfare occupations has resulted in women being increasingly concentrated in clerical and welfare work. By 1985, women accounted for 87 per cent of total health/education/ welfare employment. Women in Sweden have not been employed as substitutes for male workers in industry and commerce, but have been the beneficiaries of the expansion of welfare services from the 1960s. Out went unpaid domestic work and in came the state as provider *and* employer. Sex equality legislation, positive discrimination and trade union pressure may have improved women's wages and salaries compared with men's, but this has had little effect on vertical and horizontal segregation. The high social costs, absenteeism and disruptions to production that are connected with women's employment lead private employers to prefer men. Swedish experience demonstrates how 'policies that push all women into employment, irrespective of preferences, are incompatible with sex equality in the workforce'.¹⁰³ Social scientists are slowly beginning to admit that Swedish pro-natalist 'gender equality' policies necessarily produce high levels of sex segregation in the labour market and a large pay gap.¹⁰⁴ Even *Swedish* social scientists are beginning to admit that family-friendly social policies are incompatible with policies to achieve gender equality in the labour market, and that Sweden has a larger glass-ceiling problem than the USA, where family-friendly policies are almost non-existent.¹⁰⁵

The decline in the family as an economic unit has meant that the extended public sector has taken over many of the tasks that were previously carried out unpaid by women in the home, such as care of children and the elderly. As this opened up 'gainful' employment for more women, the same expansion of the public sector also increased the demand for labour. Not least, the expansion of public childcare has created jobs for a large number of (mainly female) child-minders and pre-school teachers. Sustained full employment, especially women's full employment, has had to rely on public sector jobs in Scandinavia, with manufacturing employment in decline. Until the mid-1980s, when its expansion came to a halt, this sector accounted for roughly 80 per cent of job growth in Denmark and Sweden. While there are small wage differences between men and women in the same occupation and industry, after controlling for education, experience, etc., men still earned more than women in the 1990s. Most important, men still earned two-thirds to three-quarters of family income. The overall pay gap in Sweden (and all Nordic countries) is much the same as in other societies.¹⁰⁶ The work histories and work patterns of men and women in Sweden differ qualitatively, even if women spend more time in market work than those in some other European countries. Men tend to dominate in positions of responsibility and authority, especially in the private sector which, unlike the public sector, is not so bound by positive discrimination.

Catherine Hakim condemns as a 'practical impossibility' the notion that 'egalitarian and family-friendly policies can eliminate the conflict between two such different, time-consuming, and demanding activities' as family and career, 'so that people who do take time out for family work are "not disadvantaged" in their careers compared with those who do not take time out for a family break'.¹⁰⁷

For most women, their jobs are not so central to them as they are for men, and they do not have a one-track life. In turn, the alternative of economic dependence with a focus on family work hardly appeals to more than a small minority of men. Most women are secondary earners whose needs and interests differ from those of primary earners.

If sexual differentiation in the labour market persists after Sweden's years of commitment to egalitarian policies, what chance of equal outcomes elsewhere?

The Potemkin workforce

Much of Swedish employment has been paper employment, with very high absenteeism. The extent of paid leave for sickness, holidays, parenting, etc., means that women take two to three times as much paid time off than men. Such 'paid absenteeism' means that, on any given day, 20 per cent of female workers are off on some kind of paid leave, or 30 per cent in the public sector. For mothers of children under three, the proportion was 48 per cent, four times the national average for all workers in 1990. A 'very large share of what is normally regarded as labour time is in fact "welfare time"'.¹⁰⁸ The levels of sickness amongst both men and women are far higher than in other countries, reflecting generous sick pay schemes. In 1990, employers became responsible for the first two weeks of sickness to cut down abuse of the scheme.

Not that it was the employers' fault. Indeed, in the spring of 1980, Goteborg's Volvo plant decided to solve the problem of high labour costs, absenteeism, and 'blue-collar blues' not by redesigning jobs (as Volvo did in the 1970s), but rather by becoming the European leader in the introduction of industrial robots.¹⁰⁹

It did not do much good. By 2005, the rate of sick leave had again almost doubled since the late 1990s. On an average day, nearly a fifth of Sweden's potential workforce was either off sick or on disability benefits. Surging absenteeism provoked sterner calls from international bodies like the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the International Monetary Fund to do something to improve the labour market by reining in out-of-work benefits, parental leave and payments for study and sabbatical leaves, as well as improving conditions for small businesses faced with tax rates twice as high as the EU average.¹¹⁰

Super kids?

High levels of sickness may also be a consequence of daycare. In the former East Germany and other socialist countries, children had higher sickness rates due to contagion in state nurseries. Mothers have to take time off work to care for them at home, or because they themselves have been infected by their child. It was calculated that, in Hungary, mothers with young children spent up to 50 per cent of their annual work time at home on maternity or sick-leave (30-40 per cent on child sick-leave alone). The cost of homecare allowances for mothers proved to be one-third of the cost of providing 'socialised' childcare.¹¹¹

In the 1980s in Sweden, daycare for children under 18 months was effectively abandoned and considerably run down for the under-threes (with some municipalities offering no nursery places for children in this age group), due to the immense costs of looking after babies properly, and reports of adverse outcomes. Paying mothers to care for their children at home on 'leave' also maintains the fiction that these women are in continuous employment. In some accounts, the babies of mothers on parental leave are included in public care statistics.

It is not sufficiently appreciated by those who eulogise about Swedish childcare that there are few places available for very young children. In general, standards have been high in Swedish childcare, compared to the situation in the US and UK. Child nurses have two years of special training and pre-school teachers an extra two-and-a-half years of training after

leaving college. There have usually been 12 children in the younger age groups (up to two-and-a-half-years) and 15-16 in the older groups of three- to seven-year-olds, and with four staff. Where problems have been suggested, there has been a tactical retreat. Since Sweden generally provides closely controlled care of a similar quality, this may have diminished its impact on child development, so that it generally has very little or no effect over and above that of the child's social class and family background.¹¹² Moreover, Sweden has not produced super children as a result of day care. As elsewhere, there are suggestions that it is only children of less educated parents who show any benefit from day care and that children of highly educated parents are more competent when they stay at home in the early years.

The big rise in the birth rate in the late 1980s was used to illustrate the benefits of putting mothers into the workforce,¹¹³ when it owes more to their opportunities to withdraw from it and look after their own children at home. This pattern is familiar: births rise as male incomes or women's unearned income rises. The reduction in the mother's opportunity costs from paid leave raises the value of her time at home, instead of this appearing 'wasteful', and also increases the status of having children. With role conflict reduced to manageable levels, the birth rate ascends.

Reducing full-time hours to part-time hours, or six hours a day for parents, also helps keep record numbers of employees working full-time, even if it is a ghost labour force. Swedish accounts of their triumphant system are reminiscent of Soviet propaganda, with the low birth rates of the 1960s and 1970s attributed to the way that women felt like 'pioneers in the labour market'.¹¹⁴

The 'collective house', or the domestic equivalent of the day nursery, was an unmitigated failure—apart from a few radicals, people simply did not want to live in them. Tried from the 1930s onwards, they floundered on high costs and low demand, and the last ones shut down in the late 1970s.

An end of gender?

Do women put their jobs first, as planned? Not really. Swedish women generally consider that any lack of balance between work and family works to the detriment of the family, not the job. Earning money is given as the most important reason for work by 70 per cent of women.¹¹⁵ The majority of parents do not use parental leave to finance part-time work, but to take a complete break. Married mothers with pre-school children tend to have higher rates of short part-time work, but long part-time (20-24 hours per week) is more prevalent among married than lone mothers. This is often the minimum time that day nurseries will take children.

Household work is strongly divided by gender. Women continue to perform the larger part of unpaid household duties. This is decried by state functionaries, although when both paid and unpaid work are taken into consideration, men and women work roughly the same number of hours (as is also the case in Britain).

Despite the widely publicised 'working parties' to study and engineer men's role change, and the ways in which changes in family law are explicitly designed to force couples to share breadwinning, housework and childcare, men's parental leave-taking has been minimal—unless compelled. Sharing leave is inconvenient, since both parties have to keep leaving and returning to the workforce. Surveys of new parents showed that most Swedish mothers did not want to share the care of babies with the father.¹¹⁶ Leave-taking is often interpreted by employers and colleagues as signifying low commitment to the job. Couples feel more secure developing one principal occupation (even if, alone, it does not provide enough to live on), than having two insubstantial jobs. The higher the father's income, the less leave he takes, while men with women who earn more, both absolutely and relatively, are less likely to take leave.¹¹⁷ Investigations to find out which factors had the strongest independent effects on preferences reveal the overwhelming importance of attitudes. Three-quarters of fathers and

two-thirds of mothers still believed in the 1980s than men should be the principal breadwinners, and almost equally they believe that success at work is more important for men.

This is despite continual exposure to 'unconventional' role models, educational efforts to 'restructure sex models', aptitudes and preferences, and the removal of any suggestions of conventional male or female concerns. As in China, moral exhortation has been a primary tool of social engineering in Sweden.¹¹⁸ However the change in the tax law is regarded as the reform that has done the most to 'promote equality between the sexes' by changing behaviour, if not attitudes.¹¹⁹ Women went to work because they had to, were forced to, and would not have done so had they had any choice. However, the touching faith in the ability to re-design people has had tremendous tenacity. One commentator tells us to:

...imagine that if an equal division of the parental leave were to be written into the parental insurance law as a condition of eligibility, it could lead to a society of men whose energies were divided between their jobs and their children, and of women who identified with their work outside the home instead of concentrating on keeping their men in shape and preparing their children for the workforce.¹²⁰

One view blames the successful incorporation of social feminism into mainstream politics for holding back the development of a more critical (read Marxist) and radical (read lesbian separatist) feminist movement. Because policy was never radical enough, complete androgyny, with all children in daycare and women in equal numbers with men in all occupations, at all times of life, has not been achieved. This is not to do with the fact that women may not want it, but because they were 'devoured by equality under the terms of a male value system...'¹²¹ Because everything was done to ensure equal outcomes, women were oppressed. The Scandinavian state is just a 'tutelary state' for women. Women remain in a secondary capacity, because men have craftily consolidated their power by taking all the senior positions in the public sector as well as dominating the private sector.

Inequalities

The income differences between generations are large, and have increased substantially in the last 20 years. The increase in poverty in the 1990s affected families with children, especially those with lone parents, numerous children, and families with young children. Couples without children, especially at older ages, were unaffected. The living conditions and incomes of 20-29-year-olds have generally declined. Among men and women aged 20-29, poverty increased sharply during the 1990s, but remained consistently low for the over-45s. This is related to longer education periods, growing youth unemployment, and earnings which begin later in life and are more insecure. Pensioners have experienced the most favourable developments in incomes, and have not been affected by the economic crisis of the 1990s, experiencing an increase of 10-13 per cent in their disposable income, while lone parents saw a fall of six per cent and couples with children saw a fall of four per cent.

From the mid-1980s, the generational differences between young adults and the elderly increased to become as large as the corresponding class differences.¹²² Generational differences are greater in the Nordic countries than in the EU as a whole. As elsewhere, unemployment since the 1970s has been predominantly a youth problem. In Southern Europe, it is quite common to remain in the parental home even to age 30 and beyond, and thereby get the economies of scale that a large household offers. In terms of the percentage of the parents' material standards, the situation of young Swedish people is less favourable than that of age-mates in Southern European countries. In spite of later entry to the labour market, the move from the parental home is only marginally delayed.

4. Why is Sweden Held Up as the Model?

In 1982, it appeared that Sweden was 'moving faster than most other advanced industrialised countries toward a society of cohabiting individuals, temporary families, and single individuals with and without children'.¹²³ Even now, when we can see how this Utopia of state direction and beneficence is itself beginning to crack, many European countries still look to Sweden as the model for social and family policy, despite the fragmented society it creates.

Those who hold up Sweden as the model for family policy in the UK fail to recognise that its centralised decision-making systems may be too rigid and unwieldy to cope with the changing, complex and diversifying conditions of modern economies, where there is far more global, unrestricted (or unrestrictable) information exchange.¹²⁴ There is also a European trend away from the funding of day care and towards cash allowances for parents of young children to use for their own or alternative care and which are not tied to any particular work patterns or requirements, as in Finland and Norway. Austrian interest in such schemes prompted research by the Austrian Institute of Family Studies¹²⁵ which showed that only around one per cent of women wanted men to stay home looking after children. Not many more wanted to share parental leave with men, or to return to work shortly after giving birth (significantly, only childless people agreed to any marked extent). The most popular options, as elsewhere, were for women to stay at home until children reached their school years, or for at least two years. There is an inexorable logic about all of this. Falling birth rates and the cost and unpopularity of childcare in the former Sovietised Eastern bloc countries also prompted moves towards family allowances and tax relief rather than crèches. The Swedish model is looking a somewhat tired one to emulate.

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