

*Rákosník, Jakub/Šustrová, Radka: Rodina v zájmu státu. Populační růst a instituce manželství v českých zemích 1918-1989 [The Family in the Interest of the State. Population Growth and the Institution of Marriage in Czech Lands, 1918-1989].*

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All societies intervene in procreation, marriage and the family. The processes of giving (or not giving) birth and raising children are too important for societies to leave uncontrolled, though social controls do not always work. The social procedures for controlling childbearing operate culturally (through the motherhood mandate), ideologically (through discourses on nationalism and/or eugenics), psychologically (as aspirations and emotions at the personal level), economically (through market incentives and disincentives) and through the state. The major instruments at the disposal of the state are overlapping social, demographic, health and economic policies based on legal-administrative and fiscal measures, such as prohibition and prosecution of induced abortions or various monetary and 'in-kind' family assistance programs. In any complex modern nation state (such as Czechoslovakia), there are hardly any measures which have defined the welfare state that do not bear at least indirectly on women (or parents), the family, and children. Thus any discussion about family and social welfare policies inevitably raises a whole series of questions about the relations between the state, the family, and the (gendered and racialized) individual. Limiting themselves to the contexts of modern Czech nation-state building, first as part of the newly independent democratic Czechoslovakia during the inter-war period, then as an occupied Nazi German Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia and, finally, after a brief 3-year democratic interlude of post-World War II democracy, as a Czechoslovak communist party-state, the authors of *Rodina v zájmu státu* explore these questions in some detail, and exceedingly well.

By focusing on population dynamics and the institution of the family as they relate to the state, *Rodina v zájmu státu* is foremost a historical examination of the development of Czech social policy. Although enacted by quite different state formations, policy similarities and continuities are much more striking than changes and ruptures. Moreover, the two authors also convincingly argue that one cannot examine modern state and its social and family policies without simultaneously exploring the role of experts in the formulation, justification and implementation of these policies. To this end, the authors analyze numerous family and population professional discourses and debates as they dominated the various historical periods. The specific areas of public policy examined include the family (e.g., the optimal conditions for marriage, prevention of divorce, support for single parent families, foster care, failure of birth control in the form of unwanted children); fertility and its enhancement or control (e.g., various pro-natalist family incentives, legal and health measures dealing with abortion, contraception and sterilization); lowering of infant mortality, largely through the medicalization of most aspects of childbearing (accomplished by the mid-1950s); suitability of children's day nurseries; a variety of issues connected with the (over)employment of women (e.g. protective legislation,

feminization of certain economic sectors, equal pay and other issues in women's equality); and the effectiveness of a family and demographic policy. The study makes it quite clear that the various experts – individual physicians, demographers, lawyers, economists, family counsellors and child psychologists – both reacted to existing trends, and attempted to shape them, typically not simply as individual professionals but also as agents of the government machinery. Reacting to what were perceived as unfavorable demographic developments (e.g., high and growing divorce and abortion rates, coupled with low fertility in the 1960s), specific experts drawn from different areas of expertise and different institutions were recruited and incorporated into existing state structures (e.g., the Ministry of Health, the Statistical Office), or newly created ones, such as the communist-era State Population Commission. The book also traces the move away from provision of various family services by charitable volunteer organizations to an exclusive provision by the communist party-state.

Rákosník and Šustrová also trace shifts in expert discourses on population size and population quality. Since excess of birth over deaths ultimately determines the survival of a given population and its economy, and since the Czechs form an ethnically homogeneous small nation surrounded by a much larger German-speaking population (significant numbers of whom as German-speaking minority and citizens of Czechoslovakia during the interwar years), it is hardly surprising to find a persistent linkage between the discourses of pronatalism and Czech nationalism. What is more surprising is the continuous impact of eugenic thought on discourses on population, clearly evident in promotion of 'biological responsibility' of marital partners to ensure healthy marriage and a healthy offspring or in a broader debate on population quality. While communist authorities openly rejected Nazi eugenic and racist theories and practices, during the 1970s they somewhat reluctantly embraced a theory and practice of the need to improve population quality under the conditions of an advanced state socialism. Concealed in internal party-state documents and directives on the desirability of selective sterilization, which were sent from the central to the local state authorities, such discourse was mainly aimed at non-conformist, delinquent parents, many of whom were ethnic Romas. We learn from the authors that in 1973 the implementation of the 'population quality' discourse went so far that

social workers prepared in advance a list of women, whose sterilization would be desirable. These women were then invited for consultation by a gynecologist who discussed the issue with them, an approach the ministry regarded as 'very useful.' The ministry also commented that leaving the sterilization discussion solely in the hands of social workers did not reach the desired result, due to an indifferent or hostile attitude of women's doctors. (p. 184)

Thus not all experts were on site and, more importantly, the policy was never widely implemented. To increase participation, women agreeing to be sterilized were offered a one-time stipend, which was almost as high as the childbirth grant, and which kept increasing in value as the 1970s and 1980s progressed. In December 1978, Charter 77 issued a document severely criticizing the practice of sterilizing Roma women, on the grounds that agreement to be sterilized was often involuntary or reached through strong pressure. The practice of sterilization of Roma women was

abandoned shortly after the collapse of communism, but “the question of out-of-court settlement has not been resolved to this day.” (p. 185).

The authors also provide a lot of useful information on the period of Nazi German Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. While I applaud the inclusion of this period as an integral part of social policy history of Czechoslovakia, I question the decision to put a photograph of a Nazi official holding a child on the front cover of the book. Is this the best representation of 70 years of Czech social policy history? The authors provide throughout the text numerous reproductions of family-themed posters or magazine photographs from the various historical periods examined, so another photograph could have been easily chosen. But this is a small quibble. The book is well written, easy to read (without any tables or population graphs) and as such should be of interest to specialists and lay persons alike.