

# **The Death of the Family?**

Evolution of the New Deal between Biological and Social Reproduction

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## **Abstract**

This paper investigates the dramatic changes in family structures that took place in industrialized countries since the end of World War II. The concept of the family, both as a biological and as a social unit, has played a significant role for the economic and ideological evolution of modern societies – but as almost every empirical indicator shows the structure and processing of this elementary unit is currently experiencing a fundamental metamorphosis. The paper explores and analyses recent developments to sketch possibilities for a fundamental new deal.

## **Introduction**

Since in many discourses on the development of the family biological, social and ideological lines of argument often appear to be intermingled, the first chapter of the paper tries to disentangle these components and to arrive at a more appropriate description of the relations between these spheres. Evolutionary biology, in particular a fashionable part of it called socio-biology, reached out to explain the dynamics of human families in terms of descriptions of animal behaviour. Since the latter clearly is strongly linked to the conditions experienced by groups of animals – including the respective responses of the members of the group, eventually consisting of different biological species – there seems to be good reason to call this behaviour ‘social’. Nevertheless it has to be clearly distinguished from the use of the term ‘social’ in the sciences concerned with human societies. For the humanities the special characteristic of the human species that distinguishes it from other mammals also implies that social behaviour cannot be naively derived from animal behaviour. In a further reaching

argument it is also evident that the confusing misuse of concepts is not just a random error, it rather follows rules of ideological combat between opposing scientific – if not to say political – camps. The baseline positions of these camps are to be outlined to get a clearer picture of what really is at stake if the transformation of family structures is investigated.

The second chapter then concentrates on a description of the old (post – World War II) deal that was struck between macro-determinants of family structures and micro-opportunities and restrictions of individuals constituting the families. As will become clear from our argument, revolt from below as well as destruction from above was an unavoidable endogenous development starting in the mid-sixties and leading to the current state of dissolving and re-shaping forms. The determinants of the revolt from below are diverse. They range from a crisis in the demand for education that cannot be adequately fulfilled within the families to the emancipation of women blowing up traditional gender roles. Destruction from above is mainly a consequence of the forces of advanced integrated capitalism, which penetrate families via the necessities transmitted by labour markets that in turn are accompanied by manipulative ideological role models. Of course, even the new form of advanced integrated capitalism will need a small social unit of about the size of a family. But how can it look like, and can it be reconciled with the aspirations coming from the revolts from below?

In chapter 3 we take a look at the possibilities for a New Deal. Indeed, the enormously increased interdependence between social entities – economically, ideologically, even biologically (global catastrophes) – makes any such new arrangement an implicitly global design of a future political economy. Families, sometimes disguised in the more economically oriented concept of a household, are just one element in a rich setting of institutional structures encompassing economic and political activities. Institutional change, as response to the evolution of political economy and initiator of further development of the latter, in many ways implies changes in family structures. Permanent or at least more fluent institutional change enforces and enables more fluent changes in family structures. Nevertheless there have to be lower limits for the inputs to the reproductive functions – economically, socially and culturally – that families are providing, and the institutional framework must ensure that these limits are respected. Indeed this is one of the foremost goals that institutional design – how evolutionary it might be – has to put on its agenda.

A few spotlights on important issues are presented.

## **1 – Family: A multi-layered concept**

From the point of view of a scientific discipline that is concerned with living systems in general, i.e. *biology*, the smallest unit of reproduction of a species is indeed an extremely fascinating object of investigation. Though it sometimes escapes the attention of scientists, it

is nevertheless evident that the life-span of individual members of a species is finite – it is only a limited countermovement of organized behaviour against the second law of thermodynamics – while the transformation of individual life into new-born individual life enables the emergence of a considerably longer lasting existence of a living system labelled species. The locus of this transformation which (in somewhat philosophical terms) negates the finiteness of individual life is the family.

Darwin, the biologist, has to be credited for the revolutionary insight that species are not a given set – as the dominant ideological institution of his time, the church, proclaimed - but are themselves subject to evolution. At any moment the variety of existing species is in a state of transition, and Darwin's most celebrated idea of a mechanism of evolution therefore is just an immediate consequence of his aforementioned hypothesis: If you do not believe<sup>1</sup> in the existence of a given set of living systems that Noah saved on his ark, then you are obliged to describe the dynamics that explain the currently observed species. Inheritance and variation, mutation and finally selection are the sub-processes that can be distinguished in these dynamics – and they presuppose an interaction between individuals of a species. The space of this smallest unit of (re-)production of a species is delimited by the group of interacting individual members; it is the *biological ancestor of the family* (abbreviated as BAF).

In the animal kingdom Darwinian evolution – the mechanism itself, not only its material - comes in many varieties. In many respects the central concepts necessary to describe it are copy-making<sup>2</sup> and random variation. At the nodes where individual life is transformed into new individual life, i.e. in the BAF, these two concepts play a crucial role too as a brief look at the model of the genetic algorithm immediately reveals. Note that for matters of consistency the Darwinian mechanism must itself have been evolutionary selected.

Interaction within one BAF is linked to other BAFs as well as to other outside circumstances, the environment. Indeed, as the investigation of species shows, copying and producing variety not only needs organization within each BAFs but also organization of the local group of BAFs, inter-BAF organization. This two-fold organization, within BAFs and in between BAFs, constitutes a species. The growth of a species thus simply is the growth of the number of BAFs it organizes. As the environment as well as the inter-BAF relations change with growing and resource competing species, variety becomes more important<sup>3</sup>. Differences in BAF organization, how strong they are and how often they occur, can be seen as an ancestor of the accumulated knowledge of a species. Note that in the animal kingdom no single BAF is aware of the knowledge of the species that is implicit in the variety of behavioural forms and their inter-BAF organization.

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<sup>1</sup> It is interesting that Darwin was very aware of the severe critique which his hypothesis meant for the church. As several biographers of his life show the fear from being prosecuted by the clergy might have even induced him to delay the publication of his scientific discoveries.

<sup>2</sup> Compare [Hanappi, 1994, pp. 43-53] for a more detailed treatment of the notion of a copy.

<sup>3</sup> Compare [Hanappi and Hanappi-Egger, 2004] for a simulation model that shows the inverse relationship between variety and change of speed of the environment. The faster environmental change appears, the more variety is optimal for a species.

It cannot be doubted that many features which the biological perspective has elaborated sound so familiar – in a double sense – that it is tempting to apply them immediately to the human species. And is it not the case that after all humans, to a certain extent still are mammals? This is the point where it becomes important to launch a hypothesis on how the human species differs from other species. The standard argument usually refers to two closely linked features: humans have cognitive abilities not found in other species, and they can use them to develop as tool-making animals. To appreciate the linkage: Cognitive model-building is just a certain kind of tool, and tool-making presuppose anticipation, i.e. cognitive model-building.

It is this rupture in evolution that characterizes the step from a BAF to a family within human society<sup>4</sup>. It remains true that inside and outside organization, families and societies, always come in a package; but both organizational forms now are radically different.

**Imitation**, what was called copying before, now not only is restricted to repetition due to visual or other sensual perceptions. It is mediated by spoken and written language. An information environment filled with well defined signs opens up and links the species. With the use of language memory that survives individual lifetimes can be built up. Moreover this memory can be transmitted and shared by the families of a society, a necessary prerequisite for the transformation of random variation.

Now **choice** can suddenly use memory to distinguish between possible anticipated futures, the past is reflected as possible future past. There clearly remains an element of uncertainty, but choice nevertheless is directed and not random. Producing more variation by admitting risky choices of family mechanisms therefore is a choice of a society confronted with fast changing environments. More traditional societies with little scope for variation hinge on imitation and can flourish only in rather stable environments.

The family, in the perspective of this social layer, is characterized as a group of interacting individuals that convene to the more or less formally constituted norms of a society, but to a certain extent also make and break these norms.

A major reason for the success of the human species as measured by biological standards, i.e. by population growth, has been the application of its anticipatory powers to exploit nature. At least since the revolution in agriculture, some 7000 years b.c. , growth rates of other living systems have been systematically manipulated to increase growth rates of societies. And there is no doubt that exploitation of nature always was accompanied by ‘exploitation of man by man’, as the classics dubbed it. But note that there is an immediate difficulty implied with this notion: If you increase a population growth rate by reducing another population growth rate, then you necessarily are talking about different populations: society consists of classes.

If this type of exploitation actually exists, then family organization will reflect class relations too. Families belonging to one type of class will be organized differently from families

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<sup>4</sup> For reasons of consistency the use of the term ‘society’ for non-human animal populations is improper use of language – at least in a scientific discourse.

belonging to another class. As is the case with other exploited populations in nature, the exploiting class will try to strike an optimal balance: do not let the growth rate of the exploited decrease too much, but take away their growth if they grow above a certain rate. Early British capitalism indeed promised to have implemented a stable political system that enabled economic mechanisms regulating such an exploitation regime<sup>5</sup>. Families of workers evidently were very different of feudal families. More recently, Göran Therborn [Therborn, 2004] has written an important book outlining the differences in family mechanisms, which are determined by political economy.

But while many differences between family types surely can be observed and categorized, a few basic similarities inherited from BAFs might also prove to be essential for a proper understanding of families: There is a rather fundamental and more or less sudden increase in utility, call it lust, that accompanies sexual intercourse. Though biologists still are not sure about the origin and advantages of sex - and recently would describe its coincidence with lust rather as a side effect<sup>6</sup> – anticipated lust as an incentive certainly has experienced a boost with the emergence of the human species. No other animal has developed a comparable culture of sexual intercourse.

Exploitation, in turn, does not stop with the simple act of taking away somebody else's outputs to enhance the own growth process. As soon as there is a developed information sphere, strategic behaviour becomes an option. It signifies the *third layer* of the concept of family – *the ideological level*. Strategic behaviour means that choices are made by taking into account that other decision makers will base their decisions on elements they take from the information sphere, from pieces of communication and information that can be posted there. It is thus possible to exploit desires that exist in the information sphere, i.e. use the actions of they induce their carriers to perform, actions that reduce their growth potential, and actions the consequences of which can contribute to the growth of the exploiter<sup>7</sup>.

The coincidence of sexual lust and procreation has always been a central source of ideological exploitation; in particular its systematic application via family organization is evident. With the evolution of the capitalist mode of production the very specific ideological form of the bourgeois family, propagated as a family model for all classes, acquired an unprecedented importance for the maintenance of this mode of production. The ruling ideology thus promoted the vision of a family mechanism that combined monogamy with a strict power monopoly of the father, i.e. patriarchy<sup>8</sup>. While the latter was meant to reflect a kind of

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<sup>5</sup> It was, of course, Malthus [Malthus, 1820], in particular as interpreted by Richard Day [Day, 1999], who has formulated this early evolutionary economic model.

<sup>6</sup> “Again and again in recent years evolutionary biologists have found themselves returning to the theme of parasites ... Parasites are touted as the prime movers in the evolution of sex.” [Ridley, 1993, p.66]

<sup>7</sup> In [Hanappi-Egger, 2004] the working of the ideological level is used for a proper definition of gender roles.

<sup>8</sup> In his empirical survey Therborn distinguishes three areas of the patriarch's power: with respect to his wife, with respect to the marriage of his children and with respect to fertility. It is revealing that the *ideological* form of the patriarchy (as presented by Therborn) presents control of *biological* (re-)production by the father as

naturally given law that also was to be found in the power structures in capitalist factories, the former was meant to subordinate reproductive functions to this given power structures. As patriarch within his family even the poorest working man should imagine to resemble his boss. And with monogamy a clear-cut functional divide of reproductive work was implied too. As far as sexual desires of the patriarch exceeded the boundaries of his monogamous relation he could break this rule as often as his wealth permitted it. Sexual desires of wives were not simply ignored in this family model, female emotions were thought to be 'naturally' channelled towards child rearing and housekeeping. The excess of sexual energy, of lust, thus was regulated along gender specific roles.

Though this ideological vision of the bourgeois family never was really lived after in families of all classes of a society, its influence cannot be denied. Only after periods when the capitalist mode of production was called into question by upheavals and revolutions this ideological form became less important.

With the arrival of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with World War I, the October revolution and its consequences, the evolution of production systems and ideological warfare did the actual social forms of families - at least in Europe - diverge from the old ideological form of the bourgeois family. The search for a new ideological form started.

## **2 – A Brave New Compromise and its Waterloo**

World War II had a devastating influence on European societies, including not only the loss of about half of their capital stocks, but also a loss of orientation of micro-units. In some of the core countries of European culture genocide of unimaginable dimensions had taken place; economic, political and military hegemony had shifted away to the USA and to the Soviet Union. It is not surprising that the new ideological family model of Western European populations had to be imported from North America. Families in the movies produced in the USA were young, happy and market-oriented: A re-birth of a modernized bourgeois family model seemed to be at the doorsteps. Walt Rostow propagated the arrival of the age of high mass consumption in the USA, and that all countries of the world will sooner or later end up in this stage – including the appropriate American family model (compare [Rostow, 1960]).

The United States had not been directly hit by the war; its most impressive experience of a crisis had been the great depression of the 30-ties. And the remedy for this crisis had been an economic policy, Roosevelt's New Deal, which in the end produced a new ideological family model too. The new ideology was surprisingly simple: it was a model of people's capitalism. In the ideological vision every individual is split into parts that belong to different classes, e.g.

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universal *social* model for families in capitalism. The most abstract form of power, ideology, uses the most archaic relations, biology, to prescribe modes of behaviour as universal rules for the particular presence. Sociobiology is just a more fashionable tune on the same instrument.

partly worker, partly capitalist and partly rentier. This fits well to the ideas of contemporary Fordism, which held that the maintenance of the circular flow between members of the society should play a major role for a firm's wage policy as well as for the states incomes policy. Homogeneous families consisting of highly heterogeneous individual members were just the households needed for that model<sup>9</sup>. Every individual earns a wage that corresponds to its marginal productivity that in turn is evaluated via labour markets that ensure full employment at equilibrium wages. No need to worry about variety necessary for selection, variety in that vision is just an in-built property of individuals: You earn what you are, as you are what you earn! This brave new libertarian compromise was the promise of the Fifties.

But once again reality deviated rather sharply from this vision. It is useful to distinguish between rebellions against this family model that were initiated by family members themselves, and destructive forces that were the consequences of processes taking place outside the families.

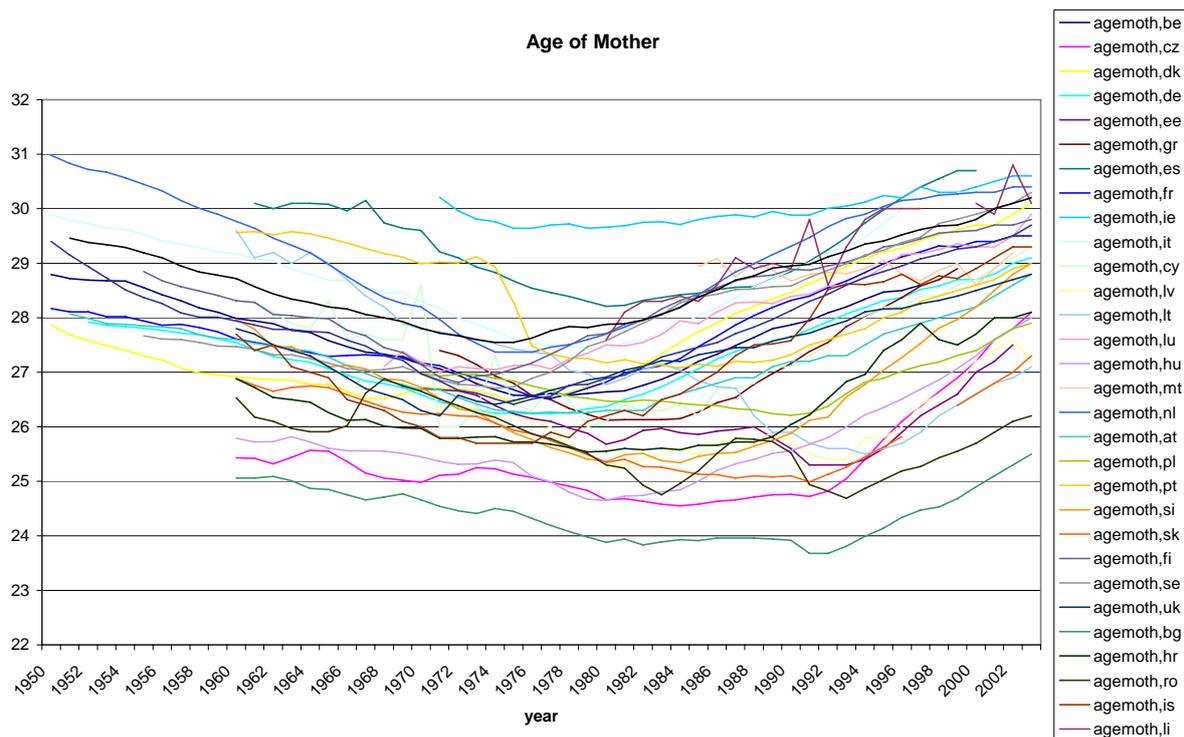
A typical *rebellion from below* came from the disappointed aspirations of young pupils and students who found that equal opportunities for education – and thus entrance into the world of young and happy couples that populated the family vision of the movies – were not provided by the existing education infrastructure. The pupil movement in Italy as well as the student rebellions in France, Germany and the USA in the late sixties were just the tip of the iceberg of *deep cultural re-orientation*.

What was pivotal for the lasting impact of that cultural break was the fact that its carriers were largely in a certain phase of their personal development, which always has to be considered as particularly open for a change of lifestyle. In the age from 16 to 25 young people experience their formative years: They leave their old families, where they played the roles of children, and start to form ideas about their possible new families, where they will play the roles of adults. With public educational infrastructure failing, and the parent generations ideal types, i.e. a renaissance of the bourgeois family type, found completely inadequate, it is understandable that communication started to focus on exchanges within the same generation. Inter-generational understanding collapsed, the generation gap widened.

The emergent family types were largely driven by more or less individually driven redesigns. The so-called *patchwork families* in the Western societies of the last quarter of the century thus are not to be considered as failing attempts to achieve a different family model, they actually *are a new type of family model*.

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<sup>9</sup> Note that the proof of the welfare maximizing properties of such a model is the core of the normative part of the so-called neo-classical synthesis that Paul Samuelson made popular in the fifties and sixties at practically every economics department in Western universities.

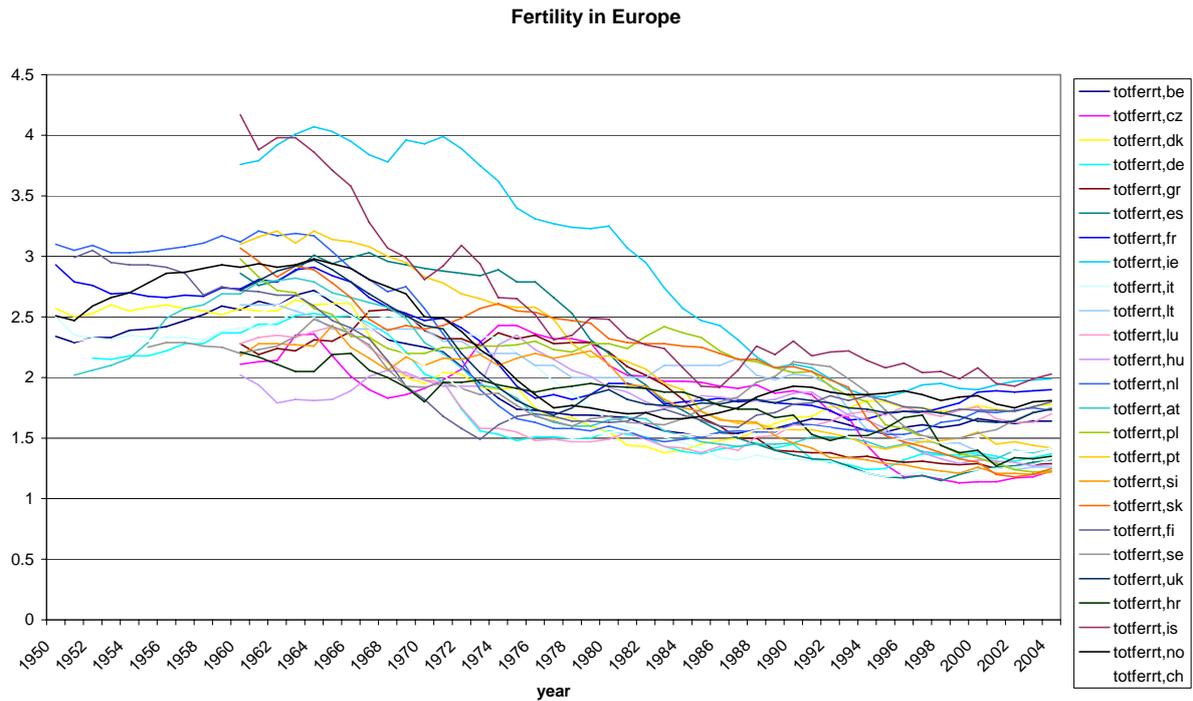


**Figure 1: Age of the mother at the birth of the first child in European countries**

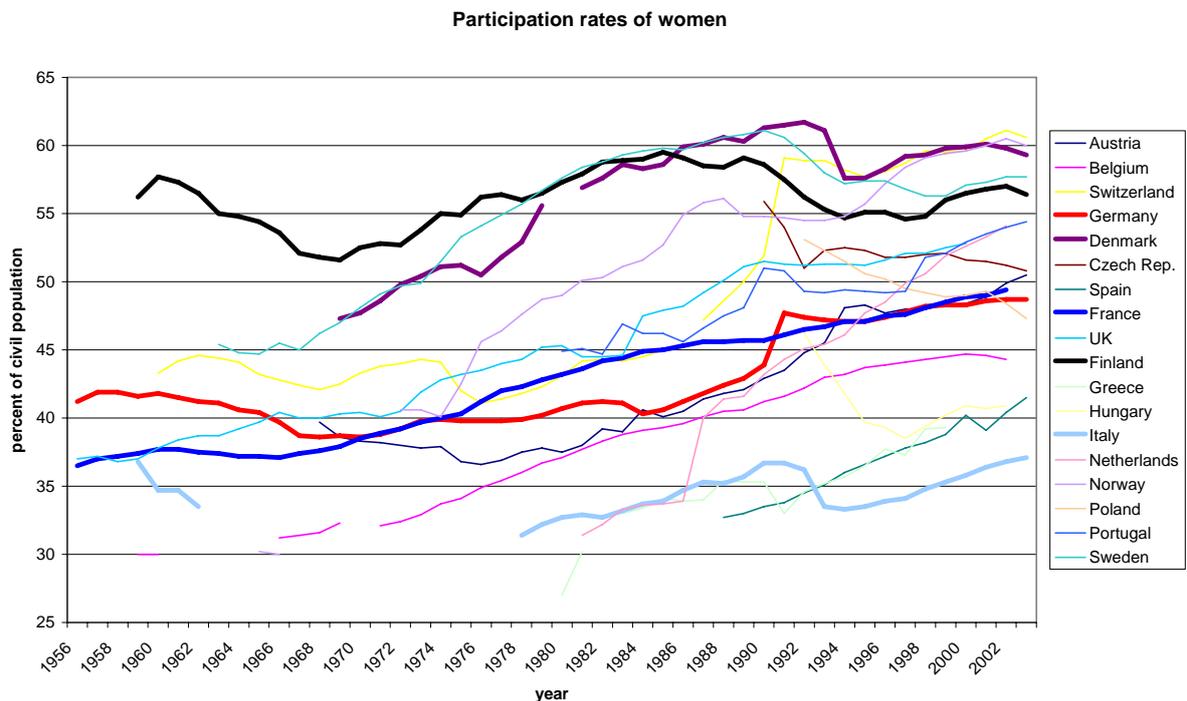
One of the most significant impacts of redesign of individual life profiles comes from the multi-faceted group of the *women's movement*. How strong this influence on European families was is shown in figures 1, 2, and 3. Women (i) started to reverse the trend to have their first child earlier; they (ii) are continuing a long-run trend of rather sharply falling fertility rates; and (iii) their participation in labour markets is approaching the levels of male participation rates. Taking these eclectically chosen indices together, they show that by the end of the century women in Western societies by and large were able to render the patriarch family model obsolete. And some of these trends – like fertility rates falling world-wide – have started to spread<sup>10</sup>.

What still is an open question for both gender, is the *how to square sex with family*. The core characteristic of family relations in BAFs, namely (re-)production of the species, is fading away as sexual lust nowadays can be experienced without the burden of subsequent child rearing. Cooperation between woman and man thus is not necessarily forced to be stable over a longer time period, curiosity concerning new and perhaps more exciting partners can be included in lifestyle. The marriage markets once directed and used by patriarchs now have turned into troubled waters with unpredictable dynamics. Divorce rates show a clear trend upwards.

<sup>10</sup> As [Longman, 2004] nicely describes television and movies play a central role in spreading visions of family life.



**Figure 2: Fertility rates in European countries**



**Figure 2: Participation rates in European countries**

On the other hand *global economic developments* themselves were starting to demand a different type of family model. Firms had grown so much, transnational corporations taking the lead that patriarchy as an overarching governance style was beginning to look ridiculous.

It became pointless to motivate patriarch family fathers by comparing them to small shopkeepers who escaped bankruptcy only by subsidies and tax exemptions – they were no heroes any more.

Furthermore due to advanced IT control spans and the development of sophisticated control and monitoring networks were possible, simple command hierarchies as exemplified in patriarchy quickly became outdated. Male workers had to offer abilities that did not match those taught by the old gender role; these abilities could not be ascribed to any of the roles present in the old type of family. As a consequence this behaviour, diverse and flexible as it often is, had to be learned on the job and in turn worked as a feedback into the working of families.

Tremendous increases in labour productivity and large shifts of whole production lines across continents and economic sectors resulted in low and unstable employment in Western countries. It is familiar now that at least one person in working age in a family is not fully employed. Stagnating wages often force all members of families to accept non-permanent part-time jobs, sometimes jobs on the black market, to keep the family income on an acceptable level. This again makes the possibility to have children look extremely unattractive. There would be no time to care for them.

Better paid, and usually more permanent jobs in larger companies are more and more combined with the obligations for employees to travel a lot, spend long time periods away from their families, A lot of entrepreneurial propaganda calls for more ‘mobility’ of the workforce. When such a job is accepted the rest of the family usually is deprived of the two thirds of lifetime that an employee usually spends outside the firm. So while alienated mobile employees dwell as singles in foreign cities – a new phenomenon of transitory family-free people heavily exploited by employers – the remaining family torso at home has to struggle with increased labour intensity in household work. Families in these social strata therefore often are in a state of permanent emergency.

The conservative political backlash that started in the 80-ties had many severe consequences for families. Many of them can be summarized under the header of a deteriorating infrastructure: education, health, transport, social security and other state financed services were considerably reduced. The reaction on the side of families usually was necessarily passive, there was no scope for defence, substitution by private businesses was either non-existing or too expensive. After all the consequences of this lack of infrastructure are not always visible in the short-run; but at least in the mid-run they do pop up as deficiencies that are extremely hard to repair<sup>11</sup>.

Finally banking and credit systems have to be mentioned. In the boom a well developed financial system makes its major part of profits in using the difference between the interest

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<sup>11</sup> As these lines are written riots of unemployed youngsters in the banlieu of Paris and many other French cities show how a misguided economic policy - in particular labour market and education policy - after some time can produce surprising and dramatic results.

rates for household savings and firm credits. The chronic low level of the interest structure since 20 years now signals that relative to the large amount of capital looking for profitable enterprises the opportunities are rather meagre. Private household credit was served in ample quantities and even for risky private businesses some credit was available. Till the day this situation has not altered too much – but catastrophe might be pending<sup>12</sup>. In case of visible signs of a banking crisis, i.e. a marked interest hike due to the discovery of bad loans, a cascade of bankruptcies, firms and households, might be initiated. In particular in Europe more than 70% of employment is employment in small and medium size enterprises, which are the first to be hit by such a crisis. The majority of European families thus are highly vulnerable to a financial crisis – it is not in sight right now, but it can hit over night. Family members thus often (rightly) have a subconscious feeling that they live on a volcano, again an incentive towards maximum consumption in the present and neglect of long-run concerns of the species.

This brief list of exogenous influences on the wide variety of family types in Europe today in no way is complete – just a few essential aspects are covered.

Indeed this variety of forms calls into question the usefulness of the concept of a family at all. Perhaps one should rather talk of the ideological aftermath of what was once called a family (IAF) – if not the death of the family is to be announced, at least the death of the bourgeois family is granted.

### **3 – Conclusion: Some spotlights on microeconomic policy design**

As implicitly already shown one of the main features of global political economy in the last century was the growing dominance of the ideological perspective relative to socioeconomics and biological processes. But this does not mean that the latter two are not to be entertained at a sufficiently high level that makes it possible to keep their importance invisible at the ideological level. ICT did speed up ideological processes enormously, information happens almost instantaneously on this globe; and it shapes actions of individuals in a most profound way. Today actual observation and own interpretation of processes is the exception; the use of ready-made, often centrally mediated interpretations is the rule.

For families, even in the form of IAF, their biological function of preventing a too rapid decrease of species members remains important. As global fertility rate developments show we must be ready for a dramatically changing mix of family types in the not too far future. While demographers usually underestimate the importance of political economy – their forecasts of half-century developments look extremely naïve – economists have to admit that policy reaction to the dramatic evolution of demo-economics is extremely slow indeed.

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<sup>12</sup> The measures contained in Basel 2 can be interpreted as safeguards against such a crisis, but at closer inspection it is evident that they might as well fire back and fuel the crisis once it started.

Since important decisions in political economy more and more are taken on a continental level institutional voice for this type of design should be established at the level of the European Union. Besides its political implementation it needs scientific consulting; and it evidently overarches several academic disciplines – including economics.

One of the more important reasons for the existence of the current blind spot in economics is that the traditional divide into micro- and macroeconomics left no space for such a hybrid topic. Evolutionary economics actually would be an almost ideal arena for looking at the design of these new deals between biological and social reproduction. Given the current dominance of the ideological level such a design could probably even be implemented.

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