

The Right to have a Father: Parental Leaves in Sweden

By Steven Saxonberg, Associate Professor of Political Science at Uppsala University in Sweden, guest researcher at the Institute of Sociology at the Czech Academy of Sciences, and research associate at the Department of Social Policy at the Masaryk University in Brno.¹

In the Czech Republic one of the most common criticisms of the Swedish model of family policy is that it places the interests of the parents above those of the children. According to this criticism, Swedish daycare policies are designed from the perspective of labor market policy rather than the perspective of what is best for children. Actually, the Swedish government realized that there is some truth to this criticism, which is why it recently *increased* access to daycare. For, while it is common for Czechs to argue that children suffer if they attend daycare facilities, it is equally common for Swedes to argue that children suffer if they are excluded from daycare. From this perspective, the state failed to consider the child's situation when it previously decided that children do not have the right to keep their daycare place when one of their parents is on parental leave with a younger child. In purely economical terms the previous policies made sense: if a parent is at home with one child, then keeping his or her brother or sister in daycare costs the state money without the added benefit of enabling the parents to return to work faster and thus contribute to the national economy. In psychological terms, however, the policy was seriously flawed, because it could be traumatic for children to suddenly be forced to leave daycare and lose the opportunity to be social and play with friends and instead be at home alone with an infant baby brother or sister. Consequently, in 2002 the government decided to allow parents to keep their children in public daycare institutions 15 hours a week even when they are at home with a younger child and receiving parent leave benefits.²

How can we explain this huge difference in attitudes, whereby most Czechs think that if we take into account the children's best interests, we should close down daycare for children under 3 and force the mothers to stay at home for three years with the children, while most Swedes believe that if we take into account the best interests of children, then they should have access to daycare and fathers should share in the child raising? I will argue that the main differences come from the different historical legacies. In particular two things are important:

1) Sweden has a unitary system with one type of parental leave and one type of daycare, while the Czech Republic has two types of parental leaves and two types of daycare.

2) The Czech Republic has endured four decades of rather orthodox communist dictatorship.

I will explain these differences below by first examining Swedish daycare and then its parental leave system.

Sweden's Single System of Daycare

In former Czechoslovakia, public childcare institutions were broken down into two groups: nursery schools (jesli) for children under 3 and kindergartens (materske skoly) for children 3-6. In Sweden by contrast, basically only one type of daycare exists for children 0-6, although in recent years children have been allowed to spend their last year of childcare at the school, where they will begin the following year. In this sense, the Swedish system has become

¹ This research was financed through a grant by the Baltic Sea Foundation in Sweden.

² Barbara Martin Korpi, *The Politics of Pre-school: Intentions and Decisions Underlying the Emergence and Growth of the Swedish Pre-school* trs by Brian R. Turner, (The Ministry of Education and Research) downloaded from <http://www.regeringen.se/content/1/c6/09/10/61/322638cd.pdf>, page 70.

similar to the American one, in that children spend the first years at one place (in America called “nursery school”) and the very last year of pre-school (which in America is called “kindergarten”) at the school where they will begin the first grade. In contrast to the USA, though, the childcare facilities are heavily subsidized so that all parents can afford to send their children to these facilities regardless of income. Another difference to the American system is that the state places strict demands on the quality of the building facilities, it requires teachers to have a college degree in pre-school education,³ and has a maximum teacher-child ration of 5-1, although my experience is that there are usually 3 children per teacher.

In the unified Swedish system, children attending pre-schools are considered a pedagogical issue and pre-schools are now under the ministry of education. Previously they were under the supervision of the ministry social affairs. However, what is really amazing for Swedes and most Western observers is the fact that under the communist regimes in Eastern and Central Europe, daycare facilities for children under 3 came under the supervision of the ministry of health! While the authorities in Sweden treat small children as a pedagogical issue, who need the guidance of qualified teachers with a good education in child psychology and early child pedagogy, the Czechoslovak authorities treated small children as a health issue, who need the support of nurses in order to stay healthy. If the motto of Swedish pre-schools could be described as “Learn! Grow! Play! Gain social competence!” then the motto of Czechoslovak nurseries was “Don’t get sick!” Given that the main task of Czechoslovak nurseries was to keep children from getting sick, it is not surprising that they gained a poor reputation. Not only did they fail in helping children develop emotionally, socially and psychologically, they did not even succeed in their main task of keeping children healthy!⁴ Since the communist authorities were not interested in providing good pedagogical care, the nursery schools were often very overcrowded, when made it easy for sicknesses to spread among the children. Consequently, mothers had to stay home with their sick children so much, the communist rulers decided it was just as easy an more economical to provide extended maternity leaves for mothers, so they could stay at home with their children for the entire 3 years.

Because of this poor experience in the past the myth has emerged that children under three suffer if they attend nursery schools and that it is “natural” for mothers to stay at home with their children until they are at least 3 or 4 years old. According to that logic, the Czech Republic should also disband its universities, since the communist era universities offered students a poor education that was bogged down in Marxist-Leninist jargon. Rather than close down the universities the post-communist leaders reformed them, but they decided not to apply the same logic to nursery schools.

It is also interesting to note that even though the communist nursery schools were undoubtedly less popular than in Sweden, where public opinion polls show that parents are very satisfied with the public daycare facilities,⁵ so far no scientific studies have been made about how well children of Czech (and previously Czechoslovak) nurseries schools have fared. Here the communist legacy also seems to play a strong roll as a tradition has emerged in which one can stake one’s claim on ideology without the need to refer to the empirical world. Thus, Czech psychologists deride the evils of daycare and argue that it is natural for children home with their mothers (but *not* their fathers because children need clear roll

³ Not everyone working at a pre-school needs to have a teaching degree, but all childcare facilities must have some employees that hold degrees.

⁴ Marie Čermáková, Hana Hašková, Alena Křížková, Marcela Linková, Hana Maříková, and Martina Musilová, *Relations and Changes of Gender Differences in the Czech society in the 90’s*. (Prague: Institute of Sociology of Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, 2000), p. 92.

⁵ Lenart Nilsson, “Förnyad polarisering i välfärdspolitiken,” p. 79-91 in Sören Holberg and Lennart Weibull eds., *Land, Du välsignade?* (Göteborg: SOMrapport nr. 26, 2000), p. 80.

models), but they make these claims based on outdated pre-war psychological theories rather than on any empirical studies. When pressed to give sources for their claims Czech psychologists typically mumble something about a study of “institutionalized” children during the 1960s. Pressed further, one finds out it was a study of children at an orphanage! In light of this, it is interesting to point out that by the time the study of Czech orphanages took place in the 1960s, such institutions had already long since been banned in Sweden! Instead, in Sweden such children are placed in foster homes, because it is acknowledged that they will receive more love from foster parents than from child miners at orphanages. Since mainstream Czech politicians (mostly male) believe the same, they prefer to listen to the advise of such psychologists as well as Christian fundamentalists⁶ rather than listen to the many Czech and international academic scholars, whose commit the “fallacy” of using empirical data rather than ideology to question current Czech policies. It should be obvious for anyone other than ideologically driven Czech psychologists and politicians that children with loving parents, who attend high quality daycare institutions but return to a happy family, will be much better off than parentless children living 24 hours in a public institution.

Even though no serious studies of children attending daycare exist for the Czech Republic, Swedish and international studies do in fact show generally that children who have attended daycare facilities do better socially, psychologically and educationally than children who have not.⁷ In addition, empirical studies of the USA, where there is a high variation in the quality of daycare services exists, have not surprising concluded that children are better off if they attend high quality daycare facilities rather than low quality ones.⁸ Thus, even if it would be true that Czech children suffered when attending neo-Stalinist nursery schools in the 1960s, it would not mean that they would suffer if they attended high quality daycare, unless one would argue that somehow Czech children are biologically different than Swedish ones.

Swedish Parental Leaves: The Flexible One-Level System

The paid parental leave in Sweden is much shorter than in the Czech Republic, which is made possible by the fact that, as discussed above, Swedish daycare for children under 3 enjoys much higher support than Czech nursery schools. Even though the parental leave period is much shorter than in the Czech Republic, it is also much more flexible. Presently, the fully paid period amounts to 13 months at 80% of the parent’s salary, plus an additional 3-month period paid at a flat rate. The 13 months are to be split evenly between the mother and the father, but one parent is allowed to give some of his or her months to the other. So even though mothers still take a longer leave period on the average than fathers do, fathers still must sign a paper giving the mother permission to use his months. Two of the months are reserved for each parent, which means that the remaining 9 months can be divided according to the parents’ wishes.

The system is even more flexible than it first seems for two reasons. First, parents do not need to take out 100% of their eligible benefit for each month they are at home. Thus, it is rather common for parents to take 50% of their eligible benefit per month for a period of 26 months. But they can also take out 100% benefits for one month and 20% for the next month

⁶ Such as two members of a German Evangelical seminar, who were invited to give speeches at the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs’ conference “Early Child Care Between Family and State” held in November, 2007.

⁷ Bengt-Erik Andersson, "Tidig dagisstart det bästa för de allra flesta barn," *Dagens Nyheter*, 8 april 2005; Bengt-Erik Andersson, “Effects of Day-Care on Cognitive and Socioemotional Competence of Thirteen-Year-Old Swedish Schoolchildren,” *Child Development*, Vol. 63, No. 1. (Feb., 1992), pp. 20-36.

⁸ For an overview, see Margaret R. Burchinal, “Child Care Experiences and Developmental Outcomes,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 563, The Silent Crisis in U. S. Child Care. (May, 1999), pp. 73-97. For an overview of the Swedish case, see Magnus Kihlbom, *Om små barnens behov och utveckling* (Swedish Authority for School Development, 2003).

etc. The only limits are that the full amount of time must be used before the child fills 8 years and that each parent only has the right to return to his or her job if they return within 18 months. This still means that if each parent stays at home for 18 months, the child could stay at home for 3 years as is the norm in the Czech Republic.

The second reason why the system is flexible is that parents can share the time any way they want. For example, if three pairs decide that they want to stay at home for a total of 2 years, one pair might decide that the mother will stay at home for the first year while the father will stay at home for the second year. A second pair might decide that they will alternate months, so that the mother stays at home during the odd numbered months and the father during the even. A third pair might decide that the mother will stay at home on Mondays, Wednesdays and Friday, while the father will stay at home on Tuesdays and Thursdays. There are an infinite number of possibilities.

The Czech system is much less flexible than the Swedish one. As with daycare, it is based on two levels: one maternity leave that is rather generous in replacing one's previous salary, but it only reserved for the mother; and one "extended maternity" leave that recently became officially a parental leave, but only pays a low flat rate at such a low level that nobody expects fathers to share in the leave period. Recent proposals will make the system more complicated but even more rigid, as parents will be able to choose among 3 different levels of parental leaves, with the shorter periods paying the higher rates and the longer periods the lower rates. However, parents must decide from the beginning whether they will take the fasted track and stay at home for two years or the longer tracks. Then after the first year of parental leave they must decide whether they will take a 3- year or 4-year leave. The Swedish system is much less complicated and allows parents to continuously change the length of their leaves and their rate of payment.

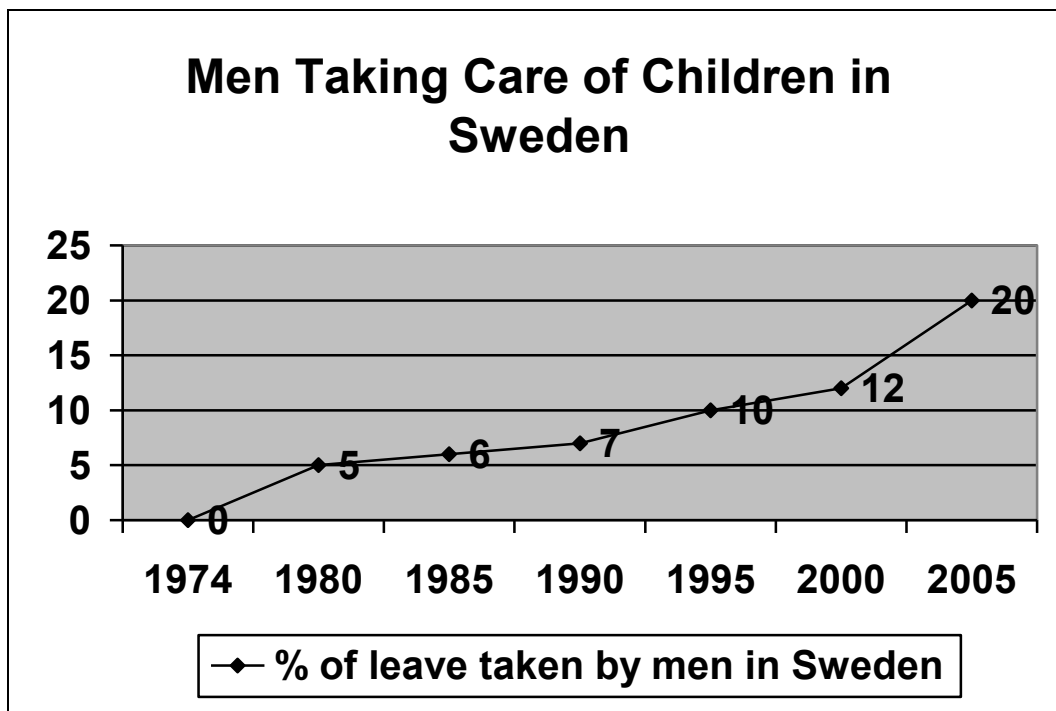
The systems are different also because they have different goals. The Swedish system aims to support gender equality, higher fertility rates and greater economic efficiency, while the Czech system aims at supporting conservative notions of divided gender roles, by forcing mothers to stay at home for at least three years per child, regardless of the results for fertility, economic efficiency or the ability of women to reach their full potential as citizens. The two-level system in the Czech Republic ensures the maintenance of "traditional" gender roles, as only mothers can utilize the short but generous maternity leave, while the parental leave pays such a low level of support that few families can afford to have the father stay at home, since the loss of income would be too high in a society in which fathers usually have higher incomes than mothers.

The one-level system in Sweden gives much greater encouragement for fathers to stay at home, since the loss of income for the family is rather low, because fathers receive 80% of their income up to a certain level. Fathers receive additional incentive to stay at home with the children because two months are reserved only for the fathers. Thus, the family actually stands to lose a lot of money if the father does not stay at home for these two months. Finally, fathers receive psychological encouragement to stay at home with their children, since officially half the leave time is meant for them and they must sign a statement allowing the mother to use part of their leave time. Moreover, the state social insurance company sends letters to fathers reminding them of how much time is left of their parental leave, which further encourages them to stay at home for half the time.

As the table below shows, when the gender-neutral parental leave was introduced and open for men in 1974, no men were staying at home with their children. By 1990 still only around 7% of the parental leave time was used by fathers, even though the replacement rate at the time of 90% gave them strong financial incentives to stay at home. Various explanations have arisen to explain the unwillingness of fathers to go on parental leave. One obvious factor is that cultural values change slowly. However, other arguments have pointed out to

hindrances from the workplace. Studies have shown that fathers are more likely to go on parental leaves if the workplace culture is supportive for such fathers.⁹ Even if fathers want to go on parental leave they were often afraid to ask their employers for permission. For while employers expect their female employees to eventually have children and take time off from work to raise their children, then do not expect fathers to do the same. Therefore, fathers who ask for their right to stay at home with their children risk being chastised for not being “ambitious.”

In order to give fathers added support against their employers, the center-right government that came to power in 1991 introduced a “daddy” month starting from 1995. This reform reserved one month of the parental leave only for the father. Consequently, as the diagram shows, even though the replacement rate for parental leaves had been lowered from 90% to 80%, the percentage of leave time taken by fathers immediately increased to 10%. Still, fathers in the private sector often felt pressure not to utilize their rights to parental leave. For example, a friend of mine complained that her husband’s employer told the men working there that if they even said the word “father leave” they would have to hand in their keys. Since she pressured her husband to take his one-month leave he was able to work out a special arrangement with his employer in which he would stay at home for one day a week for 25 days on the condition that he told his colleagues he was on business trips! To get around this problem the social democratic government increased the parental leave to 13 months in 2002 but reserved this added month only for fathers.¹⁰ Now that families stood to “lose” two months of leave pay if the father did not stay at home, fathers became stronger in their bargaining position vis-à-vis their employees. Again the percentage of parental leave time taken by fathers immediately increased and has now surpassed the 20% level.



Source: SCB, ”Uttag av föräldrapenning och tillfällig föräldrapenning 1974-2005” downloaded from http://www.scb.se/templates/tableOrChart___27563.asp.

⁹ See, for example, Linda Haas, et al. “The Impact of Organizational Culture on Men’s Use of Parental Leave in Sweden” *Community, Work & Family*, vol. 5, no. 3, (2002), pp. 319-342.

¹⁰ Ilija Batljan, Siv Tillander, Sara Örnhall Ljungh and Magnus Sjöström, “Föräldrapenning, pappornas uttag av dagar, fakta och analys” (Swedish Government Ministry of Social Affairs, 2004), p. 7. Downloaded from <http://www.regeringen.se/content/1/c6/01/77/14/116bbfe1.pdf>.

Arguments in Favor of Equal Sharing

The traditional arguments for gender equality have often centered around two important points: 1) it is better for women, 2) it is better for the economy. It is better for women if men share equality in the childraising tasks so that women no longer suffer from the “double burden” of working for a regular income while continuing to have the main responsibility for the household and childraising chores. As long as women must work much more than men and as long as they must leave the labor market for long periods when having children, then they will never be able to compete with men. Thus, women do not enjoy the same opportunities as men and compared to men they are excluded from the public sphere.

The other common argument deals with economic efficiency. It should be obvious that it would be best for the national economy if the most qualified people get the best jobs. However, if women are prevented from competing equally with men, then the most qualified people will not get the best jobs, which causes the economy to perform less efficiently. In the Czech Republic, for example, employers know that if they hire a young woman, she is likely to have two children which could cause her to go on leave for 5-8 years. Under such conditions it becomes more economically rational for the employer to hire a less qualified young male competitor, because even if he would not perform as well as the female candidate, he will never leave his jobs to take care of children.

Nevertheless, Czech conservatives would probably go back to psychological theories from the pre-war era and claim that children suffer if the father takes care of them, because it is “natural” for mothers to do so and children need to see clear gender-differentiated role models. Thus they would once again criticize the Swedish model for putting women’s interests above the children’s.

In light of this, it is interesting to note that in the Swedish discourse a lot of emphasis is placed on the children’s best interests as well. Yet, in contrast to the Czech case, the general consensus is that children will be much better off if their fathers spend a substantial amount of time at home with them. While Czech psychologists have talked about the need of having distant breadwinning fathers as “role models,” Swedish experts have talked about the need for children to have *both* parents.

One government report written during the previous social democratic government proclaims, that it is

important that the [parental leave] insurance is flexible enough to give both parents great freedom so that they can utilize the parental leaves according to their own needs. In these considerations, the children’s best must have the highest priority. The child has a right to early and close contact to both parents.¹¹

Another report from the current center-right government suggests giving special tax cuts to families that share the parental leave rather equally. The authors argue that “an increase in equality can contribute to more secure family relations for children as well as creating more equal opportunities for women and men to have careers.”¹²

A recent scientific study seems to confer these assumptions.¹³ This longitudinal study of Swedish families based on the national statistical data base, which includes all people legally living in Sweden, shows that couples are more likely to stay together if fathers share in the

¹¹ Batljan et al, p. 17, my translation.

¹² Swedish Ministry of Social Affairs, *Jämställdhetsbonus: Familjepolitisk reform*, DS 2007:50, p. 7. More precisely: when the parent who has been at home the longest period of time, he or she will get a tax cut when he or she returns to work so that they other parent can stay at home.

¹³ Karina Nilsson and Mattias Strandh, “A longitudinal study of separation and stability among Swedish new parents - The impact of role balance and specialization” Paper presented at the ESA-conference, Glasgow 2007, RN Sociology of Families and Intimate Lives, Session 7, September 5.

child leaves, while they are more like to break-up (if living together) or divorce (if married) when the fathers do not take any parental leave.

In addition to being better for women, better for children, better for families and better for the economy, one could hypothesize that shared parental leaves should also be beneficial for fathers. Unfortunately, I am not aware of any scientific study done about the experiences of fathers on father leave, but it is my personal experience that every father whom I have ever met in Sweden who has been on father leave is extremely happy that he had the chance to spend more time with his children and develop a closer relationship with them. The only negative point that has ever come up in discussions is that in smaller towns sometimes fathers felt bored, because they did not know other fathers, who were on leave at the time and share experiences together. But I have *never* met a father who regrets having spent time with his children.

The Choice Dilemma

Unless one is a religious fundamentalist little argument seems to exist for being against more equal gender roles, as it seems to benefit everyone: mothers, fathers, children, the family and the economy. Still a dilemma exists in how to create a more equal society. In Sweden some argue that fathers should be able to give away any of their leave time to mothers. They point out that this goes against the basic premise of Swedish social and economic policy in which everyone is treated as individuals. Why should parental leaves be an exception? Just as it would not make sense to let a mother receive a father's sick leave insurance payments when she is sick, why should she be able to take the father's parental leave days? Consequently, they argue that each parent should get a certain number of parental leave days and it should not be possible for them to share it.

A counterargument is that such policies would hinder freedom of choice. According to this argument, if fathers do not want to stay at home with their children, then the state should not encourage them to do so, since they would not be good fathers if they are doing something against their will. Few in Sweden would seriously believe that most men could not be good fathers. However, a stronger argument exists: it would be wrong to see all people as being completely equal. The goal of gender equality should not be to have a situation in which all fathers stay at home exactly half the time with their children. Rather the goal should be that *on the average* fathers should be at home as much as mothers. Once no correlation exists between gender and the length of parental leave, women will be able to compete equally with men which would give them equal citizenship and allow the economy to function more efficiently. Despite this, we would expect that in such a society different people would have different preference even if it would no longer be tied to gender. Some women would want to stay at home for all or most of the parental leave period, but so would some men. Therefore, it would not be necessarily good to force each relationship to be nearly exactly similar, even though we would expect that most good fathers and mothers would in fact want to spend some time at home with their children.

Actually few Swedes would argue with this reasoning. The problem in their eyes is rather how to get to such a stage in which no correlation exists between gender and length of parental leave. In the short-run they believe that a harder line is necessary to break down the barriers that prevent men from staying at home with their children.

The previous social democratic government ordered a report on parental leave reform. The head of the study chose a middle way between choice and equality by suggesting the Icelandic model in which one-third of the leave time is reserved for each parent, while the final third should be shared according to each couple's own wishes. The party congress did

not support the proposal,¹⁴ however; and after losing the elections in 2006 no further discussions have taken place at the top political level about reserving more months for fathers.

A Comparison to the Czech Republic's Neighbors

So far this paper has compared the Czech Republic's family policy to Sweden's, but as a closing remark, it is interesting to compare the Czech Republic to its neighbors. Poland, Germany and Hungary (which is not technically a neighbor, but was before the breakup of Czechoslovakia) all have had some similarities with the Czech Republic. They too have had a system with two levels of parental leaves and two levels of childcare, although important differences exist between them. For example, Poland has a more laissez-faire policy with a shorter maternity leave, means-tested parental leave and only about half as many children in kindergartens. Until recently, Germany has a system that was very similar to Poland's. Meanwhile, Hungary is the only post-communist country in Central Europe that has kept support for nursery schools near communist era levels and it is the only country that has a parental leave that is based on the income replacement principle.¹⁵

What makes these three neighbors particularly interesting from a Czech perspective is that all three countries are moving closer to the Swedish model, while Czech politicians refuse to consider any substantial reforms. Moreover, the biggest steps in this direction come from conservative, Christian politicians. In Germany it was a Christian Democratic Prime Minister Merkel, who proposed scrapping the two-level parental leave system and to replace it with the Swedish-style one-level parental leave insurance. In order to finance this, she also shortened the leave period down to 12 months, but families receive two additional months as a bonus if the father utilizes at least 2 months of leave time. Since the leave period was shortened from 3½ years (6 months maternity leave plus 3 years means-tested, lump sum parental leave) to 12 +2 months, the demand for daycare will obviously increase, so the German government plans to sharply increase support for nursery schools.¹⁶

Meanwhile, Poland under a government that was often ridiculed for being too "fundamentalist" in its Catholic orientation, the minister in charge of family affairs also wanted to move toward the Swedish model. Although the government fell before her long-term plans could be implemented, she wanted to increase the length of maternity leave and then eventually open it up to men and reserve several months for men. At the same time, she also wanted to increase support for daycare. I recently explained this trend in a scientific article by pointing out that it is rational for cultural conservatives to conclude that if they want to save the family, their must be a family to save!¹⁷

In Hungary, the need to have a family to save was an important issue already under communist rule, as the Kadar era regime carried out a reform of the parental leave that made brought it closest to the Swedish model of all communist countries in Central Europe. After the initial 6-month maternity leave, an additional 2-year leave was introduced that had a relatively generous 70% replacement rate. On the conservative side, it also had a lump sum 3-year leave, which encouraged mothers to stay at home for longer periods. Furthermore, under communist rule, neither leave was open for men. When the communist regime fell, the conservative Hungarian Democratic Forum won the first free elections. In contrast to Poland

¹⁴ "S vill inte ändra föräldraförsäkring," *Dagensnyheter*, 29 August 2005.

¹⁵ **Chyba! Pouze hlavní dokument.** Steven Saxonberg and Tomáš Sirovátka, "Failing Family Policy in Post-Communist Central Europe," *Comparative Policy Analysis*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2006.

¹⁶ **Chyba! Pouze hlavní dokument.** Bundesregierung. 2007. "Reformprojekte Elterngeld." Downloaded 9 December 2007 from http://www.bundesregierung.de/nn_66124/Content/DE/StatischeSeiten/Breg/Reformprojekte/familienpolitik-2006-08-21-elterngeld-1.html

¹⁷ Steven Saxonberg and **Chyba! Pouze hlavní dokument.** Dorota Szelewa, "The Continuing Legacy of the Communist Legacy," *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2007.

and Czechoslovakia, the Hungarian conservatives were greatly concerned about demographics and concluded even earlier than the Polish and German conservatives that to preserve the family, there must be a family left to preserve. Thus, it opened up the extended leaves for fathers and made the lump-sum leave universal, so that unemployed mothers and fathers could still receive some support. As a result, by 1995 about 2.5 of the parents on childcare leave were fathers, which although low by Swedish standards, was clearly the highest in Central Europe. In fact, at the time it was the only country whose statistical yearbook even had statistics on the number of fathers on leave.¹⁸

Since the Hungarian conservatives took a pragmatic approach from the beginning, they also kept some support for nursery schools. As in Poland and then Czechoslovakia, the national government closed down enterprise-run nursery schools and gave municipalities the responsibility for running the nursery schools. However, in contrast to Poland and Czechoslovakia, politicians at the local level still thought it was important to keep some nursery schools open. Finally, by the late 1990s the national government took direct measures to support nursery schools by earmarking money to the local governments, so that it now pays about one-third of the costs for running these facilities. In addition, in order to improve the quality of care, it moved control over nursery schools from the ministry of health to the ministry of labor, family and social affairs. Consequently, Hungary has moved away from the trap of treating children only as health issues and the childminders received training in pedagogy, psychology and child protection rather than studying to become nurses.¹⁹ Except for the neo-liberal experiments of the Socialist government of 1994-1998, little difference has emerged between the policies of leftwing and rightwing governments in Hungary. Two consequences of this are that

- 1) the percentage of leaves taken by fathers has increased to 6-7%,²⁰ making it among the highest in the world (substantially lower than Sweden and Iceland, but similar to Finland Norway and Denmark).²¹
- 2) birthrates while still lower than the Nordic countries are much higher than in the Czech Republic and Poland.²²

Why did conservatives in Hungary, Poland and Germany conclude that it was necessary to implement policies that – whether intended or not – encourage gender equality in order to increase fertility rates, while Czech politicians act like ostriches, who hide their heads in the sand when it comes to confronting the real problems that families face in balancing work and family? Again the communist legacy could provide an answer. East Germans like Merkel provide an interesting exception to the usual post-communist dynamics, because although they lived under rigid orthodox rule, much of the populace still had constant contact with Western ideas and trends via West German television. Furthermore, after the collapse of communist rule, they immediately united with the established democratic institutions in West Germany. For the other cases, while the Polish and Hungarian regimes were led by parties that officially called themselves “workers” or “socialist” rather than communist and went relatively far in implementing liberalizing reforms, the Czechoslovak regimes were led by

¹⁸ Steven Saxonberg, **Chyba! Pouze hlavní dokument.** *The Czech Republic Before the New Millennium* (East European Monographs/Columbia University Press, 2003), chapter 5.

¹⁹ I am basing these observations mainly on extensive interviews conducted with members of the ministry, advisors and former advisors to ministers, former ministers and heads of women’s organizations, conducted in Budapest in January, 2008.

²⁰ These calculations were given to me by the Hungarian Ministry of Social Affairs during a visit in January, 2008.

²¹ For statistics on all the countries except Iceland, see Batljan et al, p. 13.

²² Saxonberg and Sirovátka, p. 199.

dogmatic “normalizers,” who proclaimed that following Marxist-Leninist ideology was more important than empirically analyzing the results of their policies. Today’s Czech politicians behave similar to the “normalizing” communists that ruled them during the 1970s and 1980s. Similar to old Leninist ideologues, they believe that there exists an ideologically correct view of what is “normal” and it is normal for mothers to stay at home with their children for long periods, regardless of the results. In response to the pragmatic observations of their conservative neighbors that to preserve the family, it is necessary to have a family to preserve, they would argue that to preserve the “normalized” family, it is not necessary to have any families left to preserve.