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Family structure and functionality

VI - Market norms and bureaucratic norms

When most people talk about women's liberation, they are usually thinking about the spread of specific lifestyles and ways of acting, which are considered liberated, or preferably modern and liberated. People can be for or against these lifestyles, and for or against liberation. Ordinary people often show a greater willingness to look at the negative aspects of liberation than professionals, who have a closer relationship to ideology-producing environments.

Nevertheless, we rarely encounter people in ordinary environments who problematize the description of lifestyle changes that are thought to express liberation. It is easier for people who are schooled in theory to see that the perception of development as liberation is an interpretation, and that there are other interpretations that might prove more useful in a broad explanation. Where some see changes as a liberation from traditional gender roles and marital norms, others see those same changes as an adjustment to market norms suited to an economic institution and to bureaucratic norms or bureaucratic norms – that is, norms derived from an economic or political institution rather than the institution of marriage and the family.

This can all seem very theoretical. The significance of problematizing interpretations will become clearer if we think about day-to-day observations of changes in lifestyle. For instance, nowadays many women dress in a sexier way than women usually did in the past. But we must see what is new about all this, evoking contemporary explanations. The fact that women use clothes to enhance their sexuality is certainly not a new phenomenon, one that would require a special cultural-historical explanation. Rather, we should direct our attention to the uni-sex fashion wave of the 1970s. What is new is not that clothes are used partly to cover up and partly to show off the body's shape by means of sexual symbolism. In times past, however, there were clear-cut rules for what constituted an appropriate way to dress in various social situations. We would have great difficulty in finding an earlier period in which ordinary women daily went about in tight skirts and close-fitting men's slacks in order to attract the attention of the common man on the street and in public places, or a time when symbols of the female sex were used to help sell all kinds of products and services. *This* is historically new, and calls for a special cultural-historical explanation.

If we were content merely to study most people's interpretations of these phenomena, we would most likely get stuck at statements about a woman's right to choose her own lifestyle, or at a moral repugnance of widespread lifestyles. To explain why a given lifestyle has become widespread in precisely our own time, we must turn to theories of institutional macrostructures, and this is by no means a characteristic of popular explanations.

If we see individual adjustment in relation to norms that derive from different institutional subsystems in a society, we may hone in on a few explanations. An emphasis on characteristic norms for different institutions enables us to get beyond the framework conditions for individual choices. The reason why an institution is characterized more by certain norms than others has to do with the way tasks are organized in the institution, and with the way these institutions relate to others. Explanations based on institutional systems need not account for special motives on the part of all those who subscribe to the institution's norms. A comparative institutional perspective can provide explanations on a structural macro level.

If we go back to the dawn of the modern age, we will find societal regulations that illustrate the functionality of institutional differentiation. Institutionally related norms used to be clearly marked by their own respective areas of life: Seen in a social context, religious norms functioned as taboos for that which was sacrosanct, and as an example for various rules of living, especially on the individual level. Political norms were marked by legislative rules for governing administrative units, with those rights and duties for citizens that flowed from the authority's legitimate decisions. Economic norms dominated the markets for buying and selling and the cost/benefit-rationality in the manufacturing processes, partly limited by socio-political laws. Even norms related to family relationships were institutionally limited and legally protected. The institution-specific family norms were conspicuously governed by tradition and faith, and were characterized by diffuse and mutual obligations with respect to assigned roles and to a marital status. Relationships were collectively-oriented, with family and relatives being the orienting units, and these were characterized by norms of loyalty for particularistic relations. Marital exclusivity was maintained through sanctioned norms in the local community, through legislation, and through religious ideals and popular examples.

Today's situation could appear to be a confused version of a differentiated society, partly because market norms and bureaucratic norms have gradually come to influence an increasing number of relationships in which these norms are unlikely to be functional.

The institutional perspective shows us that we are not necessarily facing a liberation from societal pressure when we meet women who dress to attract as much attention as possible from unknown persons of the opposite sex. Rather, this should be understood as an adjustment to a market-oriented organization of sex. The typical norms deriving from the economic institution point to the perception of sex symbolism as a means of bartering in the marketplace. Strong sex symbols take on meaning when they are perceived as an advertisement for evoking the interest of potential customers, one of whom, on being selected, might prove to be a part of a lasting relationship. The reason this does not function very well is partly because men tend to think it is fair to consider women as sex objects in the marketplace, as something to satisfy their own needs, or as a means of finding a partner who will confirm men's preconceived views of themselves.

Institutional norms not only put a framework around interpersonal activity; they do the same with people. More than before, women must admit that they are constantly being viewed as sex objects, and that they risk sexual advances in a wide variety of situations. To avoid being caught off-guard, they must remain constantly on guard, a condition that often calls for a constant infusion of imagery and musical stimulus. Such a relational explanation might be more convincing than an individual-

psychological explanation, which explains the same use of media stimuli as a form of needs realization.

Certain evidence suggests that such a continuous state of alertness can affect a person's concentration on other things, such as work, politics and culture. Nevertheless, other dilemmas can be just as restrictive. Young women will have to be reconciled to being appraised in the sex market for their value as an experience-enhancing partner. In this competition, those who can appear to be the most devoted will be most likely to charm a man. At the same time, a devotion without a safety net might lead to many painful falls. One way of trying to cope with this dilemma involves learning to play the role of a warm woman, while acting out an emotional reserve. A large part of the feminine role repertoire in so-called TV soap operas illustrates this: it is an education in just this kind of adjustment. However, this is hardly the most functional starting point for a modern family union, which was intended to rest on an emotional foundation. In other words, market norms have very little functionality where family unions are concerned.

It is not only norms from the economic institution that have invaded the family sphere as the family has become increasingly de-institutionalized. Political-bureaucratic norms have also made inroads, although this has not brought about more functional forms of family union.

The socio-political assistance apparatus is concerned not only with employment service, training, illness and care for the elderly, tasks too burdensome for family and relatives in view of modern demands on living standards. Spokesmen for health services and social politics have gradually found their way into a number of areas which were previously thought to belong to the private sphere 52]. The justification for this has partly rested in accounts of violence and neglect by the family. In a neo-liberal culture few objections are raised to the notion that all individuals are equipped with rights which the state is obligated to accommodate as far as possible. Thus the health services, in the name of humanity, becomes the spokesman for a more or less comprehensive psycho-physiological needs satisfaction, even assuming the task of dealing with individuals' sexual rights in the face of family constraints and limits. Within this framework of meaning, traditional gender norms can be explained in medical categories as former ages' measures for preventing the spread of sexually transmitted diseases as well as unwanted pregnancies. This is a situational understanding which suggests that birth control agents can serve as the functional equivalent of moral norms. If the family is to have any chance under the new institutional conditions, it will have to compete in offering the individual more experiential benefits inside than outside the framework of the family.

The socio-political bureaucracy has largely been developed as an administration of an assistance apparatus designed to provide all citizens with extra rights, and not just to deal with those who fall outside the familiar and voluntary network. Neo-liberal arguments for helping the needy with universal rights has given social politics a universalistic goal. This, in turn, has provided the framework for a number of new socio-political rules of the game. Those who successfully agitate on behalf of their clients as those with neglected needs have generally received uncritical political assurances of considerable assistance.

The question is whether socio-political institutions should only be understood as service organs for society's weakest. In a very critical review of Swedish family

politics, David Popenoe has questioned the logic and child-friendliness of legislation which, in the name of humanity, forbids all corporal punishment, while at the same time putting cohabitation on a par with marriage, even though the former, statistically speaking, have three times the rate of dissolution as marriages, even where children are involved 53]. Today it is the threat of parents leaving each other that creates the greatest foreboding in children. When socio-politicians do not see the inconsistencies in their own activity, this suggests that they relate to ideologies rather than to considerations as to what is best for the family 54].

In politically conservative quarters there has been a reaction to a usurping bureaucratization, especially on the family front. The slogan of the hour was a return to the old virtues: "Back to the basics". However, neither Thatcher's nor Reagan's politics led to greater stability of the family in their respective countries. On the contrary, the de-emphasis of political influence led to greater bureaucratic market influence. The institution of the family is not strong enough, in the sense that it is bound to reclaim its position irrespective of the strength of surrounding institutions.

References

52 Flora, Peter and Martin Heidenheimer (1981): *The Development of Welfare State in Europe and America*. Transaction Books, New Brunswick.

53 Popenoe, David (1988): *Disturbing the Nest*. Aldyne de Gryter, NY; Cf. p 335 and the paragraph "The Logic and the Welfare State", p 237 f. – Cf. also Huntford, Roland (1971): *The New Totalitarians*, Penguin; chapt. 15 "The Sexual Branch of Social Engineering" (*Det blinda Sverige*, Stockholm 1971).

54 Cf. the argumentation in Blood, Robert O. (1978): *Marriage*, Free Press; in R.O.B. (1965): *Husbands and Wives – the Dynamics of Married Life*. Free Press, NY; and in Haveman, Robert and Barbara Wolfe (1994): *Succeeding Generations. On the Effect of Investment in Children*. Russel Sage NY.