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A programme for family security in Sweden

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Widely different experiments in population policy have been tried in Europe since the war of 1914-1918. Those of the Soviet Union and the totalitarian countries have dominated the field of interest. Recently, however, Sweden has set about the task of formulating a democratic population policy. This is not due to any desire for ideological competition. It so happened that the population problem assumed calamitous proportions in this period, and the different forms of government have given their answers to it in typically divergent ways.

The mere fact that Sweden has managed to enunciate a democratic population policy side by side with those of the Communist and the Fascist States has been found worthy of note, however, especially in view of the fact that it was necessary to break away completely from the traditional opinions on the subject of population, which, until the winter of 1934, prevailed in Sweden as in many other countries. Since about the eighties [1880s], views on population in Sweden have been divided into two characteristic groups: the conservative and the reformist. The conservatives were traditionally interested in maintaining or rather increasing the size of the population, seeking to achieve this end primarily by curtailing the spread of birth control. More often than not, they were also adverse to honesty in sexual matters. The other, Neo-Malthusian, group was reformist as far as private family regulation through birth control was concerned, and negative as to total population trend. In fact,

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this group usually idealised the social and economic effects of population decrease.

The new population programme of Sweden may be described as a constructive synthesis of parts of both views. It wholeheartedly accepts Neo-Malthusianism by sanctioning rational birth control, and at the same time endorses the positive interest in population of the conservative group, though only in so far as the prevention of a cumulative decline is concerned. This decline is to be checked, not by keeping people in ignorance of birth control, and not by letting the poorer classes carry the main burden of regeneration, but by educational and social measures aimed at stimulating voluntary parenthood. A new and realistic importance is thus added to the programme by the consideration of population measures chiefly from the point of view of the interests of the masses, and by the desire to improve the quality of the population through providing better social conditions for families with children.

The terms of reference and the work of the Population Commission followed these general lines. The Commission was appointed by the Government in May 1935 at the request of Parliament and included representatives of different political parties and experts in economics, statistics, medicine, and genetics. The Commission completed its work at the end of 1938, having published seventeen reports covering practically all the branches of social legislation which affect the family. [The author was closely associated with the work of the Population Commission of which she writes, as a member of one of its subcommittees and also as principal secretary to the Royal Commission on Women's Work, the proceedings of which necessarily involved collaboration with the Population Commission. The reader is referred to the original article for references to the particular reports of the Population Commission to which the author referred.][...]

The problem of declining population

The new problem faced is clearly one of declining population. So forcefully had the recent propaganda of the Neo-Malthusian group stressed the dangers of "overpopulation", and so commonly had statisticians and economists fallen into the habit of describing the demographic effects of the decline in fertility in the euphemistic terms of approaching "stabilisation", that it has taken some years of education to bring the general public to acknowledge the fact that no increase, and not even constancy, but a rapid decline in the stock of population is facing European countries to-day. The focal point of interest in the qualitative aspect of the population problem was also new, in that preponderant importance was attached not to biological deterioration but to the neglected possibilities of raising quality by improving environment.

The Swedish birth rate began to fall in the eighties and has shown a more conspicuous drop since 1910. The replacement limit was passed in 1925, when the net reproductivity fell below 1,000. [... The] figures indicate a loss

of about a quarter of the population stock in each generation – a rate of change which is likely to produce tremendous effects on the whole economic and social structure.

[...]

The present anxiety is focused not on the size of the Swedish people but on the process of incessant decline. It has finally become apparent even to those with little technical knowledge of demographic questions that the population problem is not – as was believed throughout the Neo-Malthusian era – that of reduction to a stationary condition on a higher or lower level, but that of a cumulative self-perpetuating decline, in which the population progressively liquidates itself.

As the present birth rate of Sweden falls about 40 per cent short of maintaining any size of population constant, it has been considered futile to regard any given stationary size as desirable or undesirable. If constancy of population could be achieved, there is reason to suppose that Sweden could adjust itself to various magnitudes of population. In a country with plenty of natural resources the quantity of population cannot in itself, within relevant limits, be perceived to have any important effects on the general welfare or the standard of living of the people. Therefore no calculations of optimum size have been attempted. The crucial factors of population are direction and rate of change rather than optimum size. [See table.] [...]

Table: Age structure of the Swedish people

Age group	Actual percentages		Forecast percentages	
	1910	1935	1985 [hypothesis I]	1985 [hypothesis II]
0-20	41	31	15	24
20-35	22	26	16	19
35-50	16	20	20	21
50-65	12	14	25	18
65 and over	9 (21)	9 (23)	24 (49)	18 (36)

[In *Hypothesis I*, fertility among married and unmarried women combined is extrapolated from the previous trend as first continuing to fall, though at a decreasing rate, and then finally reaching stabilisation on a lower level; and in *Hypothesis II*, marital fertility is assumed to remain the same as in 1933, but extra-marital fertility is assumed to decline at a uniform rate to 50 per cent in 1956, and nuptiality is stabilised from 1936 onward at 150 per cent of the earlier level. In all cases the mortality rate in different age groups is assumed to remain the same as the actual rate in 1933.]

The economic, social and psychological effects of such an aging of society must be considerable.

Even apart from the changes in age structure, however, a decline in population has hampering effects on economic progress, employment, and general welfare; these effects are due to influences on the relative volume and direction of consumption, production, and particularly investment. It may once more be stressed that these features of an economy in contraction

are not primarily related to quantity of population but to rate of change, not to "underpopulation" but to the dynamics of decline. The "optimum population" theory has no place for these dynamic effects, and is therefore, in an industrial society, a misleading statement of the economic aspects of the population problem.

The Swedish population policy had to have a quantitative goal determined by reference to these considerations of effects as a rational basis, and with due regard to the prevalent social values of the people. This desideratum has been formulated as the attainment, if possible, of the replacement level, and at least retardation of the rapid decline in population. No increase above reproductive equilibrium has been thought desirable or even possible.

Requirements of a constant population

When this abstract goal is translated into actual demands in the matter of child-bearing, its conflict with the private interests of individual parents and generally accepted family patterns immediately springs to the foreground. A dilemma between public and private interests is created and has to be faced; the democratic structure of Swedish society, its rationalistic bent, and its reliance on free discussion, would prevent any attempt to conceal this conflict.

The number of children born annually would have to increase from about 90,000 to 120,000 in order to maintain the population at a constant size in the long run. This in itself must seem a rather unconscionable demand on individual families, since many children even now suffer from the inadequacy of family income. It appears still more so in view of the admitted fact that even the present number must include many undesired children, who would not be born if birth control were democratically available.

[...]

Another factor pointing to a greater reduction of fertility than optimistic forecasts have taken into consideration is the continued existence of very large differences between regional and social groups. [...]

These circumstances taken together indicate how unreliable the source of future generations will be when families tend to be planned rationally.

It is theoretically possible to measure the number of children required for a constant population in terms of different family sizes and so to provide a norm with which the share of individual families in the reproduction of the people may be compared. When the required distribution of children among married couples is not taken merely as an indiscriminate average for all marriages, but allows for varying degrees of sterility in a certain number of them, this becomes one of the most interesting problems of constructive population analysis.

Such a study was made under the auspices of the Population Commission. The distribution of family size in the first phases of family regulation had given a well-known picture in which oversized and

underprivileged families accounted for a disproportionately large share of total reproduction. Some enlightening statistics may be compiled from this transitional era. A percentage calculation of the actual distribution of families according to size in 1930, counting all cases where the wife was living and the marriage "completed" (the wife being between 45 and 50 years of age), shows the marks of this closed era of rapidly changing family patterns. More than 50 per cent of the families were childless or did not have more than two children, but almost 15 per cent had seven or more children. [...]

[...]

Size of family and standard of living

This ideal of obtaining more medium-sized families was, however, a challenge to a democracy where birth control had to be taken for granted and where the rearing of children at undesirably low levels of hygiene and culture could not be endorsed.

Studies were directed towards the relation between size of family and standard of living. The most vital question was not the "general" standard of living in different occupational and income classes – an abstraction which has too frequently fossilised the discussions of recent years – but the standard of living as a function of both family type and income. More concretely stated the problem was this: how much is the cost of maintaining the standard increased, or rather the standard lowered, upon the arrival of each new child? This question not only corresponds to the economic motive for family limitation; it also brings to the forefront the fact that in the most numerous social classes a normal and desirable family size endangers the health and welfare of the children.

It may have been known earlier in a vague way, but it has rarely been so evident as in the new studies of the standard of living in Sweden – the data being computed to show budgetary changes following family changes – that in an industrial society children tend to become the greatest cause of poverty of individual families, instead of being an economic asset as they were in the old agricultural economy. The result is disastrous – either for the birth of children or for the welfare of children born. When general hygienic and cultural standards are being enhanced, the differential cost of children will also be increased and the economic motive for family limitation strengthened.

Here is revealed one of the most interesting and explosive paradoxes of modern systems of industrial economy. Unproductive ages are on the whole not included in the system of human maintenance based on capitalistic remuneration according to production. The unproductive period at the end of the life span has, in most of the industrial nations, begun to be covered by special economic devices. But children simply fall into the empty and widening gap between supporters' income and growing needs as the family increases in size.

[...]

Basic principles of population policy

It thus became apparent that if children were to continue to be born, in a country on its way to democratic equalisation, some important modifications had to be made in the social system and the structure of social reforms. The aim of these changes must be to allot to children a greater share in the resources of the nation. Part of the economic burden of bringing up children had to be transferred from the responsibility of the individual family to that of the community.

The basic principles underlying the programme for a democratic population policy in Sweden may be summarised briefly [...]. These principles can be condensed into three statements containing cumulative postulates which are elsewhere generally presented as alternatives.

(1) Individual liberty and public interest must be reconciled. Voluntary parenthood should be ensured for all families by making birth-control information universally available. Only children who are welcomed by their parents should be desired by the nation. But the resources of the community should be utilised to remodel social conditions so that more children can be welcomed.

(2) Harmony should be established between the qualitative and quantitative goals of population policy. The quantitative goal of a population constant in the long run should be pursued only by measures that simultaneously improve the health and welfare of children and thus enhance the quality of the next generation. Such considerations necessitate as a general rule the repudiation of cash premiums for parents in favour of goods and services in kind furnished directly to children; this principle, however, is subject to some modifications, as will be explained later. In case of conflict between quantitative and qualitative effects the latter should be given priority. Quantity should never be bought by sacrificing quality, but quality and welfare of children might have to be attained at the expense of numerical results.

(3) Educational influences and economic reforms should be co-ordinated. A more positive attitude towards family values and a greater capacity for handling family relationships must be achieved through educational propaganda, utilising both the public school system and voluntary adult education. On the other hand, social reforms must be effected involving a redistribution of income in favour of families with children. Propaganda without the support of economic reform would be futile and socially wrong if directed to the masses. And economic reform would not be politically feasible in a democracy without some change of values and attitudes through education, since citizens without children constitute a strong majority in the electorate, and the fate of the whole economic programme depends on the votes of those who have personally nothing to gain by it.

[...]

Educational measures

Education for family life and parenthood calls for attention in different aspects. It is partly general, directed towards everyone and consisting of an educational preparation which helps to determine attitudes, and partly individual, arranged to give instruction regarding family regulation as the need arises. The first stage will be effected through public education of both children and adults; the second mainly through personal consultation.

[In this section, the author specifies two useful educational measures. The first would involve broadening the school curriculum to include a knowledge of sexual hygiene, information about family limitation and instruction in contraceptive technique. This recommendation had strong support from the three large organizations of housewives, wage-earning women and women teachers. The second measure concerned personal consultation on birth control with doctors, nurses and midwives. Special clinics should be restricted to large towns, since elsewhere people were shy of attending them. It was "not proposed to limit the accessibility of [advice] to married persons".]

Changes in the laws on sexual matters

[In this section the author discusses recommendations of the Commission with respect to contraceptives, abortion and sterilization.]

Equalisation of income

The main principle of the Swedish Population Commission has been equal distribution of the cost of supporting children. It should not be possible for those who have no children to avoid contributing to the necessary investment in the future generation. This far-reaching demand – together with humane legislation on sexual matters and a more practical education for family life – constitutes the very foundation of the actual population programme. The Commission was not inclined, however, to favour equalisation by direct transfer of cash to large families, but preferred provision in kind for the consumption of children.

This support of children in kind rather than in cash is not copied from old forms of charity and individual relief. It follows instead the pattern of a co-operative economy in which large schemes for providing free goods and services for children are maintained by the community on the grounds of rational organisation, expediency, and social equity. Probably the best example of such schemes in existing public activities is offered by public school systems.

There are several reasons for adopting this principle. In the first place, when help is given in kind there are better guarantees that the benefits will actually go to the children and not be engulfed in the general family budget. Offering a larger apartment at a lower rent as the family grows is more apt to

raise housing standards than paying the corresponding amount in cash to parents and relying on their willingness and ability to find the larger apartment in the open market. Thus the improvement of environment which is essential from the point of view of the quality of the population will be prompted more effectively.

In the second place, direct economic advantages are to be secured through large-scale public administration of certain types of consumption. Public housing schemes for families, with their special needs as to appliances, can be carried out at less cost than similar private housing. These schemes may further be timed to fit into public works plans, permitting the release of forces to counteract the business cycle at suitable moments. In the third place, support in kind may exert a considerable educational influence generally in favour of more rational consumption habits. Community housing schemes arouse a demand for good dwelling conditions in general. Only if adequate housing facilities can be offered to those unable to pay for them will the authorities be in a position to enforce rules fixing minimum standards of quality and size of apartments for those families who have means of their own. Finally, provision in the national budget for adequate cash pensions for children would involve a sum so large as to be practically prohibitive. A very small individual pension (such as 15 kr. a month) would soon run to a quarter of the total budget.

For these reasons, the Population Commission adopted an unfavourable attitude towards a general scheme of State family allowances of the kind frequently recommended in theoretical discussion but applied only to a small degree in certain countries. This attitude, however, was not inflexible. When practical considerations make it expedient – as is often the case, especially in regard to incidental costs at childbirth – cash benefits may be permitted. An exception was also made in one other main respect – in regard to the indirect cash equalisation to be achieved through differential taxation.

In one of its earliest reports the Commission suggested a method of appreciable levelling through the system of exemptions from municipal and State taxes on incomes and wealth. The exemption for a single person should be lowered, the exemption for the wife and for the first two children raised in each case to the same level as the exemption for single persons, and the exemption for additional children doubled. It was also suggested that the age limit for exemption in respect of children should be raised from sixteen to eighteen years.

[...]

Maternity expenses

[The author outlines other benefits recommended by the Commission with respect to attendance at delivery, health centres for mothers and infants, maternity bonuses and assistance.]

The maternity assistance thus established has turned out to be a particularly interesting social institution, not only because it is without a

counterpart in other capitalist countries, but also because it has revealed a drab, silent and seldom-acknowledged poverty in large sections of the population stretching far above the poor-relief stratum. In this group any foreseen expenditure may be enough to upset completely the strained economy of the family. The advent of children often has this effect. The tragic fact that children are frequently the chief cause of poverty was perhaps not fully realised before the inauguration of maternity assistance.

[The original article contains sections with the following headings: "Economic security of orphans etc." (children's pensions, alimony and allowances), "Housing schemes for families with children", "Nutrition", "Health supervision and reduced medical costs for children", "Education", and "Pre-school institutions and recreational facilities".]

Employment of married women

In this general context it must be mentioned that the prevalent zeal in Sweden for reinforcing the family as an institution and providing greater welfare resources for children has not meant a restrictive attitude towards married women's work outside the home, but has had decidedly the opposite effect. Unless women have open opportunities and consequently free choice in the matter of remunerative work after marriage, there will most certainly be fewer marriages and also fewer children. Several reports of the Population Commission as well as the report of the special Committee on Women's Work have not only stressed the necessity for adjusting attitudes and opinions to new social conditions and new family structures, but have also proposed practical measures to restore a greater harmony between the productive activity of women and their function as mothers.

Public opinion during the last four years has largely followed the same evolution to a more liberal understanding of the changing position of married women in the world of to-day.

Adaptation of the reforms to urban and rural conditions

With due realisation of the vast regional differences in conditions of family life, the entire programme of family security has been elaborated in somewhat different detail for rural and for urban conditions.

The Population Commission made repeated efforts to elucidate these inequalities and as far as possible to create a balance by devising different forms of assistance. Thus, in the matter of delivery care, account has been taken of the different conditions of rural and urban districts. The Commission tried to create opportunities for rural women to enjoy hospital care with its advantages in difficult deliveries and in obtaining anaesthetics. The Commission also rendered more feasible the plans for small delivery

homes in rural districts, and encouraged the establishment of delivery rooms in midwives' homes and also of waiting homes for expectant mothers from distant places.

A similar line was followed in the proposals relating to nutrition, in which rural districts, where children have longer distances to go to school, were given a decided preference in the competition for State grants. In the matter of pre-school care, in which various institutions provide considerable relief for urban housewives, the Commission likewise sought to discover means whereby corresponding needs in rural districts could be met: local "summer kindergartens" for the country districts, day nurseries in connection with adult education centres and girls' schools, etc. Special attention was paid also to the need for enabling over-worked rural mothers to get away for a rest for some length of time by having a so-called "home help" to replace them for the duration of the holiday.

An analysis of the entire problem of urbanisation was attempted in a special report by the Population Commission. A definite distinction was drawn between the abandonment of agricultural occupations, which was considered an economic necessity, and the general movement from the country to the towns, which was regarded as undesirable.

Conclusion

In looking back over the diversified structure of these reforms both principles and practice have to be evaluated. Unfortunately they are not identical. The principles call for such a revolutionary change that practice must be admitted to have lagged behind. The main guiding principle was equalisation of consumption. In achieving that object a general levelling of incomes might be helpful but could not suffice, since inequalities between families of different sizes would still remain. Once this fact was acknowledged, nothing less than a new economic basis for family maintenance had to be sought. As a redistribution of cash was repudiated, the demand was for a "socialised" or rather "democratised" consumption by children of essential goods and services, administered by the community on a co-operative basis. Availability of all advantages to children of all social classes must be a vital part of this new policy of child support; the middle-class family should be relieved of the cost of children just as much as the working-class family. No entanglement of population policy with poor relief should be permitted. No social stigma should be attached to those who need assistance from the community in contributing to its continued existence. It must, however, be admitted that parliamentary alterations have practically always meant restrictions, some motivated by the necessity of introducing a programme gradually, but some probably because the population argument has not been forceful enough to break down the poor-relief limitations of social vision.

Since most of the practice is of very recent date, the time has not yet arrived to judge it, and no attempt will be made here to forecast its

effectiveness. The results will be especially difficult to evaluate with reference to the objective of checking the rapid decline of the birth rate, since during a period of transition they must run in two opposite directions. In the long run these social reforms are intended to reduce the economic and provident motives for extreme family limitation. In the immediate future, however, new social and regional groups will be reached by the liberation of birth-control propaganda. This stage has to be passed in order to arrive at one where voluntary parenthood is taken for granted in all social groups; only then will it be possible to build up a rational system of family support for the whole country. During the next decade, as during the last few years, some social groups will in all probability be induced to have more children as a result of the reforms and of their planning and discussion; other groups will be affected, and rightly, in the opposite way. No simple observation of movements of fertility curves will ever permit interpretation of the total effect, both because the reforms will act in two opposite directions and, more generally, because comparison would have to be made with the purely imaginary development which would have occurred if the family security policy had not been inaugurated.

Without doubt, however, there will be a considerable decline in the number of undesired and undesirable children, and there will be positive gains in the quality of the next generation. The expenditure on the reforms is ultimately justified on these grounds: that nothing is being wasted, that the structure of the reforms calls for costs largely to be transferred from one social segment to another, that the children's share in the wealth of the nation is increased, and that health and living conditions are being improved for those who need it most.

A groundwork has also been constructed for the far more radical population programme that will certainly one day have to be applied, when the deferred full effect of decreasing fertility on population and the economic and social consequences are unambiguously visible, and when panic might otherwise overrule both wisdom and personal liberty.