

## THE FAMILY IN THE PERIOD OF POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION (COMMENTARY TO L. MLČOCH'S PAPER)

HANNA SUCHOCKA

During the second half of the 20th century, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe twice underwent major economic, cultural and moral changes. Longer than in Western Europe, in Eastern Europe there persisted the model of a homogenous, traditional and familiar family, meaning a large, multi-generational rural family which doubled as an economic community and a living community. Although certain changes had already begun appearing in the 1930s, in general that type of family had lasted up till the Second World War. The war's end and the change of the political situation brought about an essential change in the structure of society. That was largely influenced by industrialisation and the attendant mass migrations from countryside to urban areas. That in itself brings about changes in the family model. The large multi-generational family began evolving into a small two-generational one.<sup>1</sup>

The changes also characteristic of Western Europe (in connection with 19th-century industrialisation) in Eastern Europe were augmented by additional factors stemming from the ideologisation of the state which left their imprint on the family model. The countries of Central and Eastern Europe were subjected to an experiment based on completely different fundamentals than those on which Europe's traditional societies had developed. Above all, the principles of individual freedom and the significance of the human person were negated. In their place, the ideology of collectivism was introduced which was to have basic consequences for the way the family was regarded. Collectivism essentially pertained to the economic system and meant the liquidation of private ownership and basing the economy on

<sup>1</sup> K. Slany, *Modele życia rodzinnego (Models of Family Life)* in *Znak* 2005, no. 2, pp. 29-31.

a system of social or collective ownership. But it also brought about significant consequences in the realm of mores and culture as well as the functioning of the family.

Small groups, including families, ceased being responsible for their fate. Nationalisation was consistently carried out, small farms and enterprises were liquidated and things were transformed into one, great state enterprise. The state came to own everything, both as the sole employer as well as effectively the only organiser of people's free time. That also found its legal expression in the elimination of the freedom to associate. The state also distributed flats thereby leaving no room for individual initiative. Such a system had serious implications for the functioning of the family.

During the first years of the communist state's existence, there also developed a specific ideology concerning the family. The traditional family was presented as a bourgeois relic, as it was called. Such an ideology was indispensable for the new authorities to achieve their objectives. A family strong in tradition constituted a threat to the new type of state. While forcibly imposing its new ideology, the state feared the influence of the family in the realm of shaping and educating the young. Hence the entire educational system was nationalised and subordinated to a single ideology.

Working arrangements changed significantly. Paradoxically the communist system imposed what women in the West had been fighting for. It imposed universal employment for women. But that was not to be a woman's free choice. Wages were set at such a low level that the work of a single wage-earner (the husband) was unable to support the family. Such large-scale employment on the part of women necessitated the creation of state nurseries and day-care centres (which Mlčoch has written about). From its earliest years, practically from infancy, the child was away from home. (To this day I can recall mothers leading their bleary-eyed, crying children into a tram in winter at 6 AM (privately owned cars were a rarity back then) to take them to a day-care centre). That made a permanent imprint on the child. Deprived of warmth and love, the child was subjected to the rigours of a day-care centre rather than being reared in its mother's presence.

That model was forcibly implemented, imposed from above and was not, at least in many cases, based upon a woman's conscious choice. At the same time, the conviction was engrained that only a woman working outside the home was performing a valuable task. It was then that the large-scale deprecation of housework as well as of the home and family was begun, and that has made an imprint on the way the role of women and housework is perceived to this day.

The results of that policy varied and produced different effects in individual countries. To some extent, the Church was able to offset such drastic deprecation of housework performed by women. It must be remembered, however, that the Church itself was oppressed.

In particular, the role it performed in society was subjected to indoctrination. The widely promoted view was that the Church's role was in decline in modern society. Its influence in various countries was unusually restricted.

Without a doubt, the Church in Poland did retain a good deal of its sovereignty, largely thanks to the strength and wisdom of Cardinal Wyszyński. But, in many circles, state propaganda did succeed in undermining the credibility of Church teaching. Although Polish society constantly declared itself to be 90 percent Catholic, state propaganda did have an effect. This was particularly the case as regards issues connected with abortion and what was called planned parenthood, as well as easy divorces which only through the will of the state were quickly introduced into the civil code.

One of the elements of communist ideology was the concept of 'conscious maternity'. The concept of 'conscious maternity' was based on the total permissibility of abortion. In the communist countries, abortion effectively became a normal contraceptive technique. Owing to backwardness and limited access to modern contraceptives as well as a lack of education, that was the 'simplest' method of birth control, and one financed by the state to boot. The Church's voice was unable to penetrate even in a country such as Poland. And also in Poland a law was passed making abortion widely available (1957). That law remained in force for about 40 years. What is more, it won social acceptance. Women accepted abortion. What was known as the new intelligentsia, educated under communism and usually coming from large peasant and worker families, accepted that model of family planning, regarding it as more convenient and more in tune with modern requirements. Women having many children were subjected to social ostracism. They were ridiculed and frowned upon by their superiors at work. That, of course, put them under pressure to conform to the model imposed from above.

In that context, an important observation can be made. Although the Soviet bloc of that era was completely isolated from Western influence as regards its economic system, one may observe that certain processes affecting the family model appeared to run parallel. They even included similar slogans advocating liberation from the bourgeois family model. The difference was that those processes were taking place on the basis of completely opposite ideological concepts. In the West, those were grass-roots movements

based on guaranteed freedom of choice. In a socialist state, they developed not on the basis of freedom of choice but were rooted in the subordination of the individual and family to the state; (as well as in the state's take-over, in some extent, of functions traditionally belonging to the family).

In other words, while living behind the iron curtain, we were far from Europe in the sense of positive economic and technical progress. But, probably without fully realising it, we caught up to Europe in the negative sense of limiting the number of births and restricting the role of the family in society.

Such a policy produced concrete results, and a visible decline in the number of births ensued. Immediately after the war Poland experienced a baby boom. But the years that followed brought about a significant decline in the birth rate. As a result of the post-war baby boom, in the early 1960s the well-known slogan 'a thousand schools for Poland's 1,000th birthday' (in 1966) was launched. It soon turned out, however, that classrooms were growing empty, and the school buildings had to be used for other purposes. A characteristic thing was that similar tendencies were observed in all the communist states. Being a Catholic, or rather declaring oneself a Catholic, did not essentially deter the mentality of the new homo sovieticus from having abortions. In that situation, Cardinal Wyszyński made exceptionally dramatic appeals. But those appeals did not reach society on a mass scale.

Nevertheless, in states where the role of the Church was strong, already in the communist period a grass-roots movement emerged in the parishes which was to modify general pro-abortion attitudes. The first right-to-life movements attached to the Church and independent of the state sprang up. They did not significantly affect Poland's demographics, but they did encourage reflection and spread basic knowledge about the Church's teachings on defending human life. Advice and assistance centres for pregnant mothers were set up. They received assistance to discourage them having abortions.

At the start of the 1970s, the authorities also realised the effects of their policies and how they were depopulating the country. Hence a number of new solutions were introduced – benefits for mothers giving birth, especially extremely long, paid maternity leaves. That failed to produce any radical improvement in the demographic situation, because attitudinal changes had already taken place in the mentality of women who by and large came to reject the large-family model.

Again we are touching upon one of the paradoxes of the communist system, particularly in Poland. Despite such a policy deprecating the role of the family, the family has nevertheless survived. And, thanks to the Church's strong tradition, it has retained as a nearly society-wide norm christening,

marriages and First Holy Communion, celebrated in a family and religious way. That certainly set Polish society apart from that of other communist states. Paradoxically, for a society that was poor, plagued by housing difficulties and deprived of access to the civilisation of consumption the easiest solution was the gather together in the family. To some extent, therefore, the family had retained its social functions out of necessity.

The societies of Central Europe were subjected to other significant reevaluation in the final decade of the 20th century as a result of the process of political transformation. The change of system in the post-communist countries brought about not only economic and political changes but above all social changes producing significant consequences in society's mentality.

It should be emphasised that transformation was a necessity. It meant a reversion to the principles on which the functioning of democratic societies is based. Above all, it meant a return to freedom, to the individual, to the human person as a central value. By the same token, it meant moving away from collectivism and a centrally steered distribution system towards a market economy. But a process of such fundamental change was not without its side-effects.

Toppling the existing system also meant destroying everything that provided a sense of security and stemmed from the omnipresent socialist state which extended its 'care' to everyone and to all fields of human endeavour. Now the state had ceased organising life's time, pace and rhythm.

Exceptionally painful negative consequences, especially the scope of unemployment were something completely new. They also affected relations within the family. Unemployed parents, especially jobless fathers, lost authority in the eyes of their children. The necessity of liquidating obsolete state workplaces affected women first and foremost. They returned home as losers with a sense of defeat. They did not undertake the role of a mother managing a household by choice but as a result of rejection. Deprived of their jobs, they were not accepted in the role of housewives either by themselves or by others.

The media promoted and to this day continue to promote the view that housework is something second-rate. Recently one of the more serious Polish weeklies ran a report on the situation of women in the home where in harsh terms it is stated that 'the politicians ruling today and invoking the teachings of the Church would prefer to herd women back into the home.' The word 'herd' has an exceptionally pejorative connotation suggesting that such a woman is close to being a social outcast. That does not help to change the way people think.

The transformation period was also connected with the rejection of traditional bans. In that area it turned out that the authority of the Church, which had been so great in the communist period and had helped to preserve the values of freedom in society, was not perhaps totally rejected but to a large extent ignored. Although the ethical catalogue based on the Church's social teaching was widely discussed during that first pioneering period of the transformation, it did not constitute the basic foundation of the new social relations in a society that was in the main Catholic.

The post-communist societies wanted to catch up with the Western states in a short space of time and embarked on the pursuit of an ambiguously defined freedom not firmly rooted in values.

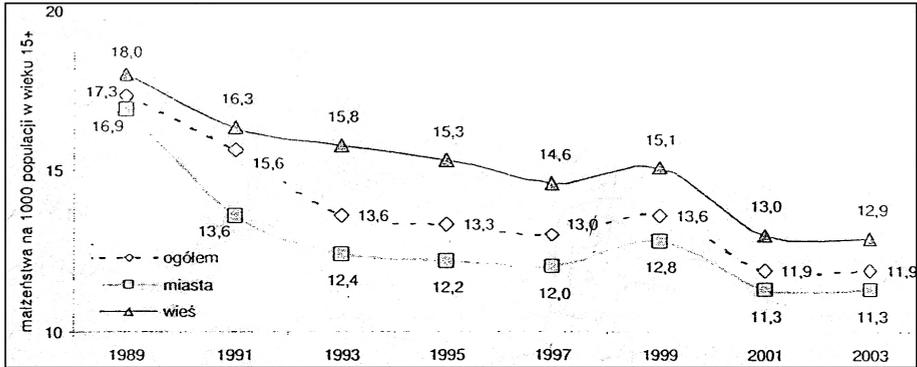
It would appear that the most negative consequences were caused by confusion in the realm of fundamental values. That especially affected the family and young people. Amid the opening that occurred, when the iron curtain collapsed and broad access to Western cultural patterns was obtained, the model of the family or human relationships presented in the Western media were erroneously perceived as the desirable, modern family model. Those family bonds that had survived communism began breaking down, Freedom was also perceived as liberation from the family. The family, especially children, started being regarded as a burden to those pursuing a career. The process of economic change as well as adapting the economies of post-communist states to the world's developed economies proceeded at a far slower pace than the adoption and emulation of Western lifestyles with all their negative traits. That was the result of several different factors.

One can agree with Mlčoch that the drive to get rich quick made a significant imprint on things. The civilisation of consumption, promoted by advertisers, indoctrinated people into believing that the acquisition of this or that product would fulfil all their expectations. The domination of the consumer civilisation to a considerable extent ensured the victory of the culture of having over the culture of being. The drive to possess everything as soon as possible replaced the positive principle of traditional entrepreneurship – of gradually getting ahead. In place of the toppled system of values a new one started to be built – a seemingly modern one in tune with world-wide trends.

The family and traditional values became something that did not fully fit this new vision of freedom.

Studies conducted in Poland since 1989 have shown a permanent decline in the fertility rate. The number of contracted marriages has

TABLE 1. NUMBER OF CONTRACTING MARRIAGES.



declined considerably (Table 1), and divorces have been on the upswing (Table 2). As a result, the structure of households began to change. One-family households dominated, but the number of non-family households began increasing, accounting for 26.4 percent in 2002.<sup>2</sup>

Young people, who are always interested in what is new and shocking, were subject to negative influence and risked making the wrong choices in life.

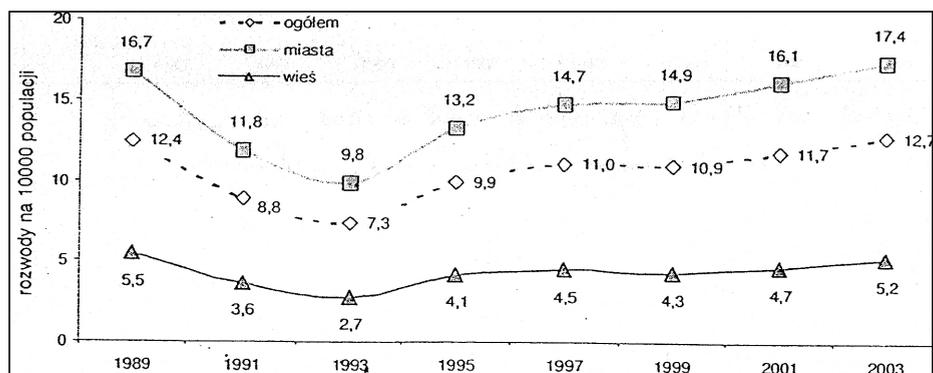
Worth quoting is a rather original description of the younger generation provided by one of its members: 'Today's young people are infected with the ideology of pleasure, and common sense has lost its moral basis – I am the only one that counts. Today's youth try to use alcohol, drugs and sex to compensate for the lack of feelings and love they did not receive from their parents – I am the only one that counts. The present generation is characterised by an attitude of insensitivity, irresponsibility and lack of empathy – I am the only one that counts'.<sup>3</sup>

Such a description of young people appears exceptionally pessimistic and tragic. But we ourselves have ended up in the trap of our own choosing. On the one hand, we sought 'liberation' from traditional family dependencies and ties. On the other hand, that liberty has created a sense of emptiness, confusion and rootlessness.

<sup>2</sup> J. Józwiak, Families and families households, Report. 2.

<sup>3</sup> M. Minkowitsch, Rodzina i młodzież w dzisiejszym świecie (The family and youth in today's world) in Rodzina wspólnotą szczęścia (International Family Congress, Lublin 23-25 April 2004), Lublin 2005, p. 179.

TABLE 2. NUMBER OF DIVORCES.



The danger of such a simplistic perception of modernity and freedom causing irreversibly negative consequences to the social structure was forcefully accentuated by John Paul II during his first pilgrimage to democratic Poland in 1991. He focused on the Ten Commandments and in particular recalled the role of the family and the right to life. The words of John Paul II were rather harsh: 'Our century is an age encumbered by the death of millions of innocent people. (...) To that vast burial ground of victims of human cruelty in our century is added the huge cemetery of the unborn'. And he posed the question: is there any human assembly or any parliament that has got the right to legalise the murder of an innocent and defenceless human being?'.<sup>4</sup>

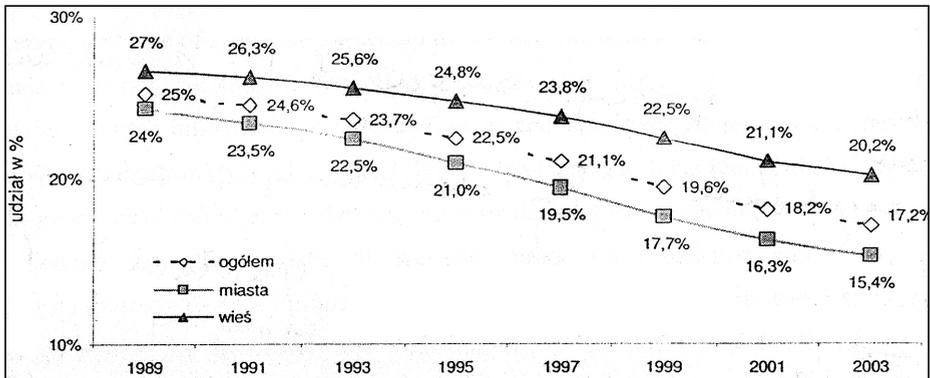
He recalled that the new society must be built on the durable foundations of values. The surprising thing was that a society so attached to the Holy Father, so ready to follow him in his pilgrimages and so attentive to his words when a certain 'political programme' was being voiced (such as his 1979 appeal to transcend the boundaries of systems), this time did not take up the challenge. What is more, society did not understand those words, critically evaluated them and found them too conservative for the contemporary world. That only showed the scope of moral confusion, the extent of confusion existing within the value system. It may be said that the long-standing communist indoctrination regarding the role of the family

<sup>4</sup> Giovanni Paolo II, Omelia della messa celebrata nell'aeroporto militare di Radom, 4 giugno 1991, in: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, XIV, 1, 1991, p. 1470.

and birth limitation was overlapped by new tendencies of erroneously conceived liberalism perceived as unrestricted freedom and the domination of the right to choose over the right to life.

But those words of the Holy Father did get taken up by a group of MPs with Christian roots who prepared draft legislation significantly restricting abortions. In 1993, the law was passed over numerous protests. It should be noted, however, that it has remained in force to this day, in spite of numerous attempts to change it. How has it influenced things? In statistical terms, the number of abortions have declined. But the issue of an underground abortion circuit remains an open question. Despite so restrictive a law, since 1989 the share of people in the 0-14 age group in Poland's

TABLE 3. NUMBER OF POPULATION IN THE AGE 0-14 IN TOTAL NUMBER OF POLISH POPULATION.



overall population has been declining (Table 3). As is often emphasised, one of the basic reasons for that situation is the growing cost of supporting and rearing a child. However, I believe that to be only part of the truth.

In the present situation, one can observe two, in some sense opposite tendencies coexisting side by side. On the one hand there is the syndrome of erroneously perceived modernity, informal relationships, frequent divorces and new post-divorce marriages which face children with having two fathers (their biological one and their mother's current partner) or two mothers in the family. On the other hand, the gradual reevaluation of such attitudes may be detected. Many young, well-educated women consciously decide to return in some sense to the traditional family model, to

have children and be with them during their early childhood. That, of course, is connected to the growing affluence of certain social groups. So far, this has been a rather limited development affecting only a small, statistically inscrutable percentage of women. Such behaviour nevertheless marks an attempt to break down a certain stereotype about a woman's work in the family. It is difficult to speak of any clear tendency. But certain symptoms may already be detected, and perhaps in future those positive examples may become a model to be emulated. That is nevertheless a very slow process, if indeed it actually becomes a process and not only a short-lived syndrome.

For certain changes to take place, it is necessary for many conditions to be fulfilled. That requires first of all a change in the long-standing way the women's role at home has been perceived. Housework continues to be presented in a negative light. The latest studies show that as many of 55 percent of all adult women work in the home (app. 6 million), but not on the basis of free choice but out of necessity. Attitudes in which such a choice is a woman's conscious and desired decision should be promoted.

A key factor is a change of mentality. Also necessary is something many governments have been grappling with: finding solutions to raise the esteem of housework by means of appropriate social benefits guaranteed by law. It is extremely important to find solutions that are commensurate with the situation of the state and do not evoke reactions opposite of what is intended. One cannot apply the same solutions used under certain conditions by the communist state, when the state as the sole employer could enact whatever norms served its purposes. Today it is difficult to enact legislation obliging private employers to keep the jobs of women on maternity leave available to them when they return to work. But an entire differentiated system of measures can be envisaged such as longer maternity leaves, counting

housework towards old-age pensions, flexible working time and tax incentives that will make it worth an employer's while to employ women following maternity leaves.

And that should be the aim of long-range social policy.

In this context, the views of the same young person who had so pessimistically described young people may be cited. He also believes 'today's young people to be a generation that, because of the consequences of the 1960s and '70s, deeply understand the value of family and what it means to grow up in a durable and stable family. Today's youth understand the significance of family, because they've got more experience than previous gen-

erations – and there is still hope. Young people are the hope, so there is still hope for the family’.

That is attested to by emerging youth organisations which are arduously changing the image of the family from the ground up. They want to re-create the traditional family in a modernised version based on the principle of collaborating spouses. When listening to the voice of the younger generation, perhaps we should agree with those who maintain that, following the various shocks caused by rapid civilisational change, the family always reverts to equilibrium.