Family decline in the Swedish welfare state

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Sweden has much to commend it. Its cities are clean, its countryside beautiful, and its people healthy and long-lived. With no poverty, no slums, and relatively little violent crime and drug abuse, Sweden has to a remarkable degree minimized the extent to which the economic luck of the draw determines the quality of people's lives.

Yet there is one thing about growing up in Sweden today that should give pause even to those sympathetic to the welfare state. There is a strong likelihood that the family has grown weaker there than anywhere else in the world. What has happened to the family in Sweden over the past few decades lends strong support to the proposition that as the welfare state advances, the family declines. If unchecked, this decline could eventually undermine the very welfare that the state seeks to promote.

The modern welfare state was founded with the goal of helping families to function better as decentralized welfare agencies. It sought to strengthen families, not to weaken them. Over time, however, welfare states have increasingly tended not so much to assist families as to replace them; people's dependence on the state
has grown while their reliance on families has weakened. In a classic illustration of the law of unintended consequences, the family under the welfare state is gradually losing both the ability and the will to care for itself.

The impediment to social welfare presented by family decline is often cast in economic terms. If the welfare state is to fulfill its goals, as Danish welfare official Bent Rold Andersen has stressed, its citizens must refrain from exploiting its services to the fullest. There is no economical way for the state to take over all the day-to-day welfare services that the family has long provided its members. Yet in what American social-welfare expert Neil Gilbert has called the "helping hand dilemma," families in the welfare state are penalized by losing the benefits of public care when they provide their own care—whereas they are rewarded with public care when they fail to look after themselves. This is a major component of what some see as the coming economic crisis of the welfare state.

Even more troubling, however, is the possibility of a social crisis. The family in the welfare state may become so weak that it is unable or unwilling to provide the kind of personalized child rearing that it alone can offer.

**Marriage and divorce rates**

The Swedish marriage rate is now the lowest in the industrialized world, and the average age at first marriage is probably the highest. The rate of nonmarital cohabitation, or consensual unions, outranks that of all other advanced nations; such unions, rather than being a mere prelude to marriage (as is more often the case in the United States now), have become a parallel institution alongside legal marriage. About 25 percent of all couples in Sweden today are living in consensual unions (up from 1 percent in 1960), compared with about 5 percent in the United States. The growth of nonmarital cohabitation among childbearing couples has given Sweden one of the highest percentages of children born out of wedlock in the industrial world—over 50 percent of all children, compared with about 22 percent in the United States. It is important to add, however, that—unlike the situation in the United States—very few of these children are born to an "unattached" mother.
The rate of family breakdown in Sweden is more difficult to measure. The Swedish divorce rate, although higher than that of most other European societies, is lower than the American divorce rate. By one estimate, focusing on the cohort born in 1945 and projecting the high divorce rates of the last few decades, the proportion of marriages expected to end in divorce in Sweden is 36 percent, compared with 42 percent in the United States. But the high Swedish rate is surprising from one perspective: many of the factors traditionally associated with divorce in the United States—such as brief courtships and early marriages, teen pregnancies, poverty and income instability, interethnic and interfaith unions, and high residential mobility—are mitigated in Sweden.

The Swedish experience has effectively put to rest the old notion that so-called “trial marriages” would have the desirable effect of cutting the divorce rate. A recent study of Swedish women conducted by the U.S. National Bureau of Economic Research, for example, determined that couples who lived together before marriage had a divorce rate nearly 80 percent higher than those that did not.

In order to divorce one must first marry, and that is precisely what Swedes in large numbers are not doing. The divorce rate, therefore, tells us less and less about the total break-up rate of couples; one must also know the break-up rate of couples who are not married. Such data are hard to come by. To control for casual cohabitation, one Swedish study compared the break-up rates of both married and unmarried couples with at least one child. The dissolution rate of the unmarried couples was nearly three times that of the married couples. It is a reasonable conclusion, based on all available data, that the true “divorce” rate in Sweden—one that takes into account the break-ups of both consensual unions and marriages—may surpass that of the United States and be the highest in the Western world.

This family-dissolution rate is reflected in Sweden’s high percentage of single-parent families. In 1980 single-parent families amounted to 18 percent of all households with children, compared with 17 percent among American whites. (The total U.S. percentage was slightly higher, because 52 percent of black families had only one parent.) Loosely related to the single-parent family rate are two other rates in which Sweden now leads the world: it has
the smallest average household size (about 2.2 persons) and the highest percentage of adults living alone (about 20 percent).

**A waning social institution**

Many of these statistical indicators of the decline of marriage, the increase of family dissolution, and the rise of nonfamily households point to real changes in the family that are commonly associated with its weakening as a social institution. The following family changes, though harder to measure, support the proposition that the family has declined further in Sweden than in any other Western industrialized nation:

1. **Parental authority.** In Sweden, authority over traditional family concerns has shifted heavily to the state. To give two examples: Sweden became the first nation to pass laws forbidding parents to strike their children, and social workers there have been able to take children away from parents for foster care more easily than in other countries.

2. **Economic dependence of children on their parents.** The economic ties that bind children to their parents elsewhere have largely been supplanted in Sweden by ties between children and the state. For instance, in addition to free or low-cost medical care, public transportation, and education, Sweden virtually guarantees a part-time job to any youth age sixteen or over.

3. **Economic interdependence of spouses.** Swedish spouses need have almost no mutual economic obligations. Swedish policy is that each non-handicapped adult is responsible for his or her own economic well-being. In the early 1970s Sweden did away with the joint income-tax return, and it now permits only individual returns.

4. **Economic care for the elderly.** Swedish families need not provide economic care for their aged members. Sweden probably has the world's lowest percentage of households with extended families.

5. **"Familism" as a cultural value.** Familism refers to the belief in a strong sense of family identification and loyalty, mutual assistance among family members, and a concern for the perpetuation of the family unit; the subordination of the interests and personality of individual family members to the interests and welfare of the family group. Still a strong value in many other advanced nations, familism is remarkably weak in Swe-
den. Swedish political discussion, for example, seldom focuses on building strong, self-sufficient families. Swedish family legislation is instead almost exclusively concerned with the situation of the individual family member.

The family, then, has probably become weaker in Sweden than anywhere else—certainly among advanced Western nations. Individual family members are the most autonomous and least bound by the group, and the group as a whole is least cohesive. The family carries out fewer of its traditional social functions; these have shifted to other institutions, especially the state and its agencies, which have correspondingly gained in power and authority. The family is smallest in size, least stable, and has the shortest life span; people are therefore family members for the smallest percentage of their lives. In sum, Swedes have apparently become the least willing to invest time, money, and energy in family life. Instead, the main investments are increasingly made in the individual, not in the family unit.

**The roots of family decline**

Why should the institution of the family have declined further in Sweden than anywhere else? For welfare-state advocates the answer to this question is troubling. Five factors seem strongly associated with Sweden’s advanced family decline: the culture of self-fulfillment, economic security, gender-role change, the ideology of the welfare state, and secularism. The part played by economic security and gender-role change is particularly dismaying, inasmuch as they are highly favored policy goals in most industrialized societies. Nevertheless, their role in fostering family decline is clearly implicated by many studies.

Virtually all of the family changes occurring in Sweden—such as the decline in marriage and the high family-dissolution rate—have been evident in every other advanced society in the past few decades. Forces that operate universally appear to have impelled change at a particularly rapid pace in Sweden.

Given the limitations of the social sciences, we will probably never know precisely what forces caused families in advanced societies to undergo the dramatic changes that began in the 1960s. But agreement among family experts is growing that if any one force is to be given causal priority, it is the new cultural emphasis on self-fulfillment—a value that logically opposes familism. Per-
sons motivated by self-fulfillment pursue their own personal interests, whereas persons motivated by familism pursue the collective interests of the family as an institution.

There is no satisfactory way to determine if self-fulfillment per se has become a stronger cultural value in Sweden than elsewhere. But we do have solid information about two other trends that are closely associated with self-fulfillment—growing economic security and changing gender roles.

The economic irrelevance of the family

For most of human history the family was an economic work unit. An economic bond held families together, and ties to a family were ordinarily necessary for sheer physical survival. The changing economic conditions in advanced societies—characterized as they are by widespread personal affluence, welfare safety nets, and the redistribution of income—have seriously attenuated the economic bond of the family. With the growth of personal economic security, the economic bond has largely been replaced by affection.

Compared with economic need, affection is a notoriously fragile basis for family solidarity. In Sweden today it is often financially advisable today to divorce—or better yet, not to get married in the first place, and certainly not to have any children. Thus affluence and economic security have brought higher divorce and lower marriage rates, and have helped to generate low birth rates that are unprecedented.

Personal economic security is probably greater in Sweden than in any other society, and this is due largely to the welfare state. No political goal of the welfare state has loomed larger. The Swedish government takes the view that if the family cannot or does not want to provide for its members, for whatever reason, the government will assume the burden.

On economic grounds alone, therefore, a Swede has little reason to hold a family together, or even to be part of a family. If children and their caretaker parent are left economically disadvantaged through family break-up, for example, the government steps in. The absent parent is forced to pay child support; when this is not possible, the government provides it. The government grants many other subsidies as well, such as for housing, and it has been estimated that the divorced mother in Sweden—in stark contrast to
her American counterpart—ends up with about 90 percent of her predivorce standard of living.

If Swedish families don’t wish to assume the economic burden of caring for their aging parents—and almost all families do not—the government assumes it for them. If the aged or infirm want to live alone and have no one to care for them, the government provides a homemaker service. Because families below the median income level cannot provide for their members as generously as wealthier families, the government redistributes income from wealthier families to poorer ones.

The result of such policies is that Swedes have become much less economically dependent on their families, and much more dependent on their state. Rather than having to build up and then draw on a pool of family resources over time to meet the needs of family members, families regularly turn over to the state a large portion of their resources in the form of taxes. Resources taken by the state at certain stages of the family’s life cycle are then typically given back at other stages.

These economic and social shifts include substantial changes in men’s and women’s roles. In recent decades, gender roles within families have been changing dramatically, especially with the movement of women—who tend no longer to be full-time homemakers—into the labor market. While undoubtedly bringing many benefits to women, these changes have contributed to family instability in two ways: by reducing the economic dependence of wives on their husbands (that is, by giving women more economic security) and by making marital roles ambiguous. Far from incorporating a set of cultural role prescriptions that is taken for granted, marriage has now become a lifelong bargaining session in which wives and husbands must continually negotiate their roles.

The welfare state has put Sweden in the lead with respect to gender equality. No social goal has been more important to Swedish welfare-state officials in recent decades than the achievement of full equality for women. Although most Swedish women would stress that they have hardly reached full equality with men, by many indicators the Swedish welfare state has been remarkably successful in achieving such equality: Sweden today has probably the smallest percentage of full-time housewives—about 10 percent—of any Western nation, one of the highest percentages of working-age women in the labor force (77 percent in
1983, compared with 62 percent in the U.S.), and the closest correspondence between women's and men's earnings (Swedish women earn about 90 percent as much as Swedish men, whereas the comparable figure is 70 percent in the U.S.).

Welfare-state ideology

Economic security and gender equality are both established political goals of modern states, goals that appear to weaken families. They are accentuated by, but by no means unique to, the welfare state. In addition to these political goals, the welfare state nurtures a distinctive and pervasive cultural mentality, or ideology, that has antifamily overtones.

Two of the central values of welfare-state ideology are professionalism in human services and egalitarianism in society. These values are strongly held and promoted by the legion of workers who staff the welfare-state bureaucracy. But the family is neither professional nor egalitarian. The cultural dominance of these two values, therefore, poses a special threat to the interests of the family as a unit (as distinct from the interests of individual family members).

Modern professionalism has achieved much by increasing knowledge and refining techniques. But according to many close observers, the great emphasis placed on professional care in Sweden has enfeebled both the confidence and the motivation of "amateur" family members in providing their own care. In the culture of the welfare state, it becomes all too easy for family members to believe that care is best provided by—and should be provided by—government-employed professionals. The argument is that professionals are trained to give the best possible care, and that taxes are paid precisely to purchase such professional care.

To make matters worse, some welfare professionals come to believe that professional care is somehow inherently superior to the care provided by families, and should be substituted for it. The original welfare-state goal—that families should be helped rather than replaced—increasingly is undermined. This is in part the old problem of goal displacement, in which members of an organization become more concerned with perpetuating their organization (and their positions in it) than with meeting its original goals. In this respect the welfare state is no different from other organizations.
Central to the ideology of the welfare state is the belief that care provided by families is not only unprofessional, but also highly inequalitarian in its distribution. Because the family has long limited economic and social equality, it is common for the more dedicated egalitarians among welfare workers to feel ambivalence or even hostility toward it—and especially toward the traditional, patriarchal, bourgeois family.

The bourgeois family is seen as a major root of social problems. In order to destroy it, some welfare-state ideologues are eager to promote alternatives not only to the bourgeois family but to the nuclear family, and to turn over most child rearing to the state.

Adherence to such a radical, individualistic egalitarianism prohibits the state from promoting those family values and arrangements that may in fact be socially preferable. Take, for example, the statement of one Swedish official: “You can no longer speak publicly in Sweden about nuclear families being ‘good’ because there are now many single parents, and you don’t want to make them feel bad.” In the same sense, the government cannot reward families that stay together, because this would be regarded as unfair to families that break up. Thus its commitment to equality impels the welfare state to mute its voice on a range of traditional moral issues.

But the welfare state’s single-minded pursuit of egalitarianism has perhaps most harmed families by making an implicit pact between the individual and the welfare bureaucracy that excludes the family unit. It is the individual, not the family, who is the welfare state’s client and who has the national identification number. Rather than aiming to strengthen the family as a unit, Swedish family policy focuses almost exclusively on helping the individual family member. In the provision of economic and other welfare benefits to each individual, the concerns of the family as a unit—that it be strong, stable, and relatively self-sufficient—are consistently overlooked.

Finally, the lessening of religious belief should be mentioned as another factor associated with family decline. As abundant research in the United States has shown, people who are strongly religious tend to be more familialistic and to have a lower divorce rate. Sweden has secularized with startling rapidity in the last half-century, and today is probably the world’s most secular society.
Less than 5 percent of Swedes regularly attend religious services, and only 50 percent proclaim a belief in God.

Secularism has never been an official policy of the Swedish welfare state. But the ideological climate of the welfare state, with its antipathy to tradition, can hardly be said to be conducive to religious life.

**The high costs of family breakdown**

Why should modern societies be concerned about a high family-breakdown rate? If Swedes are healthier and more economically secure than ever before, why should Sweden's weakening family system be cast as a problem? If the state is able successfully to pick up the pieces that are left in the wake of family decline, and indeed to improve people's material lot in the process, why is the declining family worrisome? Answers to these questions lie in the social costs that stem from the weakening and the dissolution of families. These costs lie mainly in the economy and in child rearing.

For economic reasons, the welfare state depends heavily on families that can take care of their own, that don't make unnecessary demands on the public purse, and that recognize their responsibilities as well as their rights. But once the welfare state is fully established, such families, unfortunately, appear to become increasingly scarce. The original hope of the welfare state—that families strengthened by state assistance would be better able voluntarily to care for their members—has to some extent been dashed. We have seen this problem in the United States via the "welfare crisis"—growing welfare dependency and skyrocketing welfare costs. Writ large, this becomes the economic crisis of the welfare state.

Welfare-state leaders in European nations, too, have become worried. The Swedish government today, in fact, is in the throes of pruning its welfare-state apparatus, cutting taxes, and asking more of its citizens. Belief that the welfare state is too prominent is now widespread in Sweden, and approval of the long-dominant Social Democratic government—as measured by opinion polls—has fallen to its lowest point in many years, with only about a third of the citizenry indicating support.

The bankruptcy of the welfare state would, of course, be calamitous; but weakened families are unlikely to produce it in the im-
mediately foreseeable future. Such families do, however, cause serious and immediate damage to children. Adults can pick and choose their family ties, but children cannot; adults may improve their lives through family dissolution, but children usually do not; adults can live in single-person households, but children cannot. Only the most hardened antifamily cynic can really believe that the quality of family life is unimportant for children. Indeed, most people continue to believe that an emotionally rich and secure family life is every child’s birthright.

There is no way to know whether parenting has become worse in Sweden in recent years. What can be discerned is a changing social ecology of child rearing that is associated with family decline. Most importantly, parents dissolve their relationships much more frequently than they did before, and children are more often raised by a single parent. The chances that a Swedish child will live continuously to age eighteen with both biological parents is now only approximately one in two.

Even without parental break-up, however, important changes in child rearing are occurring. With each passing year, Sweden is drifting further away from the conditions that make for good child rearing. Thus there are fewer families that do many things together (such as eating meals), have many routines and traditions, and provide much interaction between adults and children; children have less regular contact with relatives, neighbors, and the adult world of work; a child can seldom be sure that his parents’ marriage will endure; one is less likely to encounter rich family subcultures imbuing the traditional values of responsibility, cooperation, and sharing.

Adults in Sweden no longer need children in their lives, at least for economic reasons. But in social and psychological terms, children need adults as much as ever. Not just any adults, moreover, but parents who are motivated, in the words of psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner, to provide “enduring, irrational, emotional involvement.” In this sense, child rearing is an aspect of human life that the modern propensity to increase efficiency and rationalize procedures cannot improve; it is a cottage industry. What is still required is an abundance of time, patience, and love on the part of caring parents; a bureaucracy cannot provide this. In short, children need strong families.
What ill effects has the changing social ecology of child rearing brought to Sweden? The clearest evidence of a problem is in the data on juvenile delinquency. Swedish delinquency rates rose abruptly during the years of rapid family change and today are among the highest in northern Europe (although the offenses are mostly minor and seldom involve violence). There is also much discussion and some hard data concerning a considerable increase in angst among Swedish youth, with such related problems as depression, suicide, and alcoholism. For the real test, however, we must await the coming to maturity of today's generation of young Swedes.

What is to be done?

Could the United States somehow incorporate the best of Swedish family and welfare policies while avoiding damage to the institution of the family? Many American conservatives believe not; they argue that the welfare state constitutes a single sociopolitical package whose structures cannot be disentangled, and that America should continue to rely on the market and not become more of a welfare state.

But the market can be just as damaging to the family as the state. This helps account for the fact that the United States and Sweden—the Western world's welfare laggard and welfare leader, respectively—have the world's highest family-dissolution rates. It makes little sense, then, for the United States to think that it is saving the family by refusing to expand its comparatively meager welfare efforts. A middle ground should be sought between state and market; more generous parental-leave policies, for example, would allow parents to integrate work and family more successfully. Reducing the economic uncertainties of life in the United States—without generating the excessive dependence on government found in Sweden—would help the family much more than hurt it. Family conditions in this country have deteriorated so much, in fact, and we are so far behind other nations in providing such basic welfare programs for children as health care and preschool education, that the American adoption and expansion of such programs seem both necessary and inevitable.

In the end, however, family policies—important though they are—remain inadequate to deal with the most serious family problem of the modern world. Public services and facilities alone can-
not keep families whole—only people's values can. But values are fragile and must be nourished culturally. Rather than relying on welfare programs to halt family decline, we will instead have to seek more profound ways to mend the torn cultural fabric of modern society.