

The Revenge of History: the Institutional Roots to Post-Communist Family Policy in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland

Abstract

This article explores the origins of one of the myths in Central Europe that prevent women from gaining equality with men: the myth that it is “natural” for mothers to stay at home with their children during the first three years after a child is born. By showing how historical-institutional developments built up this myth, this article deepens our understanding of how institutions influence cultural norms. By analyzing three countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland) as examples of how this particular type of conservatism can emerge, we also show why these countries developed important policy differences despite adhering to the same myth of threeness.

Feminists throughout the world have been highly critical of the male breadwinner/female housewife model. Within the discourse on welfare policies, most feminists today support the idea that men and women would share equally in both the household and child-raising tasks, while both compete on equal conditions in the labor market.¹ Since in almost all industrial societies, the majority of women work, only few advocates remain of the pure male-breadwinner/female housewife model. No country has come close to achieving gender equality, though, thus making it important for feminists to continue criticizing arguments against gender equality. Since conservative political movements use arguments that differ greatly among countries, feminists are not likely to get far if they do not take into account *the specific forms of conservatism* that exist in particular regions.

This article takes three Central European countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland)² as an example of how a particular type of conservatism can emerge because of certain historical-institutional developments and it shows the need to analyze these historical

causes in order to be able to counter these specific types of conservative values. More precisely, we show that in these countries, a myth has emerged that children under *three* suffer if they attend daycare and that *it is “natural” for mothers to stay at home with them for these three years*. This discourse accepts the idea that most women want to work or must work to survive economically, but it prevents them from achieving gender equality, because it prevents women from being able to compete equally with men on the labor market, as employers expect men to work continuously, while they expect women to leave their jobs for 5 to 6 years if they have two children. Moreover, the fact that women are given responsibility for child raising forces upon them the “double burden” of care work and paid labor after returning back to employment.

In a situation where it is commonly believed that children under three suffer if their mother works, arguments only framed in terms of gender equality are likely to meet resistance from conservatives, who claim that feminists want to “sacrifice” children for the sake of their career ambitions. In addition, arguments against women being housewives are unlikely to attract attention in countries where the population strongly agrees that women should contribute to household income and only very few women become lifetime housewives. If one can show that measures which support gender equality do *not* come into conflict with the children’s best interests, arguments in favor of gender equality are likely to gain much greater support. In order to demystify beliefs about threeness, one could refer to international psychological research. While helpful, such references alone are unlikely to gain much support for gender equality by themselves. Instead, the process of demystifying also requires an analysis of the roots to these myths in order to show that these beliefs come from historical-institutional developments rather than natural laws. This article aims to uncover the historical-institutional path that contributed to the creation of some of the myths that block promotion of gender equality in Central Europe.

Although the belief is common in all three countries that it is “natural” for mothers to stay at home with their children during the first three years, *each of these countries still chose somewhat different paths in carrying out their family policies*. Once again, we trace these differences to historical-institutional legacies. The fact that these countries share these myths but still chose somewhat different policies during the communist era and these differences continue to this day, shows the power of historical-institutional developments. This article contributes to the discourse on historical-institutionalism by showing more clearly how institutional developments can influence cultural norms and also by showing how small decisions, such as ministerial reorganizations, can later have great consequences for gender relations.

Comparing Countries

Already under communist rule, Poland followed the most laissez-faire, non-interventionist (Gauthier 1999), implicitly familializing (Leitner 2003) policies of the three countries. Despite its generous maternity leave, paying 100% of the mother’s salary, at four months it was two months shorter than in Hungary and Czechoslovakia (Saxonberg and Sirovátka 2006; Saxonberg and Szelewa 2007). Along with the other two countries, Poland introduced an extended maternity leave, although its benefits were means-tested. To this day, Poland continues to have a shorter maternity leave than the other two countries and is the only country with a means-tested leave. Although it opened the extended leave for men in the 1990s, means-testing gives little incentives for fathers to take it. Finally, although the communist regime built out nurseries for children under three and kindergartens for children three to five years old, the percentage of children attending kindergartens remained much lower than in Czechoslovakia and Hungary; and again this difference continues today (see Table 1). Mothers implicitly face pressure to stay at home for three years, as childcare

facilities are rare, but they do not face explicit incentives to stay at home for three years, since they do not get paid much for doing so and the fact that the extended leave is means-tested excludes most women from this benefit.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Under communist rule, Czechoslovakia came the closest to the conservative, explicitly familializing (Leitner 2003) model of the three countries, as it went the farthest in actively promoting separate gender roles (Sainsbury 1999). Its insurance-based maternity leave at six months was generous (paying 90% of previous income). An extended maternity leave followed that was only available to mothers and paid a low flat rate until the child reached the age of three. This system basically continued after the fall of communism. As in Poland, nurseries for children under three have radically decreased since 1989 (see Table 1). Today much less than 1% of children under three attend nurseries, but some children between two and three year olds attend kindergartens. The Czech post-communist governments did introduce some other adjustments too, such as lowering the replacement rate for maternity leave and making the extended leave available for men. However, the flat-rate level for the extended leave remains too low to encourage men to take it. In 1995 the government also increased the extended leave until the child reaches four years. Recently, the Czech government introduced another modification, which allows more affluent parents to choose shorter leave until the child reaches two years and receive more money per month. But the flat-rate system remains. Since parents do not have the right to get their jobs back if they stay at home for more than three years and since it is difficult to find daycare places for children under three, most mothers still decide to stay at home for three years as they did in the last decade of communist rule. Since these policies explicitly encourage women to leave their jobs

until their children reach the age of three, it is not surprising that the impact of parenthood on women's employment is much more negative in the Czech Republic (32.3% lower employment for mothers with pre-school children) than in residualist Poland (11.1% lower employment).³

Finally, since the mid-1980s Hungary has had the most generous, universalist policy, with the introduction of an insurance-based extended maternity leave (GYED, paying 75% of previous income until the child reaches the age of two). It follows the six-months maternity leave (paying 100% of previous income). Since the late 1960s, Hungary has also had a flat-rate benefit (GYES), which is available until the child reaches the age of three. Parents choosing the GYED can receive GYES in the third year, when the GYED benefit ends. Today these two extended leaves remain. Although the income replacement level is generous (by now lowered to 70%), the GYED has a low ceiling, which gives middle- and upper-income fathers little incentive to go on leave. Nevertheless, as the only of these countries to offer an extended leave based on the income-replacement principle, it still gives the greatest incentive for men to go on leave. So while Poland does not even keep statistics on the percentage of parental leave time done by men and men are only one percent of people on parental leave in the Czech Republic (Maříková 2008: 75), in Hungary 4-7% of the parental leaves are claimed by men.⁴ As with Poland and Czechoslovakia, the communists radically built out access to kindergartens and nurseries, but in contrast to these countries, post-communist governments in Hungary have kept most of its nurseries open, although the percentage of children under three in daycare is very low compared to Western Europe (see Table 1). Since Hungarian policies make it easier for mothers to return to the labor market than in the Czech Republic (because of greater access to nurseries and a leave system that gives fathers a greater incentive to share in the leave time), it is not surprising that the negative impact of motherhood on

women's employment is a bit smaller than in the Czech Republic at 27.5% lower employment compared to 32.3% in the Czech Republic.

In summary, the radical transformation that took place in post-communist societies in 1989 did *not* cause great changes in family policies; rather adjustments in family policies basically followed the institutional legacies of policies made under communist rule. Polish policies remain the most laissez-faire, Czech policies remain the most conservative and explicitly familializing, and Hungarian policies remain the most generous and universalist. Most explanations of post-communist family policies instead only focus on the few changes that have taken place, stressing the role of international organizations (Ferge 1997a; Deacon 2000), the mobilization of women (Glass and Fodor 1997) or the Catholic Church (Siemienska 1994; Heinen and Wator 2006). The other main explanation focuses on the role of the anti-feminist communist legacy (Ferge 1997b; Funk and Mueller 1993), which *does* explain some of the lack of change in a direction toward promoting greater gender equality, but it still cannot explain the *differences* among the countries.

Since the greatest differences in policies among the three countries existed already under communist rule, to understand the development of today's policies we must go back in history. Even though authors have recently begun to link present policies to communist era policies (Bicskei 2006; Saxonberg and Sirovátka 2006; Heinen and Wator 2006), they still have not tried to answer the question as to *why* the Central European countries enacted different policies in the Communist era. *We argue that today's family policies in Central Europe arose from a series of decisions taken at critical junctures both before the communists came to power and during their rule; similarly, we argue that the myth of threeness also comes from these policies.* Thus, our article will explain both similarities (the myth of threeness) and differences (variations in policies that support the myth of threeness).

Theoretical Approach

Today's myth in Central Europe about the need for mothers to stay at home with their children for the first three years come from historical institutional developments. This article represents one of the first attempts at a historical-institutional analysis of post-communist family policies. Although a few analyses stress the importance of past policies for current policies in Central and Eastern Europe, they have not investigated the mechanisms of path dependency in childcare policies (Bicskei 2006; Heinen and Wator 2006). This article thus fills in an existing gap in the literature.

Our approach toward historical institutionalism differs somewhat from mainstream approaches. Traditionally, historical institutionalists emphasize the importance of decisions that are made at one critical juncture (Collier 1991), which set countries on different trajectories (Mahoney 2000). They note that once countries follow a certain path, it becomes difficult to leave it. Theorists traditionally claimed that a critical juncture arose when exogenous shocks caused crises (Pierson 2000), but we argue that the critical choices made concerning family policy might not have seemed very important at the time. Small choices about institutional arrangements can have great impact at a later date (Berman 1998; Pierson 2000). Moreover, as Kenny (2007: 95) notes, "seemingly neutral institutional processes and practices are in fact embedded in hidden norms and values, privileging certain groups over others" and we show that these hidden norms reinforced "traditional" gender roles.

While historical-institutionalists have traditionally focused on *one* critical juncture, Haydu develops the notion of "sequenced problem solving," in which policy makers make important decisions that influence the path of development, but these decisions are based on previous decisions (Haydu 1998). Our model is similar, but we disagree with Haydu's argument that policymakers make these important decisions to solve problems that are directly related to the outcomes. On the contrary, we argue that *important decisions are not*

necessarily made to solve issues that policymakers perceived as grave problems at the time, but rather are often the byproducts of other decisions.

Our approach comes close to what Streeck and Thelen consider to be “incremental change through gradual transformation,” rather than an abrupt change (Streeck and Thelen 2005: 9), because present policies are based on gradual long-term developments, in which several important decisions at several critical junctures combined to bring about this development, rather than a radical change brought about by a single decision. Our model also comes close to the way they use the term “layering,” which is based on the idea that policies develop through several decisions that add new layers of policies over old ones. However, the notion of layering implies that programs expand, either by including new groups of people to be covered by policies or by increasing the number of programs covered by policies. We argue, by contrast, that critical junctures might consist of choices that change the organizational dynamics of policies without adding new programs or covering new groups.

Streeck and Thelen also argue that political actors introduce important changes that they initially sell as only corrections in order not to “provoke countermobilization by defenders of the status quo” (Streeck and Thelen 2005: 23). Our study goes one step further in arguing that changes, which turn out to be important, might not even seem important at the time. Thus, policy-makers do not always even need to “sell” the changes, since they themselves are not always aware that these changes will have great impact on society.

In contrast to purely historical approaches, we combine historical institutionalism with sociological institutionalism. Sociological institutionalism emphasizes the manner in which institutions influence norms and attitudes (Hall and Taylor 1996, p. 948). As Pierson notes, institutions influence the manner in which we filter information into “existing mental maps” (Pierson 2000).

Institutional developments are constantly interacting with the world of ideas. Thus, we agree with other theorists that a certain “logic of appropriateness” arises, which induces policy-makers to think that certain policies are more “appropriate than others,” even if they are not the most efficient. Moreover, we agree with Chappell’s emphasis on the gendered biasness of what can be considered appropriate (Chappel 2006). In addition, we add that those policies which policy-makers consider to be “appropriate” are influenced by the particular “policy legacies” of each individual country.

In other words, institutions and cultural norms continuously interact with each other. When Central European policy makers made choices at critical junctures, they were influenced by dominating cultural norms, as well as by norms within their own groups (such as the Communist Party) and policy legacies that dated back to pre-communist governments. However, once they made these choices these institutional changes in turn influenced culture by creating a logic of appropriateness. Because of limits of space, we will concentrate on the manner in which institutions create logics of appropriateness, rather than analyzing all of the factors that influenced decisions at each period. This has the advantage of emphasizing how institutional changes influence the “existing mental maps.”

The First Critical Juncture: the Adaptation of the Two-Tier Model

The roots of public childcare in the territory of today’s Czech Republic and Hungary date back to the nineteenth century when they were part of Austrian Empire. At that time, Poland differed slightly because it was partitioned by three different countries: Austria, Germany and Russia. All three countries established a two-tier system of nurseries for children under three and kindergartens for older children.

Nurseries originally came about in the 1850s so that poor mothers could work both in the Austrian Empire (Fellner 1884) and in the former German and Russian territories of

contemporary Poland (Pietrusiński 1988). Kindertagesstätten also emerged in Central Europe in this period, but they were based on the model that Fröbel developed in Germany, which had pedagogical goals rather than the goal of enabling women to work. Since kindertagesstätten charged fees and were only open 4-5 hours per day, they mainly catered to the middle class. “Volkskindertagesstätten” also emerged, which combined Fröbelian pedagogy with the long open hours, so that poor mothers could work (Mišurcová 1980). Since the “Volkskindertagesstätten” taught in the national languages, while the “Kindertagesstätten” taught in German (or Russian in the Russian sector of today’s Poland), “Volkskindertagesstätten” became much more popular and widespread since they supported the national aspirations of the Czechs, Hungarians and Poles.

Hungarian nationalism was more developed in the early 1800s than in the Czech and Polish territories; and Hungary eventually achieved equal status with Austria in the 1860s as the empire renamed itself Austro-Hungarian. In 1891 the Hungarian government passed a new Act on kindertagesstätten that aimed to increase the number of Volkskindertagesstätten in order “to promote the cultural homogenization of Hungarian society and teach small children the Hungarian language” (Szikra 2011, p. 375). It also encouraged local authorities to establish and finance Volkskindertagesstätten (Bicskei 2006). In the Czech lands, nationalists established an association, *Matice česká*, that subsidized Czech Volkskindertagesstätten to teach children the Czech language (Mišurcová 1980). Consequently, Volkskindertagesstätten became more popular than the expensive, German-linguaged Kindertagesstätten. In Poland “ochronki” emerged as a place for keeping children while mothers worked. These institutions often incorporated pedagogical tasks, making them in practice similar to Volkskindertagesstätten. In the Russian sector of today’s Poland, “ochronki” became centers of social resistance against the tsarist Russification of Polish children (Lepalczyk 1988: 74).

This connection of Volkskindertagesstätten and ochronki with nationalism helps explain why they rapidly increased even before the communists came to power and why the

communist governments met little resistance when they decided to sharply increase the percentage of children attending kindergartens after coming to power. This contrasted to the nurseries, which conservatives resisted when the communists came to power and wanted to increase the number of children in nurseries. Consequently, large portions of the population saw nurseries as institutions that aimed at facilitating the communists' goal of increasing women's labor force participation, rather than promoting nationalist goals or the welfare of children (Srb and Kučera 1959).

In institutionalist terms, 1872 represents the first critical juncture in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, as it institutionalized the incorporation of the two-tier model of nurseries for children under three and Kindergärten and Volkskindergärten for children from the age of three with the Imperial School Act. Kindergärten and Volkskindergärten were to educate children under control of School Offices (§17 and §26), while nurseries only had to follow basic sanitary guidelines (§27). This act, thus, codified the division of pre-school children into two groups and ingrained into society the notion that only children over three should be included into kindergartens.⁵ In contrast, for example, in both the United States and Sweden nurseries have always been open for pre-school children of all ages. Consequently, in these countries no such discourse has emerged that children under the age of three should be treated differently than children above the age of three. This institutional division was to have great impact on gender roles a century later as it made it easier to develop the myth that it is “natural” for mothers to stay at home during the first three years.

Despite institutional similarities, differences also emerged in the support of childcare in Central Europe at the end of the 19th century and in the first half of the 20th century. Hungarian politicians were especially motivated to support Volkskindergärten as part of their nationalist, pro-natalist policies in response to losing two-thirds of their territory after WWI. They developed these policies in the 1930s to increase the “Hungarian nation” and to

redistribute wealth from the “rich Jews” to the “poor Christian working class.” (Szikra and Szelewa 2009, p. 98)

In Poland, the development of childcare facilities was hindered by the partition. Austria, Prussia and Russia considered Poland to belong to the periphery, so they did not invest in its infrastructure. Once Poland reunited in 1918, childcare facilities also faced opposition from the Catholic Church (Heinen 2008, Szikra and Szelewa 2009). The new state had a weaker capacity to build out childcare, as three areas with different administrative apparatuses had to be united. While in Poland hardly any children attended nurseries in 1939 and only 2.8% attended kindergartens in 1937 (Wojcikowska 2004), in Hungary around 1,000 children attended nurseries before the advent of WWII and 26% of children 3-5 attended kindergartens in 1938 (Szikra 2011, p. 373). The Czech lands had a slightly lower level of childcare support than Hungary, with 83 nurseries in operation in 1937 and around 20% of children attending kindergartens between the World Wars (Bulíř 1990, table 2). To this day, the policy legacy of less support for childcare continues in Poland (see Table 1); similarly, to this day, Hungarian policies tend to be more pro-natalist and nationalist than in the other two countries (Saxonberg and Szelewa 2007; Szikra and Szelewa 2009), while the Czech Republic continues to keep pace with Hungary in levels of children attending kindergartens. Thus, important differences in policy legacies emerged already before the communist regimes.

The Second Critical Juncture: Nurseries, the Productivist Norm and the Creation of the Health Problem

The division of childcare facilities into kindergartens for children over three and nurseries for children under three was not something special for the countries of this study, as this division exists in most of continental Europe and in Denmark as well. However, during the first years of communist rule, the regimes took steps that pushed the three countries away from Western

Europe. The new rulers decided to close down the ministries of social caring, since the command economy was supposed to solve all the social problems, thereby making these ministries obsolete (Ferge 1979). While responsibility for kindergartens moved to the ministries of education,⁶ responsibility for nurseries moved to the ministries of health, thus turning early pre-school care into a healthcare issue.⁷ This move was part of the Stalinist era's productionist view that the state should enable women to remain in the workforce (cf. Goven 2002). In Hungary the number of nurseries increased by nearly 500% between 1953 and 1965 (Haney 2002, p. 37). The emphasis on women's emancipation through building out childcare facilities was based on Engel's belief that women would achieve equality by increasing the socialization of care and household duties (Heitlinger 1979). From the productivist viewpoint, it was important for children to remain healthy, so that their mothers could work, but it was not important to eliminate gender roles by getting men to share in childraising or household tasks. Since the focus was on health and women's labor force participation, little emphasis was placed on pedagogical-psychological aspects of childcare.⁸

The state saw nurseries as being more "efficient" if the ratio of children per nursery was high. In Czechoslovakia nurseries were built for groups of at least 20 children and there were about six children per nurse and twenty children per child minder each day.⁹ Paradoxically, because of the problem of overcrowdedness, it became easier for illnesses to spread among the children, which alarmed some pediatricians employed in nurseries (i.e. Bařinová 1965, p. 11). Moreover, psychologists complained that children, who spent long hours (especially in all-day or week-long) nurseries, were more likely to suffer from psychological disturbances. They concluded the child's early separation from his/her mother caused these problems and thus advocated shorter hours in nurseries and longer maternity leaves (i.e. Langmeier and Matějček 1974; Haney 2002).

The higher illness rate of children attending nurseries, their hospital-like design with strict hygienic rules as well as the increasing critique of their functioning contributed to the fact that nurseries received poor reputations in the public in the time of their quickest expansion (i.e. Heitlinger 1996). For example, in Czechoslovakia a survey taken in 1956 showed that only one-third of Czech and Slovak mothers and pregnant women in gainful employment answered that they would place their children in a nursery if they had a chance to do so, mainly because of the frequent outbreaks of contagious diseases (Srb and Kučera 1959, pp. 115-120). Three decades later, Przybylska claimed in Poland that if nurseries had adhered to the Ministry of Education, the quality of care would have increased, as the nurseries would have been able to employ pedagogues instead of nurses (Przybylska 1988, p. 104).

An example of how the health issue prevented the development of a more humanistic-child centered type of care can be seen in the issue of adaptation periods. In Western countries it has long been the norm that children starting at nurseries undergo an adaptation period in which they attend the first days only for a short time with their parents and then progressively stay longer without their parents. Under the communist regimes, because of the strict hygiene rules, parents were forbidden entry to nurseries due to fears that they could bring infections (Dunovský and Eggers 1989). Images of mothers leaving crying children at the nurseries comprise the common horror story about nurseries in Central Europe. According to one Czechoslovak report in the 1970s, “about 80 per cent of newly admitted children find it hard to adapt during the first 2-4 weeks” (Heitlinger 1979, p. 172).

We should note, however, that in the more open Hungarian climate parents were finally allowed to enter nurseries.¹⁰ Comparatively speaking the children’s groups were also relatively small in Hungary, with an average of 10 children for 2 nurses and the facilities even held open-house days (Turgonyi 1977). This helps account for the fact that Hungary was the only of the three countries that kept open many of its nurseries after 1989.

If the regimes had moved the nurseries to the Ministries of Education, then it would have been possible to merge them with the more popular kindergartens and create a unitary daycare system as in Sweden.¹¹ Or as in Denmark the regimes could have kept nurseries and kindergartens separate but in the same ministry – the Ministry of Social Welfare – changed the profile of nurseries into more humanistic institutions that concentrate more on pedagogical and psychological development rather than on healthcare (Borchorst 2011).

Even if the nurseries do not put great emphasis on pedagogy, the division of children into groups of above and below three does not necessarily lead to a discourse of threeness, as the German case shows. In former West Germany, nurseries were only seen as emergency places of the last resort, as the male breadwinner model dominated society during the first post-war decades (Kulawik 1992). Consequently, until the government enacted reforms in the last decade to come closer to the Nordic model of family policies, very few children under three attended daycare, while most kindergartens for children over three were only opened part-time (Scheiwe 2011). As a result, even when children reached the age of three, most mothers could not return to work full-time. This contrasts greatly with the productivist context in the communists-ruled countries, in which mothers were expected to work full-time once they returned from the three year childcare leaves. Therefore, most West German mothers either stayed at home the rest of their lives or began to work part-time after securing their child a place in a kindergarten or primary school, since even primary schools were only opened half-time (Hagemann, Jarausich and Alleman-Ghionda 2011, p. 37). Thus, West German mothers had little reason to think it was “natural” to stay at home until the child reached the age of three and then return to work. Furthermore, since few people had experiences with nurseries, they did not receive a poor reputation as they did in Central Europe, where a large portion of the population either had first-hand experience with communist-era hospitalized versions of nurseries, or they knew people, who had. Since West

Germany nurseries did not have a poor reputation, then when governments enacted reforms in the last decade to radically increase support for childcare, these measures had widespread support across the political spectrum. As Thome observes, “The expected opposition from the Right never arose” (Thome 2007: 5) and the discourse around the reforms centered on fertility rates and gender equality, rather than possible negative influences of nurseries (ibid. 6).

The situation in the former East Germany was much different. In contrast to the other communists-led countries in the 1960s, the GDR leaders felt pressure to keep their family policies different than in conservative West Germany, as their identity was based on the notion that they were a more “progressive” alternative to the western half of Germany in all areas, including gender relations, while the other communist-led regimes only felt pressure to follow the main tenants of Marxist Leninism (i.e. a one-party dictatorship and state ownership of most industries). In contrast to the Visegrad countries, it significantly improved and increased the number of nurseries rather than introduce a three-year leave period (but it did eventually extend the maternity leave to one year). Consequently, the share of children under the age of three attending nurseries in the GDR reached 80% in the 1980s, compared to only 9 to 20% in the unpopular nurseries in Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary (Hašková and Klenner 2010).

The French situation provides another example of the fact that similar institutional developments could eventually diverge with important consequences on the discourse on threeness. In France, kindergartens have been part of the education system while crèches had a poor reputation and have been under the Ministry of Health. In contrast to the three Central European countries, in the 1960s influential empirical psychologists and pedagogues began pushing for a more pedagogical-psychological alternative to the health-based model of caring, as did the emerging feminist movement (which had been suppressed in the communist-led countries). This is similar to Denmark, where progressive pedagogues fought for a more

humanistic, pedagogical view toward daycare, although in Denmark, this was made easier by the fact that nurseries were never under the Ministry of Health (cf. Borchorst 2011). The government gave into their pressures and in 1975 introduced regulations that raised the teaching qualifications of crèches staff and abolished the strict hygienic rules. Soon after the nurseries grew in popularity (Dudová and Hašková 2011). Moreover, kindergartens have been always opened for children from the age of two in France, so 30% of two- year olds attend kindergartens (Martin and Le Bihan 2011, p. 66). Thus, even before reforms improved the quality of nursery care, threeness had not emerged as a strict norm.

The Third Critical Juncture: Introduction of the “Extended Maternity Leave”

In the 1960s, a “discursive opening” (Naumann 2005) arose that enabled pediatricians, psychologists, demographers and economists to question the policy of promoting childcare services for children under three in communists-led Central Europe. First, the economies throughout the Soviet bloc began stagnating. Economists argued that the economy could no longer “afford” to employ all the women. Second, demographers pointed to the decline in birth rates that came when women began working full-time. Third, the more open climate enabled psychologists and pediatricians to question the quality of care in nurseries (Szikra 2011; Hašková and Uhde, eds. 2009).

These developments were made easier by the lack of popularity of the nurseries that was related to their health orientation. Kindergartens remained much more popular, as they had pedagogical roles, as teachers rather than medical nurses took care of the children there. Thus, for example, a representative survey from the 1970s revealed that the ideal of full-time maternal childcare for children up to age three became internalized as a social norm in Czechoslovakia, while the percentage of children of three to five years of age attending kindergartens increased sharply to around 70% in the 1970s (Bulíř 1990; Kreipl et al. 1979).

The pediatricians, demographers and psychologists acted similar to what Mahoney and Thelen call “subversives” (Mahoney and Thelen 2010), because they held official positions within the system and wanted to make changes from within the system. When the reform debates began in the 1960s and the communist elite began worrying about economic stagnation and drops in fertility rates, they invited experts to discuss family policy issues, as in these cases “there is no obvious, easily-agreed upon solution, but ...[these issues] do not threaten either the existing political order or the power of top political leaders” (Wolchik 1983, p. 114).

In addition to the views of scientists, who often had conservative gender attitudes, the productivist view of the rulers also encouraged arguments for introducing extended three-year long maternity leaves: if the main goal of nurseries was to enable women to work and women were the sole childcarers at home, then if their children became sick, mothers must leave their jobs to stay at home and take care of their children. Moreover, if children got sick, the capacity of nurseries was not fully utilized. Given the productivist norm, a gendered logic of appropriateness arose that encouraged introduction of extended maternity leaves, as it was more efficient if women stayed at home for the whole period of three years than to subsidize nurseries that were partially empty due to sickness.

Of course, instead of introducing three years long extended maternity leaves, the communists-led governments could have followed the Danish and French paths by abolishing strict hygienic rules, reducing the size of children’s groups and incorporating a social pedagogical focus. However, such moves would have opposed the productivist norm as well as the wish to reduce female employment in the region in the 1960s (Szikra 2011). In addition, no feminist movement was allowed to emerge, which could have challenged these refamilializing moves, and in contrast to the Danish case where nurseries remained under the Ministry of Social Welfare rather than Health, discursive space did not open for progressive

pedagogues to propose reforms. On the contrary, the healthcare view became so firmly entrenched that pedagogues were not able to enter the public discourse on nurseries.

Moreover, given the gendered logic of appropriateness, in which communist leaders never had to face the influence of independent women's organizations that could question traditional gender roles, the policymakers never considered giving fathers the right to take childcare leaves (Saxonberg and Sirovátka 2006). Rather than considering the introduction of father leaves or changing the healthcare character of the nurseries, the obvious gender-biased choice of the policymakers was to induce mothers to stay at home. Thus, a third critical juncture arose as the communist regimes decided to introduce an extra "extended maternity leave" in the 1960s. The popularity of three-year extended maternity leaves quickly grew among mothers and the "threeness" became the norm.

Although all three countries decided for the same reasons to introduce three-year extended maternity leaves, the types of extended leaves differed as they relied on their pre-war legacies. The Czechoslovak regime introduced an extended leave in 1964, which was supposed to successively increase to three years to reduce reliance on nurseries. Policymakers stuck to their pre-war Bismarkian roots and introduced an extended leave that is similar to that of most of the conservative-continental West European welfare states (such as neighboring Austria) in that the benefit pays a flat-rate benefit. This extended leave pushed Czechoslovakia down a more conservative path of development, by inducing mothers to stay at home for long periods.

Meanwhile, Poland stuck to its more residualist, implicitly familialist policy legacy from the interwar years, by introducing an unpaid extended maternity leave in the 1960s, while access to daycare remained much lower than in the neighboring countries. Eventually, the unpaid extended leaves became means-tested benefits in 1981, after the regime caved into demands from the Solidarity movement (Balcerzak-Paradowska 1995, p. 55). The former

Minister of Labor and Social Affairs, Antoni Rajkiewicz, recalls the logic of appropriateness behind their decision to make the benefit means-tested rather than universal: given the fact that Poland had given less support for childcare facilities than the other communist countries, the demand of mothers to use a universal extended maternity leave would have been greater than in the other countries, as the childcare alternatives were not as available. Thus, a universal benefit would have been more expensive to implement.¹² Since the Polish economy was in shambles in 1981, the government wanted to keep costs down.

In terms of policy legacies, we can explain the development as follows: ever since the country reunited in 1919, it had less state capacity than the other countries of this study, which made it more difficult to build out daycare facilities. This, in turn, would have meant a greater demand for leave benefits if they had not become means-tested. Since policies in Poland had a tradition of being more residualist than in Czechoslovakia or Hungary (Inlgot 2008), introducing such “liberal” types of benefits did not seem like such a contradiction to the communist policymakers.

Hungary also introduced an extended leave in the 1960s. In 1967 the government introduced the GYES benefit that paid a flat rate for two years. In 1969 it was extended so that mothers received money for staying at home until the child reached the age of three (Haney 2002, p. 104). Populist-nationalist intellectuals built on the pro-natalist policy legacy of the 1930s in arguing that the flat rate system rewarded the poorer, “undeserving elements” (i.e. the Roma) and cost the country “intellectual capital,” since the wealthier, better educated groups (i.e. ethnic Hungarians) had less incentive to have children. The vice-minister in charge of family issues also played an important role personally in coming up with the suggestion for introducing an extended maternity leave based on the income replacement principle. She claims she wanted to encourage women with higher incomes to have children.¹³ Based on her recommendation, in 1985 the government introduced the GYED alternative,

which allowed mothers to receive 75% of their salary up to the child's age of two. This shows that decisions at critical junctures are not necessarily structurally predetermined: although they are influenced by policy legacies and the logic of appropriateness stemming from the past decisions, actors in decision-making positions can have great influence.

Thus, already before the collapse of communism the main pillars of present family policies were already in place. Parental leave schemes have not changed much in the three countries, although the extended leaves have been opened for men. Furthermore, the levels of children attending kindergartens remain at similar levels and the main difference between the countries is that Poland continues to give much less support to these institutions. All three countries gave some support for nurseries during the communist era, which at the time was rather high by international standards, although low by today's standards. The only big difference in policies since 1989 is that Poland and the Czech Republic have cut off support to nurseries, while Hungary has prevented the drop from being as radical.

Even the logic of appropriateness that led to the post-communist cutbacks in nurseries comes from the pre-communist as well as communist era: the artificial cut-off point of three years for kindergartens coupled with the discussions on the poor manner of organizing health-oriented nurseries and the introduction of "extended maternity leaves" all contributed to the creation of the dogma that the mother should stay at home until the child is three years old. This also led to nurseries becoming unpopular among the population, which made it much easier to cut-off support for nurseries after 1989.

Hungary provides a relative exception because of its combination of having a nationalist-pronatalist policy legacy coming from the interwar era and a pragmatic policy legacy coming from the Kádár era of rule in the 1970s-1980s. Building on the pragmatic, pronatalist tradition, the conservative, post-communist Hungarian governments have made higher fertility rates an explicit policy goal. To keep fertility rates higher they had to provide some

access to nurseries, so that middle-class, career-oriented women would still have children. They have even moved responsibility for nurseries to the Ministry of Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs.

Not surprisingly, countries like Sweden and Norway, that have a generous, high-quality and unitary childcare system, have not developed discourses around threeness and therefore, have not introduced 3-year parental leaves.¹⁴ However, even West European countries which divide pre-school into nurseries and kindergartens, did not develop the mythology of threeness. In the West German case, for example, the male-breadwinner dominated and most kindergartens were only open part-time, so mothers did not expect to go to work when their children became three. Thus, the country did not introduce three-year parental leaves and threeness did not establish itself as a dominating myth. Instead it had a 14 week maternity leave, followed by a two-year means-tested parental leave. The lack of belief in this mythology that mothers must stay at home for three years made it much easier for the German government in 2007 to carry out reforms that encourage mothers to return to work after at most one year of parental leave. Since the myth of threeness did not exist, a growing number of well-educated professional women in the western part of the country wanted to return to work earlier to be able to develop professionally, while the majority of women in the eastern part were used to return to work after one year. Thus, the government decided to radically increase support for childcare for all preschool children over one and it replaced its old parental leave system with an insurance-based one-year leave (that includes two bonus months if the father takes at least two months of leave). Similarly, in France, where the quality of nurseries improved, kindergartens accept two-year olds, and mothers can more easily work part-time, no mythology of threeness arose.

The Non-Transition in 1989 and the Strengthening of a Myth

As already noted, the collapse of the communist regimes in 1989 is more remarkable for the lack of change that took place in family policies rather than for their changes. The main change – with the partial exception of Hungary – has been the radical decrease in access to nurseries, which further accommodates policies to the myth that it is “natural” for the mother to stay at home during the first three years. This change is not surprising given their poor reputation under communist rule. Interviews with over 100 politicians, ministry officials, political advisors and heads of NGOs in the post-communist Central Europe confirm that there is widespread agreement that it is “natural” for mothers to stay at home during the first three years, that nurseries are a “communist invention,” and that children under three suffer if they attend daycare facilities. Some of our interviewees have become critical of this hegemonic discourse. Nevertheless, even they were clearly aware that this is the hegemonic discourse.

To give examples of the discourse, we cite a couple of typical statements by Czech psychologists, who have the greatest media exposure in the country. According to the head of the Czech Psychological Association, Professor Jaroslav Šturma, nurseries are one of “the relics of communism” and “we are still battling with the psychological and health consequences of these experiments today.”¹⁵ He claims that it is “natural” for the mother to be the sole person who takes care of the child for the first three years and labels attempts at inducing fathers to share in the leave time a “false emancipation” and adds that “we can see that men’s intuitive parenting is no good in this case because he does not have an opportunity for a close symbiotic communication and cohabitation with the child. It’s not arranged that way” (Šturma 1998). Jeroným Klimeš, who appears often on Czech TV goes so far as to say that “placement in these facilities before the age of three constitutes child abuse.”¹⁶ In Poland, the psychologist from the Jagellonian University, Iwona Sikorska, diverts slightly from the mythology of “threeness” in that she thinks it is OK if children begin daycare at the age of

2.5. However, if they are below that age, then they will suffer from a lack of “attachment” to their mothers.¹⁷ Although the attachment discourse has been out of vogue for several decades in the international psychological discourse, it still runs in the post-communist countries, as a way of legitimizing the three-year parental leaves.

Similarly, a Polish vice-minister at the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs in the year 2000 stated that nurseries should be “a measure of the last resort,” because “*all* psychologists say that children need the support of their mother until they reach the age of three to four years.”¹⁸ Even a feminist, former head of the Plenipotary for Women in Poland, took it for granted that children should stay at home for the first three years, even though she argued forcefully for the need to build out *kindergartens* for children *over* three and to get fathers to share in the parental leave time.¹⁹

Those few who oppose the mythology of threeness suggest that the fear of daycare for children under three comes from the communist heritage. A former Vice Minister in Charge of Family Affairs in Poland under the conservative Peace and Justice-led coalition government claims:

The nursery... is a very important point for a lot of young parents because they work. And this [lack of daycare] completely destroys their future in Poland. Why? Because nurseries started to be built in the communist era. ... [They had] bad points you know. One nursery has more than 100 kids. In the past I don't know who, but one person decided that nurseries are the part of the Ministry of Health, not the Ministry of Social Affairs but the Ministry of Health. So now the nurseries are similar to hospitals.²⁰

In Hungary, a former head of the division for the Ministry of Welfare supports increasing access to daycare for children under three and explains the historical roots of these

developments: the communist regime calculated that it was cheaper to pay mothers to stay at home than to subsidize nurseries, so the extended maternity leaves that were introduced in the 1960s led to the belief that “women should stay at home.” This “created a situation where it was accepted widely in a society that women—if they quit the labor market for giving birth to the children—this is natural.” He adds that as in the Czech Republic, many psychologists also continue to claim that children should stay at home with their mothers until the age of three, but they have not presented actual evidence on the issue.²¹

International surveys consistently show that respondents from Central Europe are much more likely than those from Western Europe to think that pre-school children suffer if the mother works (Saxonberg and Sirovátka 2006). In a Czech survey from 2010, 84% of parents with children under the age of six agreed that mothers should take care of their children under the age of three on a full-time basis (Dudová and Hašková 2011). Interviews with families in Hungary also show that mothers usually think it is important that they stay at home for three years with their children (Blaskó 2011).

Conclusion

This article shows that in today’s world it is not enough for feminists to use universal arguments about the advantages of gender equality if they want to counteract conservative forces. Instead, in each region they need to analyze the specific manner in which the anti-feminist discourse has developed. Most scholars and policy-makers in the industrialized world accept it as a fact that most women will work. However, women’s participation in paid work does not automatically bring about gender equality. For example, because of the long parental leaves and lack and distrust of nurseries, Central European countries display the greatest decline in employment in Europe for women after having children. Recent studies also show their situation is worsening not only in terms of employment rates but also in terms of their

salaries as compared to men (Riedman 2006). This article shows that we need to analyze the specific mechanisms that hinder the achievement of gender equality as well as their historical causes.

In this article, we focus on one of the main myths in Central Europe that prevent women from gaining equality with men: the myth that it is “natural” for mothers to stay at home with their children during the first three years after the child is born. By showing how historical institutional developments unintentionally built up this myth, we deepen our understanding of how institutions influence our cultural norms. By showing that path development can be based on several critical junctures, we make advances on the traditional approach to critical junctures. Although our approach has much in common with more recent ideas of layering, incremental change and sequenced problem solving, our analysis still differs in some important ways. First we show that small changes, such as ministerial reorganization (so that nurseries moved to the ministries of health and kindergartens to the ministries of education) could later have great influence on gender relations, although few could imagine it that time. While theorists of critical junctures and layering all have a starting point that policymakers are aware that they are at a critical juncture or that they are adding a new layer and thus have to defend these decisions to the population, in some of our cases (such as ministerial reorganization), policymakers were not aware that they were at a critical juncture. Also, our description of the gendered logic of appropriateness involved in closing down the nurseries after 1989 goes against the idea that governments constantly add layers – they can also peel away layers. Still this does not represent path departure, since the peeling away of a layer based its logic on the myth of threeness, which came about through historical-institutional developments.

Even though policymakers have perpetuated this myth in all three countries, their policies have accommodated it slightly differently. Thus, keeping in line with our interest in

combining historical institutionalism with sociological institutionalism, we not only show how institutional developments can help create norm-setting myths, we also show how interwar policy legacies can prevail even under communist regimes, which claimed to be making a radical breaks with the past. Because of these differences in policy legacies, important policy differences developed under communist rule and these differences basically continue to this day. Thus, in the Czech Republic, where policies encourage only mothers to stay at home for three years and little possibilities exist for mothers to send their children to daycare, the decrease of employment for mothers with pre-school children is the highest of the three countries in this study; while in Hungary, where fathers have the greatest incentive to share in the leave time, the percentage of fathers on parental leave is by far the highest; meanwhile, in Poland, where the residualist, means-tested parental leave benefits are the least generous, mothers have the lowest incentives to spend all three years at home, and therefore, mothers with preschool children show the lowest drop in employment.

Normatively, our article shows the importance of historical-institutional analyses for uncovering the sources of dominant hegemonic myths. Thus, for feminists in Central Europe, it is necessary to explore the belief that children below the age of three suffer if their mother does not provide them with full-time care. In order to do so, it is crucial to expose the historical roots of daycare, to show that nurseries are not a communist invention and that the manner in which they developed depended on the particular type of productivist ideology and thus do not imply that nurseries must be run in that manner. After the fall of the communist regime widespread agreement existed that the communist era universities and hospitals functioned poorly, but no policy-maker argued for closing them; instead they argued that they should be reformed. Feminists need to make clear that the same logic exists when it comes to childcare for children under three.

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¹ Some accept the idea that women could remain the main caregivers as long as the state pays them, so that they can have an autonomous household. In current societies, such payment does not seem to be probable for longer than few months though (Lister 1994).

² We excluded the fourth Visegrad country – Slovakia – from our study for the reason of space. The same childcare policies were applied in Slovakia and the Czech Republic under Czechoslovakia.

³ Calculations from EC (2009: 30–31).

⁴ In 2008 ministry officials estimated that 6-7% of the parental leave time was taken by men. Frey (2009), by contrast, estimates the percentage to be 4.1%.

⁵ In Poland, this division was codified when the country gained independence in 1918.

⁶ In Poland, kindergartens were under the Ministry of Education since 1932 (Graniewska 1971, p. 15). In Czechoslovakia, kindergartens were moved there shortly after the WWII although this move had been in preparation since 1930s (Mišurcová 1980). In Hungary, kindergartens were partly under the Ministry of Education since the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and in 1949 they were moved there completely (Bicskei 2006, p. 162-163).

⁷ For Poland see Graniewska (1971, p. 31) and Przybylska (1988, p. 103); for Hungary see Haney (2002); for Czechoslovakia see acts of the Ministry of Health no. 130/1951 Coll. and no. 24/1952 Coll.

⁸ The decision to move nurseries under Ministries of Health was also interpreted as part of a healthcare reform aiming to decrease child mortality and increase access to healthcare (Janouch 1951). The health situation of children was no worse in Central Europe than elsewhere where they did not tie nurseries into a healthcare reform. The context of the reform rather than the objective health situation influenced this move.

⁹ See act no. 43/1966 Coll., act no. 92/1978 Coll. and Jančíková (1979).

¹⁰ This is based on an interview with Márta Korintus, researcher at the Research Institute of the Ministry of Social Affairs, in Budapest on January 24, 2008.

¹¹ However, the Scandinavian countries have followed a different path. From the beginning, they separated the *whole* system from education (Scheiwe and Willekens 2009).

¹² Antoni Rajkiewicz, interviewed in Warsaw in May, 2007.

¹³ Judit Csehák, minister of social affairs in 1980s and 2000-2002, interviewed in Budapest on January 23, 2008.

¹⁴ The leaves are 12 months in Norway and 13 months in Sweden.

¹⁵ Jaroslav Šturma, “Tragédie kolektivní výchovy,” [Tragedy of collective childcare] 2001. Available at web portal for family issues www.rodina.cz (accessed February 1, 2012). See also his interview for the Monday to Friday popular TV show for women *Sama doma* [She Home Alone]. 9.3.2009. Available at www.ceskatelevize.cz (accessed June 3, 2009).

¹⁶ Jeroným Klimeš cited in the magazine *Instinkt* 9/10, in an article “Hrůza zvaná jesličky” [Horror called nurseries]. Available at http://instinkt.tyden.cz/rubriky/ostatni/tema/hruza-zvana-jeslicky_25003.html (accessed August 3, 2012).

¹⁷ See <http://www.edukacyjnykrakow.pl/?cget=artykul&from=154> (accessed August 28, 2012).

¹⁸ Joana Starega-Piasek, interviewed in Warsaw on October 24, 2000.

¹⁹ Izabela Jaruga-Nowacka, Member of the Sejm for SLD, former head of the Plenipotary for Women and former minister of labor and social affairs, interviewed on 23 May, 2007.

²⁰ Joanna Kluzik-Rostkowska, interviewed in Warsaw on 25 May, 2007.

²¹ Balazs Kremer, informal SZDSZ advisor, previously head of the division for the ministry of welfare (1990-1991), head of methodological unit of the Social Policy Development Center, governed by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (1991-2000), head of National Labor Center (2000-2001), and adviser to the anti-child poverty section to the prime minister. He was interviewed in Budapest on January 21, 2008.

Table 1

ENROLMENT RATES OF CHILDREN IN PUBLIC PRE-SCHOOL FACILITIES

	1930s*		1989		2008**	
Age of children	3-5	0-2	3-5	0-2	3-5	
Czech Republic	20.0	20.3	78.9	6.4	79.3	(in kindergartens)
Hungary	26.3	11.7	85.7	11.5	88.6	
Poland	2.8	9.1	48.2	3.9	63.2	
Germany				17.8	92.7	
Sweden				46.7	91.1	
France				42.0	99.9	
Denmark				65.7	91.5	
EU-15				38.9	81.3	

SOURCE. – Saxonberg and Sirovátka (2006) for 1989. Year 2008 from the *TransMONEE data base* <http://www.transmonee.org> (accessed August 10, 2012).

* Data on the Czech lands from Bulíř (1990, table 2); data on Hungary from Szikra (2011, p. 373); data on Poland from Wojcikowska (2004).

** Data on Germany, Sweden, France, Denmark and EU-15 from *OECD Family Database* at www.oecd.org/social/family/database (accessed August 10, 2012).

NOTE. – We use the *TransMONEE data base* for the post-communist countries, because they get data from the statistical offices of the post-communist countries. While the OECD data appears to be reliable for the EU15 countries, its statistics deviate from the statistical yearbooks of the post-communist countries.