

## THE EUROPEAN FAMILY: MEDITERRANEAN AND SCANDINAVIAN MODELS

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COMPARATIVE RESEARCH FOCUSING on social trends in industrial societies suggests a growing move toward convergence in many domains: religion and secularization, education, employment, consumption, decreased political radicalization, conflict resolution, and others. The same applies in the family field to European societies where there is convergence, even though, as Caplow, Mendras, and other authors observe, there are also divergences and singularities.<sup>1</sup>

Based on a matrix analysis of some seventy-eight trend reports for the first four societies included in the Comparative Charting of Social Change Project (CCSC), Langlois and Forsé state:

Most often, classic comparative analyses of social change conclude, in a more or less embarrassed way, that there is a certain mixture of convergences and divergences in the processes studied. The reason for this confusion is that strong divergences between industrial societies are exceptional and absolute convergence is even rarer. Most often the differences mask resemblances or, what comes to the same thing, similarities mask divergences. This is what we call a singularity. It is possible to understand this phenomenon only if one each element studied is systematically rearranged within a substructure.<sup>2</sup>

As Theodore Caplow and Henry Mendras rightly note, “the concept of singularity helps us to visualize the subtle balance between convergence and divergence,”<sup>3</sup> but does not always predict the responses to given trends in any particular society. Take, for example, the fertility decline in European societies during the sixties, which is generally associated with the same set of casual factors: improved contraception; the entry of married women into the labor force; the equalization of the sexes; the legitimization of consensual unions; the shift from blue-collar to white-collar work; the emergence of a feminist movement, which encouraged the employment of women; the postponement of marriage; the increase of divorce and illegitimacy; and the growing incidence of abortion and sterilization, among others. There is no way to assign a relative weight to these factors or to assess the complementary influence of mutually reinforcing trends. Although it is sure that each of the above mentioned changes were present in all four societies analyzed—the United States, Quebec, France, and Western Germany—their interactions were not identical from one society to another. At the same time, the actual convergence of trends that we observe in European societies does not

imply that they have uniform futures, their differences being inextricably tied to what they have in common, so that they both converge and diverge at the same time while their singularities are defined.<sup>4</sup>

### Convergence and Divergence in the European Family

The application of this framework to the European family should start by remembering the pioneering contribution of Louis Roussel, who in his article of 1992 on divergences and convergences in the Western European family compared fertility, nuptiality, divorce, and age at marriage indicators for sixteen countries. His main conclusion was that everything seemed then to announce the general triumph of the Parsonian type of family: medium sized, stable, asymmetric and very institutionalized.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the situation was quite the opposite from the variety of types of family prevalent on the continent today.

In fact, however, the differences observed circa 1988—especially those concerning cohabitation—were large between the southern countries, the Nordic countries, and the western and central countries. Comparing the southern and the Nordic countries, Roussel found that Spain, Italy, Portugal, and Greece were low in fertility, divortiality, cohabitation, and births out of marriage, while in Denmark and Sweden fertility was relatively high, divortiality and cohabitation were high, and births out of marriage strong or medium. For the rest of the countries (Western and Central) the corresponding indicators were more mixed. Notwithstanding, between 1965 and 1988 this situation tended toward convergence. This was specifically the case for fertility decrease, nuptiality decrease, and divortiality and births out of marriage increase.

His analysis made it clear that in this respect it was significant to distinguish between three groups of countries in Europe: Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Denmark in the north; Portugal, Spain, Italy, and Greece in the south; and the central countries. It also pointed out that new behavioral patterns are the result of national processes; they started spreading from the Scandinavian countries and moved more quickly towards the south than in any other direction. The latest series of many family indicators, for 1994–1995, show that the differences remain, but that they are no longer as wide. As seen in table 1 (see p. 25), the largest differences at present are related to employment and unemployment, which are lower and higher respectively in the southern countries than in the north. Especially worthy of mention is the highly unfavorable situation of Mediterranean women, whose employment rates are

**TABLE 1. DEMOGRAPHIC AND EMPLOYMENT VARIABLES (EU 15)**

VARIABLES	x	SEC	NEC	D
1. Age structure of the population				
< 15	17	(15-18)	(18-19)	S
> 60	21	(20-22)	(20-22)	-
2. Activity rate				
Men	66	(62-70)	(62-72)	S
Women	45	(35-49)	(55-59)	L
3. Employment rates (15-64)				
Men		(61-73)	(62-81)	S
Women		(32-54)	(58-69)	L
4. Part time workers				
Men	5	(3-5)	(12-35)	L
Women	31	(13-17)	(15-44)	VL
5. Involuntary part time				
Men	27	(15-52)	(12-35)	L
Women	17	(23-34)	(15-44)	VL
6. Unemployment rates				
Men	10	(6-18)	(5-15)	S
Women	13	(8-30)	(7-16)	L
7. Long-term unemployed				
Men	46	(46-64)	(22-41)	L
Women	50	(54-67)	(16-31)	VL
< 25 years				
Men	37	(37-63)	(6-13)	VL
Women	41	(40-66)	(8-13)	VL

X = Average

SEC = Southern European Countries

NEC = Northern European Countries

D = Differences (S Small; L Large; VL Very Large)

Source: Eurostat: *Living Conditions in Europe. Selected Social Indicators*, December 1997, 1998

lower and unemployment rates higher than men's, and who have few part-time jobs available.

These facts call our attention to gender inequality in the Mediterranean countries and the contrast between women's situation there and the more equal one which Nordic women enjoy. In the countries of southern Europe, women's roles are still quite different from men's, and women continue to be assigned inferior positions, despite their progress in recent times. Women's place in society in the Scandinavian countries is unquestionably no longer a debatable issue, but in the Mediterranean countries it still remains so. In Spain, for example, more than half of the inactive women would like to work and feel they are prevented from doing so, while in Denmark when women do not work it is because they have decided freely not to, not because they have been forced to accept the condition of unemployment.

All this suggests that when the roles of men and women become more similar, fertility and other characteristics of

**TABLE 2. HOUSEHOLD AND FAMILY VARIABLES**

VARIABLES	x	SEC	NEC	D
1. Average household size				
1985	2.6	(2.9-3.0)	(2.2-2.6)	S
1995	2.6	(2.7-3.2)	(2.0-2.3)	L
2. One person households (%)				
	13.2	(5.4-9.1)	(16.8-22.5)	VL
3. Marriage				
1970	7.6	(7.5-9.4)	(5.1-7.9)	L
1995	5.1	(5.0-6.6)	(3.8-6.6)	S
4. Cohabitation (%)				
	2.3		25	VL
5. Divorce				
1970	1.0	(0.1-0.4)	(1.7-2.5)	VL
1995	1.8	(0.5-1.2)	(2.5-2.7)	VL
6. Contraception (%)				
Total	-	59	78	L
Modern	-	38	71	L
7. Fertility				
1960	2.6	(2.3-3.1)	(2.2-2.7)	
1995	1.4	(1.2-1.4)	(1.7-1.8)	
Reversal				
8. Births outside marriage (%)				
1970	6	(1-7)	(6-19)	L
1995	23	(3-19)	(33-53)	VL
9. Mean age of women at childbearing				
1970	27.5	28.3	(26.7-27.1)	S
1995	28.9	(28.1-28.7)	(29.2-29.3)	5
10. Single-parent families (%)				
1980	-	(4.4-11.6)	18.1	VL
1990	-	(5.7-12.5)	20.8	VL
11. Children living with one parent				
	9	(4-7)	8	VL

See Table I for footnotes and sources

family life change. The new understanding of reproductive behavior carries with it a change in the concept of masculinity and femininity too, mainly because the modern contraceptive techniques are introduced in the sixties are controlled by women, while their job opportunities are limited or inadequate. Perhaps it is not fully inappropriate to name this association of variables as the *Lysistrata* effect because of its impact on conception, although not necessarily on sexual intercourse as in the ancient Greek comedy of Aristophanes.

If we now turn our attention to the family and households variables included in table 2 we can also observe many differences between southern and northern countries. The average number of persons per household is the lowest in the northern countries (Sweden = 2.1), whereas Ireland, Greece, Spain, and Portugal all exceed three persons per household.

Accordingly, the proportion of one-person families is three times as high in Sweden as in Spain, Greece, and Portugal. As fertility continues to decline, however, these figures will continue to converge.

Information about households taken from the European Community Household Panel (ECHP) reveal that single adults over sixty-five are much less frequent in Greece, Spain, Portugal, and Italy (3–4 percent). The same observation applies to young and middle-aged single people. Even couples with one person over sixty-five are less frequent in the South and Ireland. In contrast, the category of extended families, which included three-generation families and households with relatives or other people living in them, is more frequent in the South, but is extremely unusual in Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Finland.

These data indicate that a large number of young adults and older people live in the family household in the southern countries. It can be assumed that the members of these enlarged households often have relatively low incomes or pensions, or that they are studying or are unemployed. In these cases, the extended family of the South serves to support these individuals, but in the North, in contrast, lower portions of young adults are found living with their parents; young people become self-sufficient and move out of the home at an age that is relatively independent of their work or family situation. In the South, people move out of the home much later and do so in relation to their work, income and the start of a family.

In summary, given the information in tables 1 and 2, it can be stated that divergence between northern and southern Europe is seen in women's part-time work, long-term unemployment of women of all ages and men under twenty-five, the numbers of single-member households and couples living together, the rate of divorce and extramarital births, the abundance of single-parent families, and the number of children who remain in the family home until a late age.

In terms of the future, however, the main concern is not so much whether the differences that currently exist between the Nordic and Mediterranean countries of Europe will persist, but what we do not know based on them. Of the three main types of families present at the end of the twentieth century—married couples, single-parent families, and step families—the first is the most common in southern Europe, while the other two types, as well as cohabiting couples and one person households, are more frequent in the north.

#### **Intraregional convergence**

During the decades I deal with here, the European family has been converging in general, but also diverging in some cases. Exceptionally, a pattern reversal has happened also, so that at present Spaniards and Italians are behaving fertility-wise the way the Swedish did thirty years ago. Whether the present singularities will decrease, become

permanent, or increase, nobody can tell for sure, but at any time the picture of the European family will always be incomplete unless we not only consider convergences but also divergences and singularities.

This view, however, does not reflect the whole picture, because a cursory analysis of the distribution of some significant social indicators reveals that an unexpected process is ongoing now. As Swedish sociologist Joachim Vogel<sup>6</sup> has noted in a recent paper “there are considerable similarities between clusters of European member states and dissimilarities between regions.” This means that intraregional similarities and interregional differences are to be taken into account, even though the general idea of overall convergence remains valid and is especially applicable in the economic evolution of Europe.

Concerning dependency ratios, the northern countries exhibit the lower ones and the southern countries the highest, save Portugal, which has higher female employment. The same applies to the female employment index developed by Vogel, which is lowest in the southern cluster plus Ireland and Luxemburg. In its turn, his unemployment hazard score shows Sweden as the least exposed and Greece, Italy, and Spain as the most. The traditional family index divides Europe very neatly in those countries where it is strong (Spain, Italy, Portugal, Greece and Ireland—all Catholic) and Luxemburg as the singularity case, and the rest where it is gradually losing ground.

Vogel described in his study on the “welfare mix,” a triple institutional configuration of provisional of social welfare services in European societies on the part of the state, market, and family,<sup>7</sup> using the available indicators to construct a typology which conventionally assigns to the Mediterranean family the description of tradition compared to post-modern, a term used by some authors for the Nordic family.<sup>8</sup>

The family system assigns personal responsibility for the welfare of members and close relatives. In this sense, it can be considered a welfare institution parallel to the public sector but one with different types of compensation, particularly because it also provides immaterial benefits such as emotional ties, identity, and personal security. In view of the fact that the family system exercises social control and defines personal opportunities, gradual regression of the traditional family goes hand in hand with evolution of the welfare state. Transfer systems and public services reduce the dependence of individuals on the family and provide support for the employment of women and their lives outside the home. At the same time, full-time work and economic independence is key to festering expansion of the public sector.

The interdependence of the family and welfare state becomes evident if we use the statistics available for the groups of countries mentioned above. The traditional family coexists with a certain degree of basic welfare in the Southern

European countries, while weak family ties coincide with strong welfare states in the Nordic and central countries.

In order to prove these propositions empirically, Vogel approaches the construction of a traditional family index using the five following indicators:

- 1) Average household size in the country.
- 2) The percentage of adults living alone who are between the ages of thirty and sixty-four, that is, after the period when families are formed and before the death rate increases the proportion of people living alone.
- 3) The percentage of adults living with partners without marrying.
- 4) The percentage of young adults under the age of thirty still living with their parents.
- 5) The percentage of adults living in extended families, mainly three generation families.

All of the European countries were rated according to these five indicators and assigned to one of three groups approximately the same size (high, medium, and low) using the scores of -1, 0, or +1, which were later added together. The results reveal the existence of a modest degree of welfare provided by the strong family systems in the South (Spain, Italy, Portugal, and Greece) and in Ireland, all of which are Catholic countries. This group of five countries differs from the other two; at the opposite extreme is the Nordic group with weak family ties, which includes Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and the Netherlands, while the group in the middle covers the remaining central European countries and Norway.

The stability of the ranking of almost all the indicators proves that there is an underlying factor that influences the components of the index; perhaps it has something to do with the fact that the nuclear family is still in the majority in all of the member countries of the EU, even when differences between them are clear.

Vogel's research on the welfare mix confirms that there are considerable similarities within the groups of European countries and dissimilarities between the different regions. The three welfare institutions in the Nordic region and Southern European region show different characteristics. The central group, made up of the remaining member states of the European Union (Germany, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxemburg, United Kingdom, and Ireland), is located in an intermediate position in all respects. The countries in each of the three regions generally fit into the same institutional categories. In other words, the countries that belong to the same group present almost identical combinations of welfare providers. However, some exceptions related to the traditional family index do exist, as described below.

The countries, when ranked according to the traditional family index and their social protection expenditure, except for the Netherlands, fall into place as expected. Because the

social protection expenses are calculated using the new harmonized ESSPROS, Holland's position is plausible. A similar analysis of the traditional family index with the rate of dependence—inactive population, overactive population—shows that again three homogeneous groups of welfare provider mixes appear. Portugal and Ireland do not follow the pattern, with the latter closer to the Southern group in terms of the employment of women and the role of the traditional family. The Netherlands is more similar to the Nordic group in terms of the starting of families.

In summary, this analysis recalls the functional relationship observed among the three welfare institutions. The state is most active in the Nordic region, where all of the countries also have the most complete work markets given their efficiency in contributing to the material welfare of the population. The Swedish model, or even the Nordic model, combines a strong welfare state with work market policies that promote full employment, equal opportunities and the maximum redistribution of income. In fact, the market in the Nordic countries is the most efficient system that contributes to the welfare state; it provides generous benefits, limits the need for social intervention, and expands the tax base.

Compared to the past, this mutually beneficial system has become weaker in Sweden and Finland during the recent crisis, when the market has reduced its contribution, and this has had repercussions on the transfer system and public services. At present all of the Nordic countries rank very low in terms of traditional family support, perhaps as a result of the strong welfare state, broad work markets, and the fragmentation and variety of family types. Along this same line, it can be observed that the Southern group has a weak welfare state and market combined with a strong family tradition. There is a functional relationship between the need for a social support network and the existence of strong families and a weak market and welfare state.

The importance of the traditional family index can also be seen in factors concerning inequality between generations. The Nordic welfare states are less efficient in limiting inequality between generations in terms of actual life conditions than the family welfare states of the South. All of the strong welfare states (the Nordic countries) are also characterized for having very broad work markets and welfare providers, along with quite weak family institutions. The Southern group of countries, in contrast, has weak welfare states and work markets but very strong traditional family systems. At the same time, the central European countries are situated in the middle with few exceptions in terms of the three institutions.

This uniformity within the groups underscores the interrelationship of the institutions. Strong welfare states also have strong work markets that mobilize much of the population and provide earnings for almost all of the adults. This

mutually beneficial relationship between the State and market is a precondition for the battle against poverty, social exclusion and general inequality. A broad work market produces a tax base capable of financing a major welfare state and one that can limit the need for social intervention. Consequently, active, ambitious market policies play a major role in advanced welfare states. In fact, whenever one of the two institutions receives a high score, the other one does too.

In the Southern group of countries, with the exception of Portugal, there are weak work markets and the traditional family plays an important role as a welfare institution. Household size is much larger, a high percentage of the population lives in expanded households, young people move out of the family home at a later age, many older people go to live with their children, divorce rates are lower, and fewer people live alone. The traditional family is thus the functional alternative when the market and welfare do not provide a basic standard of living. At the same time, the traditional make-up of families and gender roles lead to low employment rates and to a weak welfare state.

### Concluding Remarks

In summing up, it is necessary to insist on a few points. In the Nordic countries, the labor market is the most efficient system for providing welfare. In addition, it increases the tax base and limits the need for social intervention. In contrast, the countries of southern Europe have weak welfare states and work markets combines with a strong family tradition. Support from the family in this group functions as an alternative to markets and states that are poor welfare providers. However, unlike the situation in the Nordic countries—where the lowest levels of inequality of income, class, and poverty are found—the traditional family is unable to reduce individual inequality as efficiently as the welfare state is; for this reason, there are higher rates of inequality of income and poverty in the South.

Nevertheless, the traditional family does, in fact, play an important role in reducing inequality and poverty, above all generational inequality. Young adults remain longer in their parents' homes in Italy, Greece, Spain, and Portugal, especially when they are studying and before they find a job or settle down in a permanent relationship. The same can be said about older people, who often move in with their children, particularly when their pensions are quite low. This pattern explains why older people and young adults have a better position in the southern countries than in the Nordic ones. However, it should be pointed out that this benefit is obtained at the expense of the personal dependence of women, young adults, and older people, something that is rejected in the individualistic Nordic and central European countries.

Over the course of the last twenty years, the welfare state/market mix has become weaker in the majority of the European countries. The market has reduced its contribution

to social protection and this has affected transfer systems and public services. Around 1990 a long period of expansion of the welfare state increased employment rates and gradual change towards more equal living conditions came to an end. Today the future appears to be dominated by convergence towards more reduced welfare states, but it is not easy to predict the role that families and their various forms will play in the South of Europe and perhaps even in the North.

Something we can say, however, in spite of the long observed loss of functions by the traditional family: in those countries where young people are afflicted by unemployment or drug addiction, it plays an important role, which increases the value people of advanced industrial societies assign to the institution. As surveys repeatedly show, the great majority of Europeans reject the idea that family is obsolete, and 95.7 percent place it at the top as the best-liked institution.<sup>9</sup>

This wide agreement raises an interesting question: which family types are people referring to while making such a strong choice? The answer is not at all easy, but there are forms of looking for one empirically. Some years ago, Professor Jan Trost of Uppsala University designed a questionnaire to find out what people think a family is and drew up a list of some seventeen types, from the married couple with children down to the so-called homosexual marriages. The application of this questionnaire to university students in different European countries showed that in all places 100 percent of the young people interviewed stated that the married couple with children is a family, whereas the agreement on the rest of the suggested types ranged from 95 to 6 percent.

As a model, the traditional family is alive in the minds of people; as a working institution, it is still performing important functions. While its fragmentation and the multiplication of types is an undeniable fact, it is not clear that this process will accelerate and that the traditional family is condemned to death. On the contrary, chances are that it may come back in the middle run, although not to what it was.

### NOTES

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