

**Sigurd Skirbekk:**

## **Family structure and functionality**

### **VII - *Functionality and fruitfulness***

In most countries most people would regard the increase in family breakups as evidence that something was wrong, whether they see this as immoral, detrimental, or just something unwanted. The fate of children is often used to support and justify this perception, along with married partners who have been left in the lurch, and a general sense of unease that developments are out of control.

We might have expected that people in leading positions would have done something to turn this development in another direction – at any rate, if we assume that people in leading positions have gotten there because they are more skilled than others in interpreting and leading societal development, but that they otherwise share the values of the common people. On the other hand, if we assume that people in positions of power have generally arrived there because they have been smarter than others at exploiting society's structures and predominant interpretations, our expectations would be otherwise. Then we would not be surprised to find that people in an interpretive position prefer to explain the breakup of families either as a positive expression of individual liberation, as an unfortunate price to pay for others and greater goods, or as an expression of an unavoidable development. The common thread in all of these interpretations is that they tend to disarm critical attitudes toward the predominant ideology. It is when these norms are compared with institutional norm systems in a differentiated society that we can identify these norms as market-oriented and see them in relation to the cultural patterns that emerge from an economic institution 55].

Nevertheless, certain functions of the family are very hard to explain away. This is particularly true of the relationship between family form and birth rate, and of the long-term prospects in the face of a fall in population. This has been particularly borne out in Germany, a country with a tradition for high welfare outlays, low pension age, and long-term birth rates under the reproductive level. At the same time, the country's political past has made it ideologically difficult to wage an offensive "population policy". According to the magazine *Focus* for August 14, 1995, at that time 8.8 million German married couples did not have any children; 6.8 million had one child, 4.9 million had two children, 1.2 million had three children, and 0.35 million had four or more children. Of those who lived alone, 1.9 million had one child, 0.6 million had two, and 0.16 million had three or more children.

Over the long term, a birth rate below the reproductive limit could be a sign of dysfunctional adjustment – in any case, when there are no compelling factors that would suggest a drop in the population figures. But we should stress that it is the chronically low birth figures that are critical to the survival of a society rather than chance discrepancies from year to year 56]. A temporary decline in the annual birth

rate could be due to an economic downturn that has caused some married couples to postpone having children. The situation would be different if an entire cohort were to decide to have fewer children. During the 1930s, statistics of periodic figures were interpreted as though they were cohort figures. This later led to the view that those who cry "wolf" are somewhat hysterical. The figures for the period after 1970 are unambiguous with respect to the long-term development. In Europe, the birth rates point to a level that is well below the reproductive limit of 2.1 children for women who survive their fertility period 57].

Some of the European Mediterranean countries, renowned for their sensual cultures, had birth rates in the mid-1990s which, on average, were 1.4 to 1.2 children per woman. We could appear to be on the threshold of a new population law: The more sex, the fewer children! In certain districts of central Italy, the population figures are lower than one child per woman.

Calculations based on birth developments up to 1992 caused European demographers to predict an average rate of childbirths of 1.48 for the younger generation of women in the 12 EU countries of that time 58]. Even more disheartening was the fact that there was no realistic political plan for effecting a marked rise in the birth rate. It is against this background that we must understand what the former Prime Minister of Luxembourg, Gaston Thron, said when he claimed that Europe was committing collective suicide 59].

There is no doubt that this represents a dysfunctional development, according to every discussed criteria of functionality. The question remains, however, whether this dysfunctionism can be generally applied to cultural forms that have developed in relation to the neo-liberal ideology.

In circles dominated by a neo-liberal ideology, there will be a wealth of objections. The decline in the birth rate will be explained by some on the basis of economic theories, theories about women's occupational activities, theories about historical necessity and demographic transitions and, above all, this decline will be evaluated as the result of women's newly-won right to have the last word on their own fertility. The latter provides an explanation with the potential for profound moral mobilization.

These explanations can all be made to fit various contexts in which they seemingly apply, but none of them has gained universal recognition; the reason is clear: They are not comprehensive; they cannot replace cultural explanations. Explanations based on inadequate economic resources are contradicted by experiences from other times and societies in which families had far more children than the Europe of today, even though these communities had less leisure time and fewer financial resources. Moreover, it is not always the poorest who have the fewest children. If a concept of relative poverty is introduced in order to rescue the theory, this brings us straight-away into the realm of value explanations that are based on evaluations of children as opposed to commodities. Nor can theories about the increased numbers of women in salaried occupations all the variations in the declining birth rate. Comparative studies from Norway do not suggest that occupationally active women have conspicuously fewer children than those who are not occupationally active 60].

The variation in European women's occupational participation compared with the variations in the number of childbirths make it unreasonable to explain the low birth

rate in Europe in recent years by claiming that women have received paid employment. For example, the period target for children pr. women in Italy in 1997 is calculated at 1.22, while it was 1.86 in Norway. At the same time, OECD figures from 1997 show that scarcely 44% of Italian women were occupationally active, as opposed to 75% of Norwegian women.

Nor do historically deterministic laws concerning "demographic transitions" turn out to be anything but a trend 61]. This explanation has rested on preconceptions that a decline in child mortality will necessarily lead to a corresponding decline in birth rates, after a transitional phase with high birth rates and low mortality rates 62]. Experience thus far tells us that Europe has fallen far under the reproductive level, while the fall in birth rates in most other countries has far to go before reaching that level. Within Europe, immigrants from other cultures generally have more children than the native-born population. For Germany, the disparity in fertility rates has been put at 20%. This suggests that a number of special characteristics of an individualistic culture in our part of the world appear to be an explanatory factor we cannot get around.

In the public debate, if not necessarily in demographic circles, the most common explanation for the fall-off in births is the potential of birth control and women's heightened technical potential for having the last word on their own fertility. The era of involuntary births is over. Those who bemoan this development are said to be attacking women's liberation!

A certain knowledge of the fate of different women caused this author to doubt the validity of the latter explanation. An opinion institute was contacted in 1975 and asked to do a representative study among Norwegian women to determine whether the decline in the birth rate could be explained as an expression of women's general wishes 63]. Of those who had children at that time, 23% responded that they had only one child; 36% responded that they had two; 22% had three, while approx. 20% reported having four or more children. To the question how many children they thought was appropriate for a Norwegian family, less than 1% of all those polled answered "no children", 2% responded one child, 44% two children, 41% three children, 10% four or more children, and only 4% responded "don't know". This distribution of responses showed already at that time that the primary wishes for number of children was above the number that women could be expected to have. To the degree that there was a mismatch between ideals and reality, this went contrary to propaganda, even though in certain cases there was a match.

Another study of the same question was carried out in the 1980s in a number of western countries 64]. These studies showed the same trend, to an even more marked degree. The ideal number of children for European women at that time was about one child more than they could expect to have. At the same time, comparisons showed that while the number of realized births in all the countries that were studied, with the exception of Ireland, were under the reproductive level, the ideals in every country were higher than the reproductive limit. The reason the Europeans had not reached the reproductive level cannot be explained on the basis of women's primary wishes 65].

This kind of study is all the more reason to focus on intermediate circumstances between wishes and realization to explain the decline in births. The de-institutionalization and disestablishing of the family appear to be good candidates

for an explanation. In fact, this has been confirmed in more systematic demographic studies. The an official committee appointed to study population developments in Norway wrote their report in their report in 1984: "Changes in fertility outside of marriage and changes in the durability distribution of marriages means relatively little. The key factors are fertility in marriage and the proportion of married women. What kept the birth rate high in the 1950s when the population of parents was small, was the fact that the percentage of married couples increased sharply. From 1965 there was a sharp drop in marital fertility. This did not have immediate consequences for the birth rate, due to the favorable change in the age structure that took place at the same time. The full ramifications only appeared after 1970. But the negative effect of marital fertility disappeared after a few years. In the late 1970s, a diminishing percentage of married women contributed most to the fall in the birth rate." We read further: "We conclude that the intermediate variable related to marital behavior has had a marked influence on the development of the birth rate in the 1950s and after 1975. It is clear that cohabitation unions do not compensate for the decline in traditional marriages as far as fertility is concerned 66].

Despite the fact that more women than ever are giving birth, since it has become more common for unmarried couples to have children, this does not compensate for the effects of a weakened marital culture. Comparisons between fertility among cohabitators and married couples must be tempered by the somewhat uneven age distribution; more cohabitators than married couples can expect to have fertile years ahead of them. Nonetheless, the difference in birth rates between groups is so large that it is unrealistic to assume that age variation will ultimately compensate for differences in reproductive behavior.

This suggests that the de-institutionalization of family unions will be a key link in what appears to be a dysfunctional adjustment. The cultural aspect of the decline in births enters into the picture in part through attitudinal changes in the direction of increased emphasis on self-realization instead of relative and family realization, and in part as the unintended effects of a de-emphasis and privatization of the institution of marriage, adapted to the interpretations of a neo-liberal cultural complex.

Studies of the difference between what is called the first and the second demographic transition suggest that we are faced with changes of a cultural nature 67]. Whereas the first decline in birth rate could be explained in terms of parents' wishes to secure a better financial and social status for their children, the decline in later years must be explained in terms of stronger wishes by the parents to gain time in which to invest more in their own self-realization and their own well-being. A Dutch demography describes the new ideals as a "secular individualism", with an emphasis on "the individual's right and freedom of defining both goals and the means of achieving them" 68].

The close connection between changes on the family front and the rather extensive cultural changes in the course of the last few decades makes it highly unlikely that we will see a radical revision of the position of the family as an institution as long as society is dominated by neo-liberal ideology and frameworks of meaning that emphasize self-realization. On the other hand, the relationship between a neo-liberally adjusted culture and a dysfunctional reproduction indicate that we are facing an extremely precarious situation, when viewed from a slightly longer perspective.

In order to evaluate the strength of a given development, it is not enough to consider all the forces that are at work in the ongoing development. Any explanation of the strength of such forces will be incomplete if it is not seen in relation to the weaknesses of opposing forces. Thus it would be unreasonable to say that forces which have been reckoned as culturally conservative are weak merely because they cannot be made to fit a competitive argumentation. The fact that they have not been able to stand out in the ongoing debate, especially after 1968, is due to an inability to cope with new cultural framework conditions. The burden of proof has not rested with those who have spoken on behalf of individual liberation, but with those who have spoken on behalf of a supra-individual order. Conservative spokesmen have not been very clever at developing and exploiting social research on their terms.

Even though we are faced with a significant imbalance between conservative and neo-liberal where it concerns the utilization of different types of research, the dominance of neo-liberalism cannot be explained without drawing upon a wealth of ideological constructions and myth formation. To draw closer to this aspect of contemporary culture, it would be useful to take a closer look at a debate that took place after it became known that western societies were no longer maintaining reproduction levels. The debate on immigration deals in part with immigrants, but also with ideological interpretation, which has kept important problem statements from rising to the fore.

## References

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- 57 Coale, Ansley J. and Susan Cott Watkins (1986): *The Decline of Fertility in Europe*, Princeton Univ. Press, NJ. – Kravdal, Øystein (1994): "Fruitbarhet under reproduksjonsnivået i Norge", *Samfunnsspeilet* 1/94.
- 58 Cited in *The European*, December, 1993.
- 59 This statement is cited in the issue of *Newsweek* dated December 15, 1986
- 60 Cf. Jensen, Ann Magrit (1981): *Barnetall og yrkesaktivitet*. Artikkel nr. 12. SSB, Oslo.
- 61 Hirschman, Charles: "Why Fertility Changes". *Annual Review of Sociology*. Annual Reviews Inc., no. 20, 1994, pp 203-233.
- 62 Thompson, Warren (1929): "Population", *American Journal of Sociology*, p 34 – Khalatbari, Parvitz (1983): *Demographic Transition*, (Beiträge zur Demographie) Akademie-Verlag, Berlin.
- 63 Norsk Gallup, Nov./Dec. 1975: "Barneantall", ordered by S. Skirbekk/Institute of Sociology. The study was based on interviews with 436, 419 and 421 women during weeks 40, 42 and 45; the selection proved to be reasonably representative according to standard kontroll measurements.
- 64 Cf. tab 9.8 in Blom, Svein (1986): *Familieverdier*. Report No. 22, Institutt for sosiologi og samfunnskunnskap, University of Trondheim. Women's attitudes were studied in the following countries:

Belgium, Denmark, England, France, Ireland and Northern Ireland, Italia, The Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, West Germany and the USA.

65 Cf. also Wetlesen, Tone Schou (1991): *Fertility Choices and Constraints: A qualitative Study of Norwegian Families*. Solum, Oslo.

66 NOU 1984:26, *Befolkningsutviklingen*, p 67f.

67 Kaa, D. van de (1987): "Europe's second demographic transition" in *Population Bulletin*, vol. 42, no. 1, march, Population Reference Bureau Inc., Washington.

68 Lesthaeghe, R. (1983): "A Century of Demographic and Cultural Change in Western Europe: An Exploration of Underlying Dimensions" in *Population and Development Review*, 9, no. 3, p 429.