

Commentary I

The Nordic Model, EU Policy & Gender Relations

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First, I would like to thank Gösta Esping-Andersen for a stimulating keynote address and a thought-provoking paper. I feel that his work on the future of European welfare states in the 21st century is a very important contribution, above all because it addresses two key issues that are all too often ignored in current discussions on socio-economic policy-- the implications of new family patterns and dynamics, and the need for greater investments in children and families.

As for Gösta's argument that the highest priority in the future should be to ensure the welfare of children, I could not agree more. Also, I very much appreciate his recent emphasis on the economic context of reproduction, which represents a major shift in his analysis of contemporary welfare states (developed in his latest book *Social Foundations of Postindustrial Economies*).

My own view is that comparative research on welfare states should pay much greater attention to demographics and to conditions affecting reproduction. Such an emphasis is important, not only to assist in the identification of current and future challenges to European welfare states, but also to help us understand our common past. (I have previously made this suggestion in a variety of contexts, including a paper entitled "Education and Research in Times of an Ageing Population", presented at a meeting of the Swedish Ministry of Education in Uppsala, 1-3 March 2001.)

When we discuss the Nordic model, for example, we often compare current crises and challenges with conditions during the welfare state's "golden era" of the 1950s and '60s. But, in fact, that period was unique from a demographic point of view. It was characterized by a very large population segment in the working ages, and a comparatively small proportion of older persons. Today, the situation is very different. Old-age dependency rates in Europe are high, and they will become even higher in the future due to the low or declining birth rates of recent decades.

Three issues

In responding to Gösta Esping-Andersen's presentation, I would like to focus on three issues. First, what are the implications of his analysis for the Swedish version of the Nordic model, and for the current debate on social policy in this country? Second, how can his call for larger investments in social programmes be reconciled with the prevailing notion that we have to accept the current

economic priorities of the European Union, including the so-called Maastricht criteria? (The latter are strict norms for economic policy, including limits of two percent on average annual inflation and three percent on the annual budget deficit.)

Third, what principles of social justice should in the future apply to European women, and to mothers in particular? In this regard, I am not certain that the "win-win" strategy that Gösta has suggested-- employment of mothers coupled with services to families-- is sufficient to resolve the fundamental crisis in gender relations that we can now observe in Europe.

Cause for alarm

Regarding the first question: Gösta suggests that the highest priority should be placed on ensuring the welfare of children and developing services to households. He also emphasizes that the future economy of Europe has to be based on the two-earner household. What are the implications of these proposals for Sweden?

From a Swedish perspective, of course, it is gratifying to note that Gösta's recommended priorities have already been adopted by this country. For example, Sweden has for many years been relatively successful at incorporating single mothers into the labour market and combating child poverty. There is thus reason to be optimistic about the capacity of our welfare state to meet future challenges.

Upon reflection, however, it is clear that the development of the Swedish welfare state during the past decade gives cause for alarm. In the wake of the 1990s' economic crisis, Sweden has in several important respects retreated from the priorities urged by Gösta Esping-Andersen. The crucial question is: To what extent are the basic components of the Swedish welfare state at risk?

An important conclusion in this regard is suggested by the report of a national inquiry that was submitted in January, 2000. Entitled *A Welfare Balance Sheet*, a major finding of the report is that the Swedish economic crisis of the 1990s had especially severe consequences for three segments of the population: children and young people, immigrants, and single mothers. (See *Välfärd vid vägskäl. Delbetänkande från Kommittén Välfärdsbokslut*, SOU 2000:3, Stockholm: Socialdepartementet.)

Sense of urgency

In other words, those whose needs should have been given the highest priority, including children, were instead among the hardest hit. Furthermore, the heaviest cuts in public expenditures were made to social services, while outlays for income maintenance actually increased, primarily to the benefit of the middle and upper classes. This response to the economic crisis of the 1990s is, of course, exactly the opposite of that recommended by Gösta Esping-Andersen. It is a development that should incite us to engage in scholarly and political discourse on the future of the Nordic model in Sweden.

Another important lesson from Sweden's experience of the 1990s is that Gösta's recommended strategy of greater investment in children and families is not, in practice, especially easy to implement. Not even in Sweden-- which has strongly advocated social policies that are favourable to women and children-- has it apparently been possible to provide them and other vulnerable subgroups with adequate safeguards in a time of economic crisis. This seems to indicate that, in order to successfully pursue a child-friendly social policy in the future, it will be necessary to advocate that policy with an even greater sense of urgency than Gösta has conveyed today.

In short, we must make it absolutely clear that our future prosperity depends not only on the establishment of competitive markets, the primary goal of the European Union, but equally on investment in people and, above all, in children. That observation leads to my second question, i.e. whether it is possible to pursue a policy of greater investment in children and families within the framework of the EU's current priorities.

Obvious tension

Gösta Esping-Andersen argues that we have to accept the status quo with regard to social spending in relation to GDP. He also refers to the Maastrich criteria as the point of departure for devising future social policies in Europe. I can understand that such a perspective might appear suitable for a presentation to an agency of the European Union, including the report by Gösta that has served as the conceptual framework of this seminar ("A Welfare State for the 21st Century"). But should we not, at least in this setting, discuss the obvious tension between the economic policy of the EU-- which focuses primarily on increasing prosperity by means of increasingly competitive markets-- and proposals for placing greater priority on investments in people?

It is indisputable that investments in children are of vital significance to the future of Europe, for at least two reasons: the welfare of children is at great risk in our present society; and our continued prosperity depends on their future contributions. It is therefore my view that we should not so readily accept fundamental criteria, such as a ceiling on the level of social expenditures, which have the effect of making it very difficult to pursue the policies we advocate.

Again, I think that we need to be even more emphatic in our demands for a greater priority on social investments than we have been. This leads to my final point, which has to do with gender relations and the value we place on work performed within the realm of education and caring services. In the future, what principles of social justice should apply to women, and to mothers in particular?

Gender-neutral citizenship

With respect to gender relations, I feel that Gösta Esping-Andersen's analysis is based on very traditional assumptions. He mentions that husbands might do some of the work in future households. Basically, however, the proposed strategy seems to assume that women will continue to perform most of the chores in the home. Future families must have two breadwinners, and higher priority should be given to household services "in order to reconcile the career and family goals

of mothers". But there is no mention of men's responsibilities in the home-- of the need to promote gender equality in connection not only with paid work, but also with the performance of unpaid work in society.

It might be argued that the goal of gender equality is still not realistic. However, I would like to emphasize that the Swedish welfare model is, in fact, based on a gender-neutral concept of citizenship which is not limited to supplying services to working mothers. Moreover, the current situation of declining marriage and fertility rates throughout Europe suggests that gender-neutral citizenship, with similar rights and obligations for both sexes, is precisely what most modern European women are demanding. If men fail to respond to such demands, the effect is likely to be an increase in unstable family patterns-- one of the problematic demographic trends in Europe today.

Regarding gender equality, I feel that Sweden's experience is worth considering, since this country has actually tried to pursue the win-win strategy recommended by Gösta Esping-Andersen-- i.e. to combine women's employment with extensive services to households.

Nevertheless, many Swedish women do not regard themselves as "winners". In a survey of attitudes toward families and children that was published last week, ninety percent of the Swedish women interviewed stated that they could not imagine having children if the father were not prepared to share the daily responsibilities of the household on equal terms. (See Winberg, Margareta, och Nordh, Sture, "Barn misgynnar kvinnans karriär", *Dagens Nyheter*, 7 March 2001.) The time when European welfare states could count on the unpaid and unequal contributions of women has, I believe, definitely passed.

In the end, we are faced with a fundamental problem in the probably not-so-distant future: How to organize and finance all the work within the realm of reproduction and the family that women once performed free of charge, as their lot in a traditional and highly unequal division of labour between the sexes?

Lack of caring

A striking feature of current neo-liberal ideology is that it lacks all reference to issues of caring or domesticity. That was not the case when the capitalist economy was first being established. According to the influential theory of "separate spheres" which accompanied the rise of the male-breadwinner system, it was the proper function of men to earn profits and wages in the marketplace, while women were assigned responsibility for other needs-- caring, emotional support and maintenance of family networks.

Today, the prevailing notion is that we should all be out earning profits and wages, while other aspects of life should be dealt with during our leisure time-- or, if a new service economy emerges, perhaps "unskilled labour" will be able to service some household needs. But are such chores, which to a large extent involve personal services, *really* unskilled and *should* they be?

When caring and domestic services were included in women's traditional role, they required life-long learning and were regarded with great respect, particularly in rural areas. Could it be that we perceive this kind of work as unskilled because

it has previously been performed by women, without pay? Also, should we not consider the likely consequences if certain kinds of personal services are so poorly compensated that only young people are prepared to accept such low-paid jobs, as stepping stones to more rewarding careers?

Fairness and freedom

I believe that we are already facing great difficulties in this regard. Two or three decades ago, highly-skilled women were prepared to work for low wages-- in the Swedish public sector for example-- since traditional gender roles were still pervasive and most female jobs were poorly paid. In this way, society benefited from large reserves of skilled female work, which was not performed mainly in response to market incentives, but rather because women had learnt that it is work that must be done, and done with great devotion. In short, women's discipline and sense of duty have until now provided the foundation for reproduction and caring services.

But I do not think that this will remain the case in the future. Women demand fairness and freedom, and they will continue to do so. It is therefore necessary to question whether the polarized service economy outlined by Gösta Esping-Andersen-- an economy in which traditional unpaid women's work becomes low-paid work for poorly educated men and women-- is an inevitable development that cannot be challenged.

If a challenge is to be made, however, it needs to be clearly understood that the realm of reproduction and family life is of fundamental importance to our society, even in relation to economic growth and competitiveness.

It is to the very great credit of Gösta Esping-Andersen that he has stimulated debate on the central issues of reproduction and the family, with convincing arguments based on extensive empirical research.

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