

Family Policies in Post-Communist Nations

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Letter from: Steven Saxonberg

I THINK THAT BETTY REID MANDELL made some interesting points in her discussion (in *New Politics*, Summer 2008, Vol. XII, No. 1, Whole # 45), but she has some misconceptions.

First she writes “None of the writers of these articles questions the term ‘Communist’ in referring to Communist nations. This leaves the impression that those nations were being governed by Marxist ideology.” I think that the majority of authors writing about gender and post-communism/communism understand that the communist-ruled regimes deviated in their policies from what Marx wrote. For this reason, it is quite common to call the regimes “state-socialism” — to emphasize that it is an authoritarian type of “socialism.” I would agree that these regimes were not really “socialist” at all, so in my book on the collapse of communism (*The Fall*, published by Routledge) I refer to the regimes as “Soviet-type” to emphasize that they followed a model that came from the Soviet Union. However, in journal articles you have so few words and so little space that you do not have space to discuss such issues (unless it is an article concentrating on the issue of how to label these regimes) so I often use the term “communist regimes” or “communist-led” to emphasize that communist PARTIES were in power. That does not mean that I think that the parties were implementing the types of policies that Marx would have preferred or that these regimes were following the path that Marx had predicted. (Which is not to say that I share Mandell’s sympathies for Trotsky because even he in practice acted very authoritarian during his period of influence in the first years after the Bolshevik Revolution. For example, rather than implement workplace democracy, he wanted the factories to be run with military discipline. In addition, I think he was wrong to categorize these regimes as transitional regimes, that were at a “higher” stage of development than the capitalist Western regimes. They comprised their own type of regime, with their own types of dynamics and they were for the most part at a lower level of development than the West European capitalist regimes.)

Then she writes about my particular co-authored article “While women were forced to work in those countries, they also had to care for the children and do housework. That is hardly liberation.” We never claimed that the communist-led regimes liberated women and we make a big point of the fact that they still expected women to have full responsibility of the household. She took our comment out of context. When the communists first came to power, their policies did MORE than most West European countries to promote gender equality. We wrote this in RELATIVE terms. I think this paragraph that I will now cite makes it clear that Mandell misrepresents us:

Although the state-socialist policies shared some similarities with Sweden’s defamilialized, dual-earner, individual-earner-career model, important differences existed. While state socialism expected families to have dual-earners, it only expected mothers to be both earners and carers. Fathers were not expected to care for child-raising or household tasks. In fact, fathers were not even allowed to go on parental leave except in unusual cases. State-socialist regimes also followed traditional conservative parental leave policies. In order to encourage higher birth rates, the regimes eventually created extended maternity leaves. These were low paying, flat rate benefits that induced mothers to leave the labor market for long periods. Thus, the state-socialist model combined defamilializing labor market and childcare policies with conservative, familializing maternity leave policies.

I also take issue with Mandell's conclusions about Sweden. She writes: "Yet even there relatively few fathers take advantage of this. The solution to the problem involves more than money; there are deep-seated cultural attitudes that need to be resolved." I do not know how she defines "relatively few" and if she defines "relatively few" as anything less than 100 percent, then I will agree with her statement. However, usually "relatively few" means something close to 0 percent. In Sweden well over 90 percent of father go on father leave. I do not remember the exact statistics, but I think it is around 96 or 97 percent, but if you are really interested in is, I can look it up for you. About 23 percent of the total parental leave time is done by fathers, which is still short of 50 percent which would mean sharing equally, but it still is high enough to show that policies can bring about changes. Mandell does not mention Iceland, where one-third of the leave time is reserved for fathers and over 30 percent of the total leave time is done by men.

Finally, Mandell concludes by stating that she never trusted a journal that does not publish letters to the editor. I guess that means she does not trust any academic journals, because I am not aware of any academic journals that publish letters to the editor. If there were no limits on space, I think it might be a good idea to include letters to the editor, but unfortunately, the trend is the opposite: the number of words social scientists like myself are allowed to use for articles is declining, so our articles must be shorter and shorter. When I first started writing journal articles the limit was often 12,000 words. Now the limit is often 6,000 words. I once even had a limit of 5,500 words. Given this situation, I would prefer being able to write longer articles than cutting the size of our articles even more to allow letters.

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