

Sigurd Skirbekk:

Family structure and functionality

II - The Swedish Case

In Sweden, Alva and Gunnar Myrdal were the first ones to put family policy into a social and political framework; in the mid-1930s they wrote a book entitled "The Crisis in Population Development" 10]. The authors pointed out the national dangers of the contemporary decline in the birth rate and argued for an active social policy geared toward society's poorest, so that these could eventually be able to establish normal families. In the 1940s, Gunnar Myrdal wrote that all the experts were in agreement that every effort should be made to prevent illegitimate births 11]. This goal was one of the reasons that radical politicians in Sweden supported the work of RFSU, with the unforeseen consequences that this had during the 1960s and '70s, as already mentioned. The new interpretations of the goals and tasks of family policy arose at a time when radical Sweden was compelled to acknowledge that its policies had had effects other than those originally intended, and that it would either have to change policies or alter the political goals of those policies.

Already by the mid-1960s, a number of semi-official written pronouncements were made in Sweden in favor of a "new family", in which equality between the sexes was highlighted as a supreme value. The development of individual potential became a stated goal of family policy 12]. Adults were to be treated the same way by society, whether they chose to live alone or together with others. The Swedish Institute, an organization dedicated to the spread of Swedish social views abroad, published a work in which the author, under the title "*The Family is Not Sacred*", asserted that marriage and divorce should be regarded as completely private matters between individuals, with no interference from society 13]. The reference to equality and to women's freedom of choice became an important element in the 1970s' debate about what was to become a Social Democratic change of views as to the goals for a progressive family policy. This view was largely institutionalized in the new Swedish family legislation of 1974. It has also played a significant role in discussions of the family's position in the other Nordic countries.

The development in Sweden is of particular interest: it is here that the deinstitutionalization of family establishment has made the greatest strides – at least in our part of the world; and it is here that we find the most pronounced political programs for promoting this policy as something positive 14]. According to certain studies, Sweden also stands out as the western country in which marriage is weakest in public opinion, despite the fact – or because of the fact – that Sweden has gone far in removing some of the bothersome obligations that legally applied to formalized marriage 15].

In the previous chapter we quoted the following passage from the Swedish study on marriage and the family: "Theoretically, the birth of children in modern societies, with their medical opportunities, specialization and differentiation of work could be separated from the family and reduced to a mere biological event. As far as we

know, sociology has not been able to report of any society where this has been the case." Normally, this would suffice to put the burden of proof on the advocates of cohabitation in deciding whether cohabitation can serve as the functional equivalent of marriage. It says a great deal about the strength of a framework of meaning dominated by values associated with individual-oriented liberties, when our society demands a justification for the stand that people should get married, and not for the stand that those who live together should *not* get married.

Explicit and implicit arguments for cohabitation have become more widespread in recent years; in the popular media this has gone hand in hand with – if not preceded – actual developments. However, these arguments have never risen above the counter-arguments that could be leveled against them. Admittedly, the viability of the various arguments can be legitimately assessed in different ways. In part, they could be evaluated on the basis of the relationship between claims and actual circumstances, and in part on the basis of existing data on differences between marriage and cohabitation. An example of testing for the former would be attitude studies that can be confronted by legitimatizing claims to the effect that cohabiting couples usually choose their type of union on the basis of an ideal conviction or with the claim that they choose cohabitation because of their confidence in the strength of their own life – cf. the expression "love marriage" that is often used for cohabitation in the 1970s and 1980s.

Against these interpretations is a Swedish study which concluded that young people generally moved in together without any prior decision not to get married. In fact, there was often no prior decision to even move in with each other; "it just happened that way" 16]. Another Swedish study, this one of 279 family lawyers during the 1970s, confirms this picture. As to what grounds their clients usually gave for avoiding marriage, about six out of ten lawyers stated that "they didn't want to commit themselves". Only one out of ten mentioned that for many, love was such a strong force that they reckoned they could get by without a formal marriage 17].

Nevertheless, the weakening of marriage is not a distinctly Swedish phenomenon. As we have already mentioned, certain changes have had the effect of watering down the family's tasks, while the development of birth control technology, an economic safety net, and the media's ideals and expectations in youth environments have all made it appealing to go in for less binding forms of coupling. For example, in the United States it is estimated that the number of cohabiting couples has risen from 0.5 million in 1970 to 1.5 million in 1980, and to 2.5 million in 1990. Though these figures may not be 100% reliable, it is hardly doubtful that the position of marriage in the US has suffered in recent years. Relatively speaking, fewer people are getting married and more people are ending their marriages.

In sociology, it was long taken for granted that whatever befell the marriage-regulated family could be explained as a form of adjustment to new social circumstances, circumstances which could admittedly be problematical in a transitional phase. This has been a major pattern for interpretations among sociological family theoreticians in the second half of this century, from Talcott Parsons to Anthony Giddens 18]. There is, however, another tradition, often relegated to the sidelines, represented by such names as Carle C. Zimmerman and David Popenoe 19]. These men have seen the development as a manifestation of the decline of an important social institution. The question of which of these two

interpretations is the most convincing could be resolved if professionals could agree on whether developments pointed to conditions inside or outside of functional minimum measures for a social development.

References

- 10 Myrdal, Alva and Gunnar (1934): *Kris i befolkningsfrågan*. Stockholm.
- 11 Myrdal, Gunnar (1940): *Population: a problem for democracy*. Harvard Univ. Press, Cambridge, MA (1962), p. 185).
- 12 Cf. *Jämlikhet*: The Alva Myrdal report on the Swedish Social Democratic Party, 1971, p. 82.
- 13 Leijon, Anna-Greta (1968): *Swedish Women – Swedish Men*, Swedish Institute, Stockholm, p. 125.
- 14 Cf. Part II, "The Case of Sweden" in Popenoe, David (1988): *Disturbing the Nest. Family Change and Decline in Modern Society*. Aldine de Gruyter, NY.
- 15 According to an opinion poll made public by the Prime Minister's office in Japan in 1984, only 28% of Swedish young people at that time were purportedly in agreement with the statement that people ought to get married, and that it was better to be married than not to be married. In comparison, 78% of Japanese young people concurred in that statement. The Swedes' reluctant attitude toward marriage also comes to the fore in an international study on the spread of cohabitation at the expense of marriage. This phenomenon was registered as being more common in all western European countries in the 1980s, but with the Nordic countries in the lead and Sweden as the country in which it was most widespread. Cf. Prinz, Christopher (1995): *Cohabiting, Married, or Single*. Avebury, IIASA, Luxemburg; p. 74 f.
- 16 Levin, Bo and Jan Trost (1978): *Att sambo och gifta sig. Fakta och föreställningar*. SOU 1978:55, chpt. 4 & 5.
- 17 Claesson, A., R. Lundgren and G. Lundh (1973): "Samvetsäktenskapet och juridiken", Uppsala; printed in *Tre sociologiska rapporter*. The Justice Department 1975:24, Stockholm.
- 18 Parsons, Talcott and Robert Bales (1955): *Family, Interaction and Socialization Process*. Free Press, NY.
Giddens, Anthony (1993): *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*. Polity Press, Oxford.
- 19 Zimmerman, Carle C. (1947): *Family and Civilization*. Harper, NY. Popenoe, David (1988): *Disturbing the Nest. Family Change and Decline in Modern Societies*. Aldine de Gruyter, NY. Cf. also Christopher Lasch, 1977): *Haven in a heartless world*, chpt. 3.