Recent Pronatalist Policies in Western Europe

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Twenty years after the onset of declining fertility in Western Europe, governments are still uncertain how it will affect their countries and what they should do about it. Demographers, mindful of past forecasting mistakes, are reluctant to rule out a return to higher fertility, especially since at least one economic theory has been advanced to explain how this might come about (Easterlin, 1980). Still, most analysts believe that current trends in marriage and family formation make an early and spontaneous return to higher birth rates unlikely (Westoff, 1978 and in this volume).

In terms of consequences, the prospects for continued economic growth are also unclear. Within the last decade, analysts seem to have reached a guarded consensus that adjustments can be made that will keep economies growing (Hanslувka, 1980, p. 310; Council of Europe, 1978, p. 242; Espenshade, 1978, pp. 667–668). Geoffrey McNicoll (in this volume) is somewhat less sanguine, citing little-researched factors of distribution and international economic relations that could nullify the necessary internal adjustments. There is greater agreement on the need for a major restructuring of the welfare state in these aging societies to avoid what many politicians see as a threat to the social contract between the generations (see, e.g., Eversley and Köllmann, 1982; Kaufmann and Leisering, 1983). One possible mitigating step, reopening the door to mass immigration, is widely rejected on the grounds that its social and political costs would outweigh the advantages of a larger labor force and a more substantial tax base. Since rates of infant and child mortality are already low in the industrialized countries, improvements in mortality control would simply add more elderly dependents to the population. Thus, many political leaders in Western Europe are looking for ways to reverse fertility trends.

Many Western European governments have increased their financial assistance to families (United Nations, 1984). Only France and Luxembourg,
however, appear to have adopted a specific demographic target—the return to replacement-level fertility. Some countries, like the Netherlands, with high population densities, profess to welcome the prospect of a decrease in population size. Others, like Great Britain, have always resisted the idea of population policy. Because of the diversity of opinion, members of the European Economic Community rejected France’s 1983 proposal for a joint pronatalist initiative (Tomlinson, 1984, p. 111).

Without in-depth study, it is not easy to judge a country’s position on population. Governments are not monolithic and there is commonly a range of opinion, even at the center. Furthermore, even democratic governments are sometimes reluctant to disclose their intentions, for population policy often raises sensitive and potentially divisive issues. In some instances, a policy is announced but suitable measures and effective institutions are lacking, or the budget is inadequate for the task. In 1976, France adopted a demographic target—replacement-level fertility or a little above—but it has taken years to bring the institutional structure for policymaking up to its level in 1945, when pronatalism was at its peak, and, to date, financial appropriations have been modest. Still, France’s persistent efforts over the last ten years seem to imply a genuine commitment to pronatalist policy. Likewise, a determination to act appears to be developing in West Germany, although a coordinated set of measures has yet to be designed and no formal pronatalist policy has been announced.

It is the thesis of this article that a key to the cautious response of low-fertility nations lies in three factors that shape the way political elites perceive demographic trends and possible solutions. First, and most importantly, public demand for population policy is weak. Historically, European pronatalist policies were associated almost exclusively with centralized and authoritarian states and somewhat monistic societies (Finkle and McIntosh, 1979, pp. 278–281). Today, by contrast, democratic governments in pluralistic societies must be responsive to the numerous and diverse interest groups that have gained access to the political process. Second, there is a lack of confidence in any of the pronatalist measures that have been proposed. Western European governments today do not have the option of addressing the birth rate directly by restricting access to contraception or legal abortion. They recognize that financial incentives have not prevented the decline of fertility; moreover, the broader measures they are now considering are both imprecise and difficult to formulate. Finally, the rationale for pronatalist policy is not compelling. In the past, pronatalist sentiment was largely based on the belief that a nation’s military power and diplomatic influence derived from the size and growth rate of its population.1 Today, demographic factors carry less weight. The wealth of a nation, the quality and education of its population, as well as its capacity to form and maintain alliances, are considered more important sources of national power (Wright, 1955, p. 362; Russett and Starr, 1985, pp. 127–161). Furthermore, although political leaders concur that low-fertility countries face difficult problems of adjustment to the changing age structure, there is a general
expectation that the adjustment can be made. Governments appear loath to use
the possibility of future crisis as the justification for measures that do not
command broad popular support.

In the pages that follow I examine some of the features of the policy-
making environment that impede the actions of Western European governments
in the field of population policy. The discussion draws primarily on the ex-
amples of France, West Germany, and, to a lesser extent, Sweden. The
countries are of particular interest in that all three introduced pronatalist policies
in response to the low fertility of the late 1920s. In France and Germany,
especially, both attitudinal and institutional residues from that time still color
perceptions of population questions. Sweden cannot accurately be described
as ‘pronatalist,’ but that country has consistently led the way in developing
social policies that have informed the population policy discussions of other
nations. While France and Germany may have gone further than other Western
European countries in developing their policy responses to below-replacement
fertility, they do not differ significantly from other countries in their main lines
of thinking.

The context of population policy

Recent years have witnessed some evolution in the way in which government
leaders approach population questions. Less than a decade ago, the starting
point for discussion was a country’s earlier experience of fertility decline:
France’s pronatalism, Germany’s revulsion against population policy, and Swe-
den’s concern for social welfare and equality provided the backdrop against
which contemporary trends were assessed (McIntosh, 1981). Today, policy-
makers seem to have come to terms with the past. While these characteristic
orientations to population trends lie just below the surface and account for
many of the differences among countries, policy discussions now seem to be
much more firmly based on contemporary experience. In addition, because of
the accumulation of research on the dynamics of low fertility and on its likely
societal consequences, today’s debate is more fully informed and better
grounded in empirical reality.

The attitudinal context of policymaking has also been affected by the
arrival at the middle and upper levels of government of individuals who have
no personal recollection of either the fertility decline of the 1930s or the
pronatalist policies of the 1940s and 1950s. Many people in France see the
upheavals of 1968 as a watershed; since that date, they say, young people
have shown little interest in population growth—a perception shared by many
government officials. This lack of interest among officials brings a certain
ambivalence into the heart of policymaking circles. Thus, early in 1985, Pierre
Laroque, now Vice-President of the High Committee for Population, told this
writer: “[President François] Mitterrand is serious about population. So is the
Ministry of Social Affairs. Everyone else in the present government is Mal-
thusian” (interview, 1985). In Germany, the gradual passing from the scene of those who remember National Socialism should help to desensitize the question of population policy; yet, in Germany too, some officials who influence the policy process share the public’s lack of interest. This was exemplified when a member of the interministerial working group that is examining the consequences of population decline commented: “The question that bothers me is why are demographers so worried about declining fertility? Germany is so overcrowded. We would be much better off with fewer people’’ (interview, 1985).

These remarks are not intended to suggest that policymakers are less than conscientious in their search for a solution to a difficult problem. What they do imply is that many of the bureaucrats to whom high-level decision-makers look for ideas and advice, who write the reports and draft the proposals for policy, are not themselves fully convinced of the gravity of the demographic situation. The analyses they prepare and the proposals they advance are likely to be tempered by alternative values that they consider equally or more important.

The economic context

For roughly a decade, the development of population policy has been severely constrained by financial difficulties originating both in the oil crises of 1973 and 1979 that precipitated the economic recession, and in age-structural changes resulting from low fertility. The escalating cost of health care, especially for the elderly; the demographically inspired increase in the number of claimants of old-age pensions; and the feeble rate of economic growth, which has raised the demand for unemployment benefits and retirement pensions while it has reduced the number of workers contributing to the funds—these are the most obvious elements. Because of these financial constraints, governments in many Western European countries have had to hold the line on—or even cut—their assistance to families.

Neither France nor Germany has been able to avoid the cuts. In 1982 Germany’s Christian Democratic/Liberal government was forced to reduce the budget for family policy as part of an emergency restructuring of the social security system. This was mainly effected by reducing the child allowance (Kindergelt) for middle and upper income families, but the cuts also included a reduction in the benefit payable for the six-month maternity leave, and elimination of the education allowance for children of school age.3 This was an embarrassing experience for a government that had campaigned for office on the basis of the opposition’s “neglect” of the population issue.

In France, likewise, the egalitarian but expensive family policy proposed by the Mitterrand government in 1981 had to be abandoned a year later when the social security funds were found to be in deficit. The new policy would have greatly reduced the special allowances introduced by President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing for the third child, increased allowances for second children, and gradually extended them to the first child. After the crisis, the socialist
government returned to a less expensive policy that directed most of its assistance to families in greatest need—including three-child families (Hecht, 1982, p. 221). In 1982, moreover, as part of a broader economic policy, the Mitterrand government proposed taxing family allowances. This was the first time such a proposal had been made by a socialist government in France (ibid., pp. 212–214).

Recovery from the world economic recession is taking place more slowly in Europe than in the United States. It is all the more remarkable, then, that at the end of 1984 the West German government announced its intention to restore and increase its assistance to families beginning in 1986. The duration of compensated postmaternity leave is to be extended to a full year, with the benefit to be payable whether or not the woman participates in the labor force. The income tax deduction for dependent children is to be dramatically increased, from DM 432 to DM 2484 (from approximately US$215 to $1238), and a small increase is also scheduled in the deduction for dependent adults. In addition, education allowances for school children will be raised. Further small changes in the income tax structure are to be introduced in 1988 (Bulletin, January 1985, pp. 13–14). In the opinion of Rita Süssmuth, a family sociologist later appointed Minister of Youth, Family, and Health, expenditures of this magnitude would not have been considered at such a time in the absence of serious concern over the birth rate (interview, 1985).

The Institutional context

The official policy statements collected by the United Nations (1984) indicate that Western European governments are relying to a great extent on family policies to address the decline of fertility. This is not surprising, since these well-entrenched and popular programs provide governments with a ready-made instrument for tackling the fertility problem indirectly while maintaining some distance from the sensitive issues surrounding population policy. Additionally, since many people, especially on the political right, associate the fertility decline with the spread of “destructive” social practices—abortion, divorce, cohabitation outside of marriage—family policy appears to them an appropriate vehicle for reform.

In some ways the use of family policy to stimulate the birth rate is a carryover from the 1930s and 1940s. Although the history of child allowances as an income-maintenance device can be traced back to the mid-nineteenth century (Glass, 1940, pp. 99–100), family policy was primarily developed as a response to the widespread poverty and low fertility of the 1930s (Glass, 1940; A. Myrdal, 1941). Since that time it has been greatly elaborated, and the social welfare objective has come to dominate the pronatalist aim. Indeed, the politics of family policy today is largely concerned with ways of revitalizing the demographic aims.
Family policies vary widely in their scope and in the number and complexity of their measures. As a minimum, however, most countries now provide the following as part of their social insurance programs:

- medical care during pregnancy and child birth
- a mandated period of compensated pre- and postmaternity leave
- health supervision of infants and young children
- cash allowances for families with children up to school-leaving age, or beyond it if the child is obtaining job training or higher education
- assistance in obtaining and paying for suitable housing—either low-cost loans for purchasing or furnishing a home, or subsidies for rental accommodation
- some form of income tax relief for dependent children.

More recent additions to family policy include the right of access to contraceptives and legal abortion, and measures intended to reconcile the demands of parenthood with those of participation in the labor force. In introducing the latter, many governments have had the birth rate in mind; measures include the provision of daycare and leisure-time centers for children, and extended periods of maternal or parental leave that may be taken after the expiration of maternity leave. Such leave may or may not be compensated but usually includes the right to return to the same or a similar job, and the protection of seniority. In some countries parental leave may be counted as work in fulfilling the eligibility requirements for an old-age pension (social security). 4

Despite its popularity, family policy is an imperfect instrument for stimulating fertility. Reliance on family policy tends to divert attention from the consideration of other approaches, and it manifestly has not prevented the decline of fertility. Although no one can tell what the level of fertility would be in the absence of family policy, most analysts believe that new or increased family incentives have at most a temporary effect on the timing of births and do not influence the size of the completed family. Not all scholars agree with this assessment, however. In France, Gérard Calot and Jacqueline Hecht (1978) estimated that approximately 10 percent of French fertility in the late 1940s and 1950s could be attributed to pronatalist family legislation. More recently Jean-Claude Chesnais (1985), on the basis of correlations between the magnitude of social transfers to the family and fertility levels in several countries, has argued that family policy can be effective in raising fertility.

The pronatalist effect of family policy is weakened by the dual, and frequently contradictory, objectives of welfare and pronatalism. Within a family ministry, demographic policy has to compete with many other programs for both funding and visibility. In France, for example, population policy is a subsection of family policy, which is only one of the responsibilities of the social security administration. Under the socialist government, social security itself constituted only one division among many in an umbrella Ministry of
Social Affairs and National Solidarity with still broader responsibilities. Indeed, family ministries are almost invariably embedded in multifunctional ministries of wider scope. Inevitably, in such circumstances, the focus of some proposals may be lost as they are shaped to conform with overall policy, or measures introduced in one department may conflict with those of another. Processes of this kind account for much of the incoherence of family policy, as well as a weaker demographic impact than was intended by pronatalists.

The almost universal tendency to assign responsibility for family welfare to large composite ministries reflects not only the broad scope of family policy, but also the low status accorded family departments within the government hierarchy. Low status means that family ministries are likely to have tenuous access to the centers of government power; just as important, they have little capacity to influence or coordinate the activities of other government agencies. The need for such coordination is particularly acute in the formulation of population policy, as demographic trends are widely thought to be affected by conditions that cut across several sectors of a government’s economic and social policy. Immigration and labor policy are two such sectors to which we return presently. However, even within the central core of population/family policy itself, new ways of defining the field are making the problem of coordination more complex.

In a major change from the philosophy of the 1940s, policymakers in today’s more affluent world have come to doubt the efficacy of financial incentives as a means of encouraging women to bear more children. Uncertain about what would be more effective, governments are turning to a broader concept of family policy that has emerged since the 1970s. Much policy discussion today is focused on ways to create a social environment that is more closely adapted to the needs of parents and children. Advocates of such an approach have in mind not only improvements in working hours and conditions for parents of young children, but also such proposals as better integration of different age groups in housing areas; provision of more recreational facilities in the suburbs; better public transportation between the home, work, daycare centers, and shopping areas; traffic-free streets in residential areas; more parental involvement in daycare and nursery centers; the right to stay at home with sick children without loss of wages; and a host of similar measures.

From a demographic perspective, the trouble with these proposals is that they are indirect and nonspecific with respect to fertility, and their introduction would require the collaboration of a diversity of interest groups as well as governmental and nongovernmental agencies at both central and local levels. The multiplicity of both actors and objectives makes the formulation of a coherent set of measures difficult. Even France, with its pronatalist past and institutions with extensive experience in population policy formulation, has encountered problems of this sort. Throughout the 1980s, members of the High Committee on Population, the principal institution for advising on the formulation of population policy, have had difficulty in reaching agreement. Members of the committee interviewed in 1985 attributed the problem, in part,
to the size and diverse interests of the membership since its reconstitution in 1979. In an effort to create a more effective working environment the committee was again reorganized in 1985 and its membership reduced in number. Like his predecessor, Charles de Gaulle, President Mitterrand has assumed the presidency of the committee, ensuring once again that its advice reaches the highest political level (*Bulletin Quotidien*, 1985, pp. 13–14).

The range and scope of family policy proposals are likely to be even greater impediments to the elaboration of coherent policy in West Germany, where specialized institutions for population policymaking are lacking and where responsibility for policy formulation and implementation is divided between the federal and state governments (McIntosh, 1983, pp. 202–207).

**Labor and immigration policy**

Even a brief discussion of institutional coordination would be incomplete without some consideration of where labor market and immigration policy fits within the broader context of pronatalism. In the search for ways to reconcile the conflicting demands of parenthood and work, the introduction of the right to an extended period of postmaternity leave seems to have been one of the few successes. Early attempts to provide mothers with longer maternity leave, or to allow them to work shorter hours for the same pay, were frequently opposed by feminist groups and trade unions, which feared this would reinforce the marginalization of women in the labor market; the idea became more acceptable when the right was extended to either parent. However, unions still express opposition to attempts to provide more flexible working hours. In France, the government recently reached agreement with unions and employers over working conditions for parents, but the proposal was rejected by the majority of workers (interview, 1985). According to informants in both France and Germany, employers are generally more receptive than unions to the idea of change; nevertheless, while not strongly opposed to making working conditions more compatible with parental responsibilities, employers tend not to actively promote the necessary changes since these make the task of management more difficult.

To this writer’s knowledge, Sweden has elaborated the only really successful labor market policy for parents. But that country instituted the parental insurance scheme as part of a national effort to bring about equality between the sexes, several years before the problem of low fertility was recognized. One of the guiding ideas of this policy was that every adult—man or woman, with children or without—should be responsible for his or her own economic support, and the unions cooperated with employers and government to make this possible (Reimer, 1986). Most of the unions, both for professionals and workers, now have well-established departments to look after family interests.

In many ways, however, Sweden is a special case. The society and its institutions are small, and there is a long tradition of cooperation between workers and employers and between government and societal organizations in
general (Anton, 1980). While these conditions for coordinated policymaking have no parallel elsewhere in Western Europe, even Sweden’s extensive provisions in the field of work and family have not prevented the continued decline of fertility.

Western European nations have long relied on immigration to supply their need for labor in times of economic prosperity. Today, however, immigration policy has become separated from population policy in general and is no longer regarded as even a partial solution to the problem of low fertility. The protracted economic recession in Western Europe has exacerbated the problem of assimilation, and governments that closed their borders to newcomers in the early 1970s are now trying to send unemployed immigrants home. Although a racist attitude is currently evident in several countries, it is difficult to believe that Europeans will not reconsider their immigration policies once prosperity returns—particularly countries such as France, whose experience with immigrant labor dates back 150 years (Spengler, 1938, pp. 194–195).

The politics of pronatalism in the 1980s

In France and Germany, as well as in some other Western European nations, it is not hard to reach consensus on the goal of demographic policy: replacement-level fertility. What is more difficult is agreement on the means to achieve it. As in the 1930s, the political debate over low fertility is strongly influenced by ideologically inspired differences over what constitutes the “good society.” It is hardly surprising that political views on an issue of such consequence for society should be shaped in part by the ideological preferences of political parties, and incorporated into their global visions of the ideal society. This was the case in the 1930s and it continues to be true today. Although there is considerable merging of views toward the center of the political spectrum, there are nevertheless distinct left/right differences both in the significance attached to population growth and in the policy instruments the political parties choose to employ.

In Western Europe, both in the 1930s and today, rightist parties have chosen measures that would support the traditional family. An official of the family ministry in Bonn expressed it thus: “For the CDU [Christian Democrats], the starting point of the family is marriage. A family starts when a child is born to or adopted by a couple” (interview, 1985). In terms of reconciling parenthood and work, most right-wing parties would prefer to give women an “education allowance” to remain at home with young children. This type of measure is often justified by conservatives as giving a woman the choice between caring for the child herself or paying someone else to do so. Generally speaking, however, the suggested allowances are too small to compensate for loss of wages. Leftist parties, by contrast, generally dislike education allowances, arguing that they tend to put pressure on women to leave the labor
force. Instead, such parties usually attempt to provide sufficient places in daycare facilities for all children who need them. This is a much more expensive proposition that is seldom achieved, although attainment is becoming easier as the number of small children decreases.

Deductions for dependent children from pretax income are another instrument frequently advocated by liberal and conservative parties, whose support often comes mainly from middle and upper income groups. Socialists, on the other hand, regard tax deductions as unfair to low-income families, who derive less advantage from them. Again, in recent years, some of the more extreme elements of the political right have become alarmed at the changes taking place within the family. As in the United States, they would like to limit the right to legal abortion, restrict the access of young people to contraceptives, and, somehow, discourage cohabitation outside of marriage. So far, governments of all political hues have resisted taking such steps; nevertheless, the principal measure introduced by the Conservative/Liberal coalition government in Bonn in its first years in office was the creation of a Mother and Child Foundation with limited funds to assist poor women who would otherwise terminate their pregnancies.

Once elected to office, political parties must compromise, and governments in both France and Germany have deviated significantly from the positions they took while in opposition. During the 1980s, new government coalitions—Socialist/Communist in France, Conservative/Liberal in West Germany—have been forced by economic and political pressures to modify their stance. The result, in both countries, has been a marked convergence toward the policies of the other side. To understand the nature of these shifts and how they came about, we will briefly examine the policy activities of the various governments of France and West Germany.

In France, the first attempt in many years to strengthen the pronatalist impact of family policy was undertaken in the mid-1970s under the center/right administration of President Giscard d’Estaing. Although Giscard spoke often of the importance of population growth for France’s international standing, his policy instruments were weak. Simone Veil, his family minister until his last year in office, was a committed feminist who personally disliked the idea of stimulating fertility. It is doubtful whether Veil, whose chief accomplishment was to secure passage of a highly controversial bill to liberalize abortion, gave Giscard’s pronatalist initiative more than token support. In fact, a spokesman in her cabinet took pains to stress that the new pronatalist policy was a personal initiative of the president, not of the minister (interview, 1978).

In the mid-1970s, moreover, Giscard had to tread carefully. Public opinion did not support a return to the familiar type of pronatalism. In announcing his “new family policy” before the National Union of Family Associations (UNAF) in 1975, the president denied that it had any pronatalist intent (Giscard d’Estaing, 1975). Steps were taken to remove a number of measures left over from the 1940s that were considered coercive. One of these was an additional
allowance payable for babies born within a specified period after their parents’ marriage or after the birth of a previous child. In response to their demand for job security, many employed women were given the right to two years of leave after the birth of a baby; however, this leave was not compensated. For most of his term of office, Giscard’s policy remained largely in the realm of rhetoric.

Toward the end of the decade, Giscard got a chance to act. A survey conducted by INED (Institut National d’Études Démographiques) showed an upward movement, from two children to three, in ‘‘ideal family size,’’ and women stated that poor economic conditions were preventing them from bearing a third child (Girard and Roussel, 1979). As a response, the amounts of several allowances payable for the third child were increased, yet the total still amounted to less than a professional wage. Economic conditions following the oil shock of 1979, and perhaps the president’s lack of full commitment to the pronatalist tack, precluded a serious effort to reverse the birth rate.

Arriving in office in 1981, the new socialist government of President Mitterrand attempted to set in place a family policy that would be much broader in scope and more egalitarian. It was intended that family policy would treat all children equally, irrespective of birth order, and efforts were to be made to promote equality between the sexes. The overall aim was to reshape society in ways that would make childrearing less onerous. Within the family ministry, the secretary of state eliminated the most substantial of the special allowances created by Giscard for women having a third child, and simplified the family allowance system. But, as already mentioned, proposals to extend the family allowance to all children equally (including the first) were too expensive and had to be abandoned.

The financial crisis provoked by the Socialists’ egalitarian measures marked a turning point in the Mitterrand administration’s approach to family policy. Taking the initiative himself, the president returned to the less expensive expedient of placing the emphasis on the third child. The government has also introduced an allowance to cover the previously uncompensated right to leave from work following the birth of a baby. However, the benefit covers only the first 12 months of leave, and is available only to parents having a third or higher order child. In short, the difficulty of making ends meet forced the Mitterrand government into a policy hardly distinguishable from Giscard’s.

In West Germany, the first five years of the Christian Democratic/Liberal (CDU/FPD) coalition government brought fewer changes than might have been anticipated from the CDU’s position while in opposition. As in France, both political and economic realities tied the government’s hands. Compared with France, Germany in the 1970s was an even less favorable place in which to elaborate a population policy. The end of National Socialism had left Germany without demographers and demographic research institutions; with a highly decentralized governmental structure; and with a strong aversion to the idea of population policy. This aversion is said to have been shared by Helmut Schmidt, who succeeded to office in 1974. Although the shortage of expertise
is now less acute and population questions have become less sensitive, progress toward enacting a pronatalist policy is inevitably slow and cautious.

For the balance of the 1970s, the Social Democratic/Liberal (SPD/FPD) coalition government concentrated on educating itself on population questions. The Federal Institute for Population Research was created in 1974, and in 1977 an interministerial working group was appointed to synthesize scientific and bureaucratic opinion on the societal implications of declining population growth. Hampered at first by a dearth of information in some critical areas, the group’s definitive report did not appear until 1982 (FRG, 1984). After extensive review, the report was accepted virtually unchanged by the conservative government. The working group was then requested to examine whether it would be desirable to draft proposals for policy, but so far the group has not reported.

In terms of policy, the Social Democratic/Liberal government attempted primarily to improve conditions for women: amid intense opposition from the political right, the laws on both abortion and divorce were liberalized. Nevertheless, despite the economic constraints, the child allowance was substantially increased in 1979. In the late 1970s the federal government also undertook part of the cost of the economic program instituted in West Berlin in an effort to halt the heavy outmigration from that city (McIntosh, 1983, pp. 215–219). This was an exceptional move that reflected West Berlin’s symbolic and strategic importance. Beyond this, most pronatalist efforts made during Chancellor Schmidt’s term of office were at the state level. Surprisingly, the instrument used by these governments was modeled on the family-formation grants employed by the National Socialists in the 1930s. Low-interest loans were made available to newly married couples to assist them with housing, and their repayment was to be cancelled gradually at the birth of each child, up to the third, born within a stipulated number of years.

In 1979, the opposition Christian Democratic/Christian Socialist parties made population and family a leading issue in their campaign for the federal elections of 1980, attacking the Schmidt government for what the conservatives called its “irresponsibility” in failing to deal with the population decline. There was a strong element of political sophistry in this tactic, however, as the opposition parties were well aware that no money would be available for population policy even if they were elected (interview with the CDU, 1978). In fact, as we have seen, one of the new government’s first acts was to reduce the Kindergelt and other allowances for families.

More than five years elapsed before the Christian Democratic/Liberal coalition found it possible to carry out its election promises. As mentioned above, two expensive new pronatalist measures, an allowance to cover the cost of a year of “baby leave” and further tax deductions for dependent children, were announced late in 1984 and were scheduled to take effect in 1986. Within a few months, however, this pronatalist thrust was counterbalanced by the announcement of a new, socially advanced policy for women.
The policy’s aim is the achievement of full equality between the sexes, both at home and at work (German Tribune, 31 March 1985, p. 3). It was thought by some political elites in West Germany that this was a response to a sharp decline in the number of women’s votes going to the government parties in the recent state elections (interviews, 1985).

Irrespective of their ideological preferences, therefore, once in office governments in both France and Germany have adopted a highly pragmatic approach to low fertility. In concrete policy terms, there has been a convergence toward instruments that appeal broadly to the public. Except, possibly, for the new German measures, budgetary appropriations have been relatively modest. An immediate explanation for this low-key approach is the continuing economic weakness that has set a limit on governmental expenditures. A more fundamental explanation, however, is tied to the changes taking place in patterns of family formation: young people—and especially women—no longer want to be tied down by large families. This is one of the reasons behind the West German government’s decision to move closer to the position of its center and left wings. As an official of the family ministry told this writer, “The CDU has realized that it must start where the people are” (interview, 1985).

In both France and Germany in 1985, informants spontaneously stated that there no longer exists a political lobby for the traditional family. In both countries, networks of family associations have long played a leading role in articulating the needs and demands of families. This is no longer the case. In Germany, a spokesman for the family ministry, himself a former family association employee, summarized the situation thus: “Remember, there are two sorts of power. There is the kind that comes from being listened to by government, and the kind that brings votes. The family associations only have the first kind.” In France, the family associations no longer speak with one voice. In order to survive, these former bastions of tradition have had to open their doors to all comers—single-parent families, divorced and unmarried parents, cohabiting couples—whose interests often differ from those of traditional families. In sum, although they are useful as critics, family associations are “too divided among themselves to make an effective lobby” (interview, Ministry of Social Affairs, 1985).

Furthermore, advocates of pronatalist policy in France no longer receive the volume of support that used to come from associations whose primary purpose was to lobby for such policy. Today there are only two nationally known pronatalist associations, the century-old and highly respected Alliance Nationale: Population et Avenir, and the newer Association pour la Recherche et l’Information Demographique. Neither of these associations commands widespread support, and both operate on a shoestring budget. More significantly, both associations have been obliged to abandon the strongly pronatalist position characteristic of the past. Neither organization attempts to promote “la famille nombreuse” of former times; nor do they emphasize the third child in a family. Basing their objectives on INED studies that have repeatedly shown that French women bear fewer children than they say they want, both associations now aim only at “removing the obstacles that prevent women
from having the number of children they desire” (interviews, 1985). This is a much weaker position.

Concluding remarks
Political leaders in many countries of Western Europe are concerned at the continuation of below-replacement fertility, and many believe that governments should intervene to bring about a recovery in the birth rate. This article illustrated a number of barriers to the formulation of pronatalist policies. At the most practical level there are distinct limits to governments’ ability to finance the measures they deem necessary. More profoundly, governments are encountering difficulties in formulating a pronatalist policy. Conscious that traditional family policies have not prevented the decline of fertility, and ignorant of the precise reasons for the fall, political leaders are now considering a more encompassing approach that might bring about a fundamental reshaping of society. As might be expected, policies that touch on numerous aspects of social and economic organization are hard to formulate in a coherent and coordinated manner.

By far the greatest impediment to governmental decisionmaking is that ordinary people do not want a pronatalist policy. Western Europeans have developed a way of life and patterns of family formation that are incompatible with the objectives of pronatalist policy. In the pluralist and democratic nations of Western Europe, governments are unwilling to introduce policies in areas that do not command a broad societal consensus. This is the situation identified decades ago by Gunnar Myrdal and articulated in his Godkin lectures at Harvard University under the title Population: A Problem for Democracy (1940). The intervening years have done little to lessen this dilemma of democratic government.

Conceivably, the political climate for population policy might be improved if certain changes were to occur. If public opinion took on once again a more familial orientation; if researchers identified more precisely how decisions on childbearing are made so that more focused policy instruments could be designed; or if clear evidence were to be adduced that low fertility was visiting serious harm on the economy, the society, or the polity—under such conditions a consensus in favor of pronatalist policy might be achieved. In the absence of one or more of these changes, it is likely that governments in Western Europe will continue to tinker at the edges of family policy, working incrementally and without a clear sense of direction.

Notes
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1 For a discussion of the historical determinants of pronatalist policy see Finkle and McIntosh, 1979, pp. 278–281; and McIntosh, 1983, pp. 27–41.

2 The opinions expressed in this article are based in part on over 100 interviews with politicians, middle and upper level government
officials, and academic and other informed observers in France, West Germany, and Sweden in 1978, in France and Germany in 1985, and less systematically in Great Britain between those two years.

3 Information received in 1985 from informants in the Ministry of Youth, Family, and Health and the Federal Institute for Population Research.

4 The details of family policies are constantly changing, but the main outlines show some stability. Good reviews may be found in Kamerman and Kahn, 1978; and Kamerman, Kahn, and Kingston, 1983.

5 An interesting example of the effect of conflicting objectives presented itself during an interview with an official responsible for French family policy under the socialist government. Asked whether the ministry might consider changing those provisions that result in single-parent and other nontraditional families receiving more assistance than married couples with children, the official replied: “We could do something about it, but it is unlikely. That is an old-fashioned idea. Why should the ministry support only one type of family? Besides, those are the people who really need the help” (interview, 1985, my emphasis; see also Sullerot, 1984). For a discussion of the ministry’s policy on this point see Laroque, 1984, pp. 50–52.

6 This type of approach was elaborated during the 1970s in Germany, in the family reports prepared periodically for the Ministry of Youth, Family, and Health (FRG, 1975, 1979); in Sweden, where it often came up in interviews in 1978 (see e.g. Liljestrom, 1978); and more recently in France (see e.g. Boulaya and Roussille, 1982).

7 See, for example, the remarks of the Minister of Labor and Participation in his introduction to a report on the work of the committee, as well as the minority opinions attached to the report (France, 1980).

8 The education allowance recently introduced in France (starting with the third child) is only FF 1000 a month (approximately US$150), compared with a minimum wage of FF 3500–4000 and an average wage of approximately FF 6000 per month in 1985.

9 Interestingly, although a government bill, both in 1975 when it was adopted for a trial period and in 1979 when it was confirmed, the abortion bill was passed in the National Assembly by the unanimous vote of the opposition left-wing parties. Very few members of the government or parties of the right supported it (Le Monde, 1 December 1979, pp. 1, 8).

References


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Sussmuth, Rita. Personal communication, January 1985.


