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Population Development, Population Debate
And Policy Implications

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Julkaisija: Uppsala. Almqvist & Wiksell. 1980.

Julkaisu: More Children of Better Quality?
Aspects on Swedish Population Policy in the 1930's. s. 38-64.
ISBN 91-554-1094-4

Sarja: Studia Historica Upsaliensia, 115.
ISSN 0081-6531

Verkkajulkaisu: 2002

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Sweden in the 1930's: Population Development, Population Debate and Policy Implications

Ann-Sofie Kälveborn

What were the main characteristics of Swedish population development and, in particular, fertility patterns up to and including the 1930's? To what extent and in what way were they reflected in the debate on and decisions concerning population policy? And finally, what policy impact could be expected with regard to pertinent theories on fertility and given the specific characteristics of Sweden in the 1930's—political, economic and social?

These are the main questions to be answered in this chapter. The problem of population versus social policy will also be considered, particularly in the context of an analysis of Alva and Gunnar Myrdal's writings on the subject.

Swedish Demographic Patterns in the 1930's

Falling birth rates were the immediate, obvious cause of the fervid European interest in population in the 1930's. In many countries, among them Sweden, the net reproduction rate fell far below unity and a rapid population decline was prophesied.

Sweden stands out as the country with the lowest birth rate (Table 1). The Swedish net reproduction rate was also among the lowest in Europe.

What kind of population patterns, especially with regard to fertility and nuptiality, were prevalent in the situation the policy-makers intended to affect? Were, furthermore, such patterns homogeneous and uniform all over the country, or were there differences? If there were differences were they attributable to social, economic and cultural factors and conditions?

First, an overall outline of Swedish population history will be briefly presented. Diagram 1 gives the essential factors in Swedish population development from the beginning of national statistics in 1750 up to 1967. The continuous growth of the population becomes especially accentuated after 1810, when a decisive fall in mortality (the first stage of the demographic transition) occurs. Some sixty years later a corresponding fall in the crude birth rate sets in

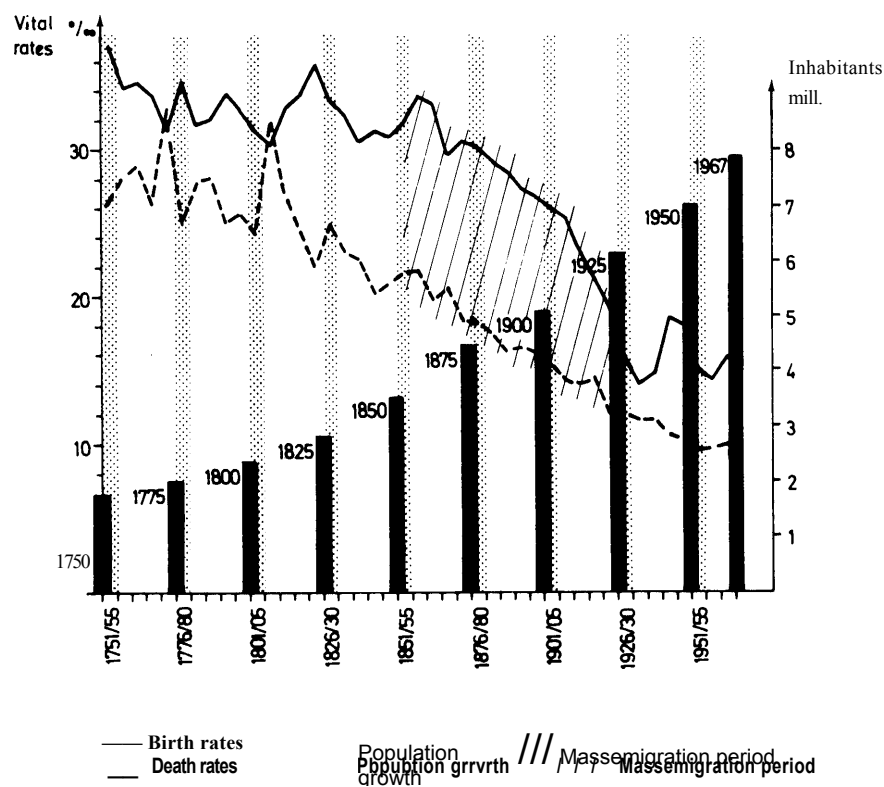


Diagram 1. Crude rates of birth and death and total population growth. Sweden 1750—1967.

Source: *Historisk statistik för Sverige. Del 1. Befolkning 1720-1967*, pp. 48, 87.

Table 1. Crude birth rates for various European countries 1899-1937

	1899/01	1909/11	1919/21	1929/31	1931/35	1936	1937
Belgium	29.1	23.4	20.2	18.4	16.8	15.2	15.3
Denmark	29.8	27.5	24.0	18.4	17.7	17.8	18.0
Germany	35.4	29.8	23.7	17.2	16.6	19.0	18.8
England and Wales	28.7	24.2	22.6	16.1	15.0	14.8	14.9
Finland	32.4	29.9	23.1	22.3	19.5	19.1	19.9
France	21.7	19.3	18.4	17.7	16.5	15.0	14.7
Italy	33.1	32.5	27.8	25.7	23.8	22.4	22.9
Holland	32.1	28.7	26.7	22.7	21.1	20.2	19.8
Norway	29.8	26.3	24.3	17.0	15.2	14.6	15.1
Switzerland	28.9	24.9	20.1	17.0	16.4	15.6	14.9
Sweden	26.8	24.7	21.6	15.2	14.1	14.2	14.4

Source: Bickel 1947.

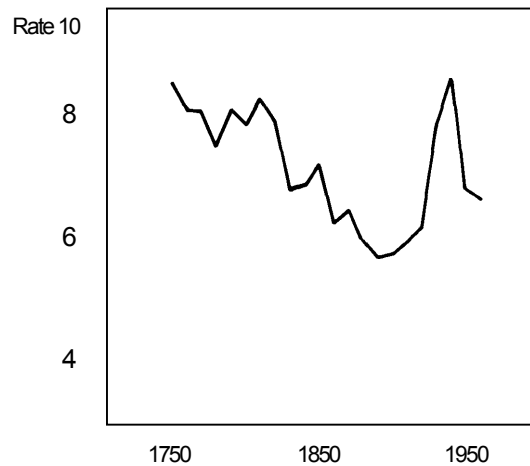


Diagram 2. Crude marriage rates for decades. Sweden 1751-1970 (per 1 000 mean population).
 Source: E. Hofsten-H. Lundström, *Swedish Population History. Main Trends from 1750 to 1970*, p. 33.

reaching its lowest level in the middle of the 1930's and completing the demographic transition.

Diagram 2 provides similar information on the crude marriage rate, where a decrease begins from about the second decade of the 19th century and reaches its lowest level in 1900, after which a rapid rise sets in up to the middle of the 1940's.

Crude rates only provide information of the relation between the demographic events and the total population, but are insufficient for more subtle purposes of interpreting changing fertility and nuptiality patterns. Table 2 therefore gives information of marital age-specific fertility rates between 1751 to 1970, that is the number of children born (or confinements) in relation to the number of married women in each specific age-group. The decisive fall in fertility here emerges as from 1880 and onwards—the quinquennium 1866-70 is atypical because of the severe demographic crisis in 1868 and 1869 due to extremely bad harvests.

Secular trends in demographic events may, however, be disrupted by short-term influences from, for example, business cycles. The relationship between these two phenomena in the explanations of the low birth rate in the 1930's will not be discussed here, but the reader should bear in mind that both played central roles in the contemporary discussion about low fertility in Sweden.

The main concern in the 1930's was, however, replacement rates—would the living generations be fully replaced by their children or would the low birth rates result in a decline in the population? ¹

¹ A. Myrdal 1941, p. 8. Cf. also below pp. 52 IT.

Table 2. *Age-specific marital fertility rates in Sweden 1751-1970. Legitimate live births (up to 1955 confinements) per 1 000 married women.*

Years	Age of mother							Total 15-44
	15-19	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	
1751/55	—	483	416	353	245	134	31	319.3
56/60	—	451	387	325	226	122	31	292.7
61/65	—	446	386	333	230	124	31	292.2
66/70	—	440	376	334	233	123	31	290.3
71/75	—	445	345	302	219	118	29	273.0
76/80	—	454	372	333	239	135	35	299.2
81/85	—	448	357	298	215	113	28	275.3
86/90	—	469	367	313	212	118	28	277.6
91/95	—	479	404	341	226	123	29	293.0
96/00	—	459	389	332	231	117	28	286.4
1801/05	—	466	379	314	226	120	26	280.8
06/10	—	445	369	300	214	115	27	271.3
11/15	—	459	377	318	232	121	26	287.6
16/20	—	458	379	319	237	132	26	290.1
21/25	—	472	395	335	251	140	28	304.5
26/30	—	449	373	315	238	134	26	287.0
31/35	—	448	370	312	239	136	24	283.1
36/40	—	448	366	307	235	130	24	277.3
41/45	—	459	375	318	245	138	23	289.8
46/50	—	455	366	315	245	135	23	287.4
51/55	—	457	373	320	247	141	22	290.1
56/60	—	483	383	334	268	154	27	302.2
61/65	—	469	386	333	266	163	26	300.7
66/70	—	445	365	308	250	142	24	278.2
71/75	—	482	389	333	265	158	24	300.0
76/80	—	468	390	333	267	153	26	301.9
81/85	—	447	376	325	258	150	23	294.5
86/90	—	447	372	318	253	142	22	289.3
91/95	—	456	365	307	243	136	20	278.8
96/00	—	467	369	297	234	129	17	273.4
1901/05	610	456	359	286	218	118	16	259.8
06/10	629	450	341	270	205	107	14	250.4
11/15	594	404	299	232	178	94	11	223.1
16/20	596	392	211	209	154	80	10	200.7
21/25	602	354	242	178	130	66	8	173.8
26/30	575	309	199	140	98	48	6	138.0
31/35	531	273	173	120	77	35	4	116.8
36/40	518	261	170	118	73	30	3	114.6
41/45	550	288	198	140	86	31	3	134.8
46/50	555	281	186	125	75	28	2	124.5
51/55	543	268	167	102	56	19	2	104.4
56/60	524	267	172	99	48	15	1	101.2
61/65	523	275	183	99	44	12	1	107.2
66/70	440	243	170	87	36	8	1	102.9

Source: Hofsten-Lundström 1976, p. 30.

Table 3. *Generation gross, net, and actual replacement rates by cohort 1870/71-1924/25*²

Replacement rates			
Year of birth	Gross	Net	Actual
1870/71	1 795	1 239	991
74/75	1 727	1 239	947
78/79	1 619	1 129	945
82/83	1 480	1 053	904
86/87	1 329	973	851
90/91	1 222	900	830
94/95	1 089	829	786
98/99	960	729	706
1902/03	883	708	682
06/07	892	733	719
10/11	910	762	761
14/15	971	823	835
18/19	968	848	868
19/20	1 043	922	940
20/21	976	868	887
21/22	1 007	899	930
22/23	983	882	922
23/24	1 002	903	952
24/25	993	899	

Source: Bernhardt 1971, pp. 12 f.

² The reason for relating each cohort to two years is that the age of the mother and not her year of birth is given. Births to women of a given age in a given calendar year actually cover two years, if birth cohorts are considered. Bernhardt 1971, p. 9.

Table 3 presents the gross and net reproduction rates, together with the *actual replacement rate* (which measures the actual number of children born to each cohort of women, divided by the size of the cohort) for Sweden from 1870 to 1925.³

The actual replacement rate is lower than the other rates up to 1910/11;

3 The gross reproduction (or replacement) rate predicting how many daughters on the average each woman of a generation would have during her childbearing period, indicates the possibility of a generation replacing itself. This rate is based on the number of women born in a certain year or during a certain period. However, some of them will die before passing through their entire childbearing period. To correct for this, the gross reproduction rate can be reduced—for each age—by the proportion that would not survive on the basis of current age-specific death rates. The resulting rate, which is lower than the gross reproduction rate, is called the net reproduction rate. The difference between the two rates is, of course, dependent on female mortality. Cf. Petersen 1969, pp. 82 f.

Table 4. *Per cent ever-married at age 50 and mean age at first marriage for birth cohorts of Swedish women, 1870/71-1917/18*

Cohort	Per cent ever-married at age 50	Mean age at first marriage
1870/71	76.8	27.1
74/75	76.2	27.0
78/79	75.8	26.9
86/87	75.9	26.9
90/91	77.2	26.9
94/95	78.5	27.0
98/99	78.1	27.2
1902/03	80.1	27.4
06/07	84.8	27.2
10/11	86.9	26.7
14/15	89.9	26.0
15/16	89.0	25.7
16/17	91.4	25.6
17/18	91.2	25.2

Source: Bernhardt 1971, p. 19.

afterwards it is higher. This was due to the effects of emigration and immigration. As long as the original birth cohorts were decimated by emigration as well as by mortality, the replacement rates were, of course, diminished. But when immigration became larger than emigration, the size of the cohorts increased accounting for the higher rates for later generations, i.e., those who began their childbearing periods around 1930.⁴

The Swedish replacement rate thus fell far below unity and the decrease was especially rapid from the turn of the century to the middle of the 1930's. This development is even more dramatically illustrated when compared with the percentage of married women per age-cohort.

In her book on Swedish fertility, the demographer Eva Bernhardt sums up the development from 1870 onwards as "the transition from late and far from universal marriage combined with relatively high marital fertility to relatively early and almost universal marriage combined with highly controlled fertility".⁵ (Cf. Table 4.)

Table 5. *Parity progression ratios for marriage cohorts 1906/10 and 1943/47, by age at marriage of wife*

Marriage cohorts	Age at marriage	a0	a1	a2	a3	a4	a5
1906/10	-20	988	957	902	851	807	775
	20-24	977	940	861	802	775	759
	25-29	951	911	827	760	726	685
1943/47	-20	983	842	622	483	490	(414)
	20-24	948	779	509	431	400	389
	25-29	903	700	420	334	352	(420)
1943/47 if	-20	99.5	88.0	69.0	56.8	60.7	53.4
1906/10= 100	20-24	97.0	82.9	59.1	53.7	51.6	51.3
	25-29	95.0	76.8	50.8	43.9	48.5	

⁴ Bernhardt also discusses the influence of mortality on reproduction rates. As long as this is declining—as was the case in Sweden during the actual period—the net reproduction rates will understate the real extent of population replacement. Bernhardt 1971, pp. 16f.

⁵ Ibid., p. 70. For a more indepth analysis of the development of female nuptiality patterns in Sweden from the 18th century up to the beginning of the 20th century, see S. Carlsson 1977

Source: Bernhardt 1971, p. 76.

What did these changes mean in terms of family size? Obviously an increased rate of marriage combined with a lower mean age at marriage and a fall in fertility points towards a fall in mean family size.

Bernhardt compares women marrying in the period 1906—10 to women marrying in the period of 1943-47. In the former cohort 4.71 children were born per marriage, whereas the corresponding number in the latter was only 2.25 children per marriage.⁶ Did some families have a large number of children and others none, or was the decrease evenly distributed? Since Swedish population registration provides information on the order of births, this problem can be solved. In Table 5 parity progression ratios, i.e., the propensity to continue from a given parity to the next higher one, are presented. The ratios are computed by first dividing the number of marriages with one birth by the total number, then the number of marriages with two births by those with one child and so on.⁷

Table 5 shows that it is the occurrence of births of a higher order—the fourth or higher—that decreases dramatically. Smaller families thus became the rule. Another important consequence is that women ceased to have children after a relatively short period of marriage, and accordingly had most of their children in their twenties or early thirties. Earlier women often had children late in their fertile period.

The above is, however, only a description of the development of nuptiality, fertility and family patterns for the whole of the country. To obtain a more

⁶ Bernhardt 1971, p. 73.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 76

thorough understanding of the demographic situation in Sweden the range and characteristics of variations found within this pattern must be studied. Simply put, fertility tends to vary with economic and other changes. The effects of such changes, however, are not only dependent on their intrinsic character but also on the nature of a society, in particular the sanctioned forms of marriage and family. Thus the same type of change may produce varying results in different contexts. Here I will not go into the largely unsolved problem of explaining fertility transition in Sweden. It should be kept in mind, however, that old patterns will very likely survive far longer among some social groups and in some social contexts than in others in the face of ongoing economic and social changes. It is also clear that new social patterns may be more or less acceptable to different social strata, depending to some extent on their desire or ability to identify with the social norms and values expressed by those retaining power and the leading positions in society.

In a country experiencing great economic change one would thus expect great variations within the prevalent demographic pattern. What kind of a country, then, was Sweden in the 1930's? How far had development gone towards the industrialised, urbanised Sweden of today, a typical so-called developed country?

In 1935 the total population of Sweden was 6.2 millions. 66 per cent lived in the countryside and 34 per cent in towns.⁸ The countryside was, however, to a large extent industrialised. 26 per cent of the people living in the countryside thus lived in villages or some other form of population agglomeration.

The decisive start of industrialisation is generally considered to have taken place in the last decades of the 19th century. The first thirty years of the 20th century are characterised by a remarkably rapid development in this sector. Maps 1 and 2 give the increase in numbers of industrial workers from 1896 to 1930, and also show that industrialisation in Sweden largely took place in the countryside.⁹ The growth of the towns and other densely populated places was, however, dramatic from the last decade of the 19th century (cf. Diagram 3).¹⁰ This development implies considerable transfer of population from the agrarian to other sectors of the economy. During the 1930's for the first time less people made their livelihood from agriculture than from industrial occupations.¹¹ But also within agriculture significant changes took place. While in some parts of the country the old type of small proprietary farming remained unchanged (indeed it often persisted long into the 20th century), in central and southern Sweden the large landed estates adopted (even before the major industrial advances) a highly rationalized, commercialised large-scale type of production.¹²

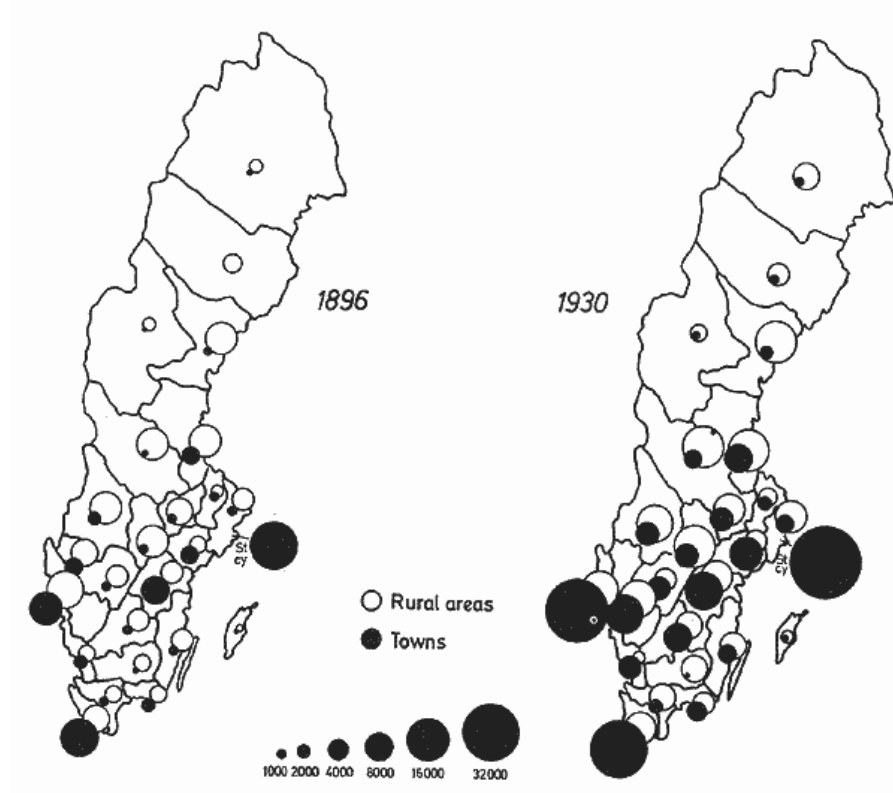
⁸ Statistisk årsbok för Sverige 1939, tab. 9.

⁹ Cf. Population Movements and Industrialization 1941 and Thomas 1941. With regard to industrialisation in general in Sweden see Montgomery 1939, Gårdlund 1942 and Samuelsson 1968.

¹⁰ Historisk statistik för Sverige, p. 66.

¹¹ Ibid., tab. 23.

¹² The most recent work on agricultural change in Sweden is Isacson 1979. Cf. also Eriksson & Rogers 1978. Heckscher 1941 gives an overall picture of economic development within agriculture in Sweden. Cf. Also Dovring 1953 and Samuelsson 1968. Utterström 1957 concentrates on agricultural



Maps 1 and 2: Industrial workers in rural areas and towns, by counties 1896 and 1930.

Source: Population Movements and Industrialization, pp. 14, 12.

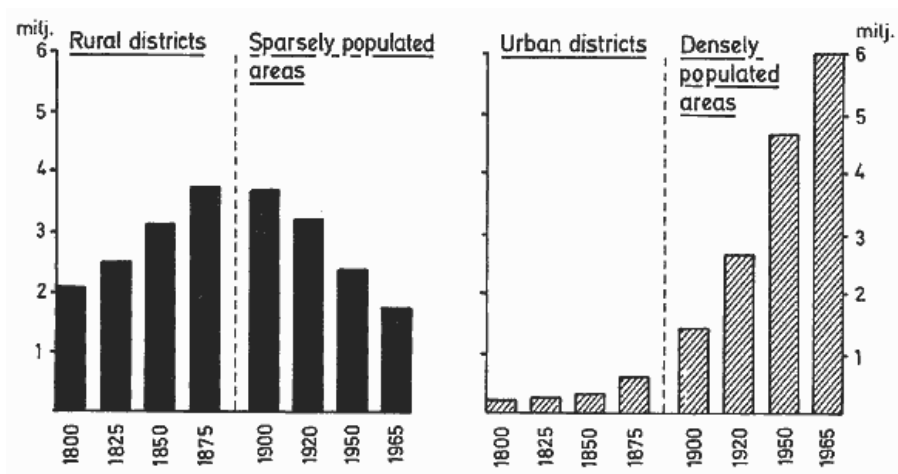


Diagram 3. Population in rural and urban districts and in sparsely and densely populated areas. Sweden 1800-1965.

Source: *Historisk statistik för Sverige. Del 1. Befolkning 1720-1967*, p. 67.

Sweden in the 1930' was thus a far from homogenous country – it was a country which not only had experienced tremendous change but was still experiencing rapid change in a whole range of areas. It is therefore not surprising that fertility and nuptiality patterns showed great variations. Since our knowledge of fertility and nuptiality is based on locally and regionally collected statistics, the most convenient way of presenting information on them, although from an analytical point of view seldom the most satisfactory, is by geographical area.

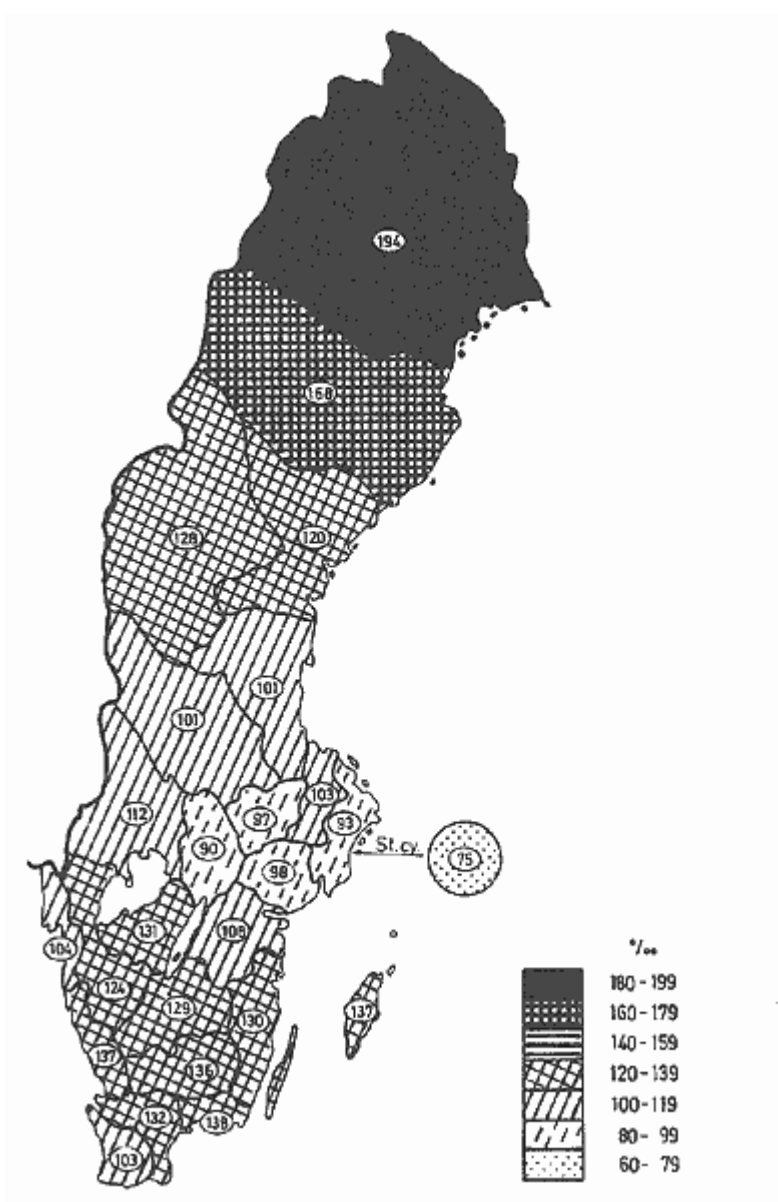
Fertility in Sweden during the 19th century was described by the prominent Swedish statistician Gustav Sundbärg as varying significantly from area to area. He observed three different demographic regions in Sweden. "Eastern" Sweden had low ages at marriage but also low fertility, whereas the reverse was true of "western" Sweden. The "colonisation" areas in Norrland were remarkable for an extremely high fertility.¹³ How much of this roughly outlined pattern was still in existence in the 1930's?

In 1938 two statisticians, S. D. Wicksell and C.-E. Quensel, investigated the regional distribution of fertility in Sweden in 1928-33 on behalf of the Committee on Population.¹⁴ They stated that the regional differences observed by Sundbärg were still in existence, though modified. The marital fertility rate was lowest in two *län* in the middle of Sweden, Örebro and Stockholm *län*, whereas the highest marital fertility was still to be found in the very north of the country.¹⁵ Variations within the same *län* could, however, be great. If the

¹³ Emigrationsutredningen, bil. V, pp. 4 f.

¹⁴ Wicksell & Quensel 1938.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 74.



Map 3. Marital fertility 1931-40. Regional differences.

Source: E. Hofsten-H. Lundström. *Swedish Population History. Main Trends from 1750 to 1970*, Table 6.17.

average rate for the whole of the country is given the value of one hundred, the rate within, for instance, Göteborgs and Bohus *län* varied from 70 to 187. The lowest rate in the country, 48, was in the town of Örebro and the highest, 282, in the parishes of Pajala and Korpilombolo in the north of Sweden. The corresponding birth rates were 6.25 per mille and 33.67 per mille.¹⁶

Map 3 shows pronounced regional differences by *län* in Sweden during the decade 1931-40. The high fertility of the two northernmost *län* is especially conspicuous. The middle part of the country had the lowest rates.

During the six-year period investigated by Wicksell and Quensel, the fall in

¹⁶ Ibid.

the birth rate was much more considerable in the countryside than in the towns. The towns, however, generally had a considerably lower fertility than the countryside.¹⁷ This is quite in accordance with differences in fertility usually observed between rural and urban areas in developed countries.¹⁸

The discrepancy between rural and urban areas also reflects variation due to other socio-economic variables. The population occupied in agriculture in the 1930's had a higher fertility than the rest of the population, even if income levels are considered.¹⁹

There is, however, also an independent correlation between income and the number of children. People with the highest and lowest incomes tended to have the most children. There is an inverse correlation for the middle groups, so that the number of children becomes smaller as incomes rise.²⁰ This is part of what W. Petersen describes as the typical pattern of modern Western societies: "The better a family is able to afford children the fewer children it has."²¹

Nuptiality slowly rose during the 20th century after the great decline in the 19th century; a lowering of the age at marriage is also evident but the development up to and during the 1930's is slow. Gustav Sundbärg also pointed out regional variations in nuptiality at the turn of the century. Recently, Sten Carlsson in his study of unmarried women in Sweden up to the turn of the century has shown that nuptiality also differed considerably between social and economic strata.²² Marriage rates were highest among daughters of landowning farmers, whereas women among the landless proletariat had low nuptiality rates and high ages at marriage. In the upper social strata of the population a considerable share of the women remained unmarried.

Although no study of similar detail exists for the period of immediate interest, some of the differences found by Carlsson seem to have persisted. But changes have also occurred. In 1930 the lowest ages at marriage for women among the total population were found among the growing number of industrial workers. However, even agricultural workers now married at younger ages.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 81. Cf. also A. Myrdal 1941, pp. 48 ff

¹⁸ See e.g., Petersen 1969, p. 496.

¹⁹ Sjöstrand 1938, pp. 209 f. Cf. also A. Myrdal 1941, pp. 64 f. Bernhardt has made the same observation for Swedish farming and non-farming populations in the 1960's. Bernhardt 1971, pp. 152f.

²⁰ Sjöstrand 1938, pp. 211 ff. A. Myrdal 1941, pp. 61 ff. Myrdal, however, also refers to the results of Edin & Hutchinson 1935, who in a study of Stockholm families married in 1920 to 1922, found a positive correlation between income and number of children. Myrdal suggests that a similar tendency is observable in the country as a whole in the special Swedish census of 1935-36. A. Myrdal 1941, p. 63. Cf. also Hyrenius 1946.

²¹ Petersen 1969, p. 498

²² S. Carlsson 1977.

Women belonging to the middle classes, especially those groups with a higher education, were still oldest at marriage, but the overall differences between the social groups upon which information can be obtained from the statistics are small, on the average about two years.²³

Regional differences are less striking than earlier; the lowest median age at marriage (24.3) is found in Västmanland *län*, the highest in the city of Stockholm (26.6). Differences between town and countryside seem, in a total perspective, to be insignificant—the median age at marriage for women in the countryside was 25.3 and for women in the towns 25.9.²⁴

The main characteristics of Swedish fertility and nuptiality in the 1930's may be summed up as follows:

- a. rapid fertility decline, in spite of an increasing frequency of marriage, to replacement rates far below unity.
- b. considerable regional variations in fertility.
- c. considerable, though decreasing, differences in fertility between town and countryside.
- d. influence of socio-economic variables such as income and social status on fertility resulting, on the whole, in an inverse correlation i.e., high income—low fertility.
- e. increasing nuptiality rates together with lower ages at marriage; noticeable but diminishing differences in nuptiality patterns due to social and economic variables.

To sum up—the demographic pattern that Swedish politicians wanted to influence was far from uniform. This fact should be remembered in the following discussion of the impact of Swedish population policies in the 1930's. It also provides the demographic context in which the Swedish population debate should be considered.

Swedish Population Policy in the 1930's: Debate and Decisions

Conflict between neo-Malthusians and pronatalists was a major feature of the population debate in Sweden. As mentioned above, a new law on contraception was approved by the Swedish *riksdag* in 1910; the law was a victory by conservative and religious interests over the advocates of birth control. Infor-

²³ *Folkräkningen* 1930, IX, pp. 13 f. and tab. 17. Quensel 1939. Cf. also A. Myrdal 1941, pp. 29ff. Myrdal, writing in a pronatalist context, interprets the current marriage rates and ratios as alarmingly low.

²⁴ *Folkräkningen* 1930, IX, p. 11.

mation on and public sale of contraceptives were prohibited. But despite this repressive legislation the birth rate continued to fall. At the end of the 1920's voices in public debate warned of an imminent population decline. In 1931 the first pronatalist proposal was put forward in the Swedish *riksdag*.

When the debate began hardly any pronatalist policies existed in Sweden, apart from the law on contraception of 1910 and the 1921 law on abortion. The latter was a considerable relaxation of the previous, very severe legislation of 1864. Punishments for illegal abortions were, as in other European countries still imposed. The law, however, introduced the validity of medical reasons for abortion.²⁵

No system of family or children's allowances existed in Sweden; families in need had to resort to poor relief. A fee was charged at childbirth to be paid to a midwife at a home delivery, or to the hospital if delivery took place there. Only about 10 000 Swedish children had access to a day-care centre or a kindergarten. Most were founded on private initiative.²⁶

It might be mentioned that the situation of unmarried mothers and their children had been improved by a new law in 1917. Each case was treated individually and the interests of both mother and child were looked after by a specially appointed children's welfare officer.²⁷

Compared to other European countries, Sweden at the beginning of the 1930's had very few policies designed positively to affect fertility by alleviating the economic and/or other burdens of families. From this point of view the debate on population started almost at zero.

In 1931 the leader of the Conservative Party together with most of his party colleagues in the Second Chamber of the *riksdag* put forward a proposal demanding a redistribution of tax burdens in favour of married couples and families. Pronatalist motives were heavily stressed both in the proposal and in the ensuing debate in the *riksdag*. The proposal was not acted upon, however.²⁸

In 1934 the Conservative Party periodical *Medborgaren* (The Citizen) again took up the question and advocated measures to alleviate the economic burden of children for families. The Conservative youth organisation stressed the importance of the problem in even stronger terms. In 1934 this organisation came into conflict with its mother party and split from it. In the following election it could muster three members of the *riksdag*. The youth organisation took a more right-wing stand than the Conservatives and was clearly influenced by National Socialist policies in Germany. The small Swedish National

²⁵ Hatje 1974, pp. 119ff., Liljeström 1974, p. 29, p. 31.

²⁶ A. Myrdal 1941, pp. 137ff., pp. 316f., p. 392.

²⁷ Hafström 1970, pp. 88 f.

²⁸ MAK 1931: 160. Cf. Cervin 1971, p. 13.

Socialist Party followed the signals from the south in their population programme and pleaded for a "qualified" population growth, where that part of the population which was considered racially most valuable would answer for the demographic reproduction of the country.²⁹

The Agrarian Party also touched upon the population issue. Their programme particularly stressed the value of the rural population, both qualitatively and quantitatively. The rural population was considered to represent the most valuable source of demographic renewal in the country. This view had its counterpart elsewhere, in France for instance and particularly in Germany. A Swedish economist discussed it at length in a book dealing with the Swedish population problem and agriculture.³⁰

Traditionally, the Conservatives, whether calling for restrictions on emigration, immigration or contraception, had been the most active advocates of population policies. Their alarm for the population development is therefore far from surprising. The leftist parties in Swedish politics had, however, maintained a hostile or at least suspicious attitude towards such policies.

The Myrdals and the Population Dilemma

In 1934, however, a new phase in the debate was introduced when two prominent Social Democrats, Alva and Gunnar Myrdal, published a book entitled *Kris i befolkningsfrågan* (Crisis in the Population Question).³¹ Stressing the impending threat of population decline, the Myrdals demanded social reform as the only possible remedy for the situation. Neo-Malthusianism had played an important role in enabling the people to improve their living conditions by having fewer children. Now, however, society had to redistribute resources in order to give people the possibility of having the number of children they wanted—three per family was necessary to stop the threatening decline. But population policies should be based on the concept of "voluntary parenthood", and should not be coercive. The law on contraception of 1910 ought therefore to be abolished, abortion to be liberalised and organised information on sexual matters to be introduced. It may also be mentioned that the Myrdals saw immigration as an unrealistic alternative to solve the problem of population decline.³²

²⁹ Cervin 1971, pp. 13 f. For the political ideology of the conservative youth organisation see Torstendahl 1969, pp. 62 ff.

³⁰ Cervin 1971, p.14. Sommarin 1935.

³¹ The book met with great interest. 16000 copies were sold which by the Swedish standards of that time, was a considerable number. (Hatje 1974, p. 8.)

³² A. and G. Myrdal 1934. Cf. also Cervin 1971, pp. 16ff., Hatje 1974, pp. 15ff. and Glass 1940, pp. 316f.

In their book the Myrdals also put forward a whole range of proposals for measures in the area, mainly directed at the economically least well situated parts of the population. New mothers in poor circumstances should get special economic relief. Tax deductions ought to be introduced for families with children. Housing for poor families with many children should be subsidised. Child nutrition ought to be improved by free school meals and price reductions on essential provisions. Nurseries and day-care centres had to be created in order to provide children with early stimulation and working mothers with child care. The Swedish people should, moreover, get good information and education on problems concerning housing, nutrition, education and health.³³

All of the proposals thus had social policy content aimed at benefiting families, and especially families in the poorer strata of the population. The Myrdals on the whole succeeded in making their population policy programme acceptable to their party colleagues. At a Social Democrat party congress Gustav Möller, the Minister of Social Affairs, made the statement that he did not care about scaring the Liberal and Conservative parties with the threat of depopulation as long as it made them accept policies of social reform.³⁴

How did the Myrdals conceive the relation between population policy on one hand and social policy on the other? Both in *Kris i befolkningsfrågan* and later publications they stressed the importance of quality in a population when quantity was threatened. In her book on Swedish population policy, *Nation and Family*, Alva Myrdal thus made the following statement: "When the population fails to regenerate itself, the problem of how the human material may be preserved and improved becomes urgent."³⁵ This position leads to a qualitative population policy with a *social* policy content—as evident from the proposals in *Kris i befolkningsfrågan*. Alva Myrdal, does not, however, see the population motive as a means for social reform as Gustav Möller did in his above-mentioned statement. On the contrary, she points to the primacy of the population motive over social ones—"the population crisis must make us rethink all social objectives and programs" and "social policy had to be reconsidered in the light of the findings of demographic science".³⁶

The essence of the population decline is said to be a crisis in the family—"the family crisis represents the microcosmic view of what under the macrocosmic aspect stands out as the population problem". As a consequence

³³ A. and G. Myrdal 1934

³⁴ Quoted in Hatje 1974, p. 31.

³⁵ A. Myrdal 1941, p. 94

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2 and p. 9. Cf. also the following "the population problem concerns the very foundations of the social structure ... a problem of such giant dimensions calls for nothing less than complete social redirection".

"the task of our generation is to reintegrate the family in larger society".³⁷ This has to be done because, "influencing the whole structure of modern social life may be the only effective way of controlling the development of the family institution, including the factor of procreation".³⁸ A development of a complete family programme adapted to demographic planning is needed.³⁹

Alva Myrdal, however, later denounced this standpoint. In 1967 she writes in the preface to a new edition of *Nation and Family*: "I should now reduce any semblance I might have to a "pronatalist" approach; the fact that population trends in Sweden during the 1920's and 1930's if *unchecked* pointed in the direction of depopulation was a temporary thing, serving to dramatize the message of our work on formulating a social family policy".⁴⁰

Also Gunnar Myrdal maintained that social policy had to be governed by population policy motives, implying "simply an intensification of the important part of social policy which bears upon the family and children".⁴¹ Both Alva and Gunnar Myrdal explain this view with the central economic importance of population—children are the "chief economic asset" of a nation.⁴² The state has to realise the vital significance of this economic asset and accordingly invest in it—by social policy. Since population is the principal part of a nation's wealth, it is an investment that "can be even more profitable than investments in factoring and machines and other property which rust can corrupt and the moth consume".⁴³

Gunnar Myrdal also expresses the view that social policy may be a practicable means "in the fight to create a positive interest in the heart of the people for the fate of the population . . . Many citizens whom it would certainly be difficult to induce to adopt a positive attitude in the population question . . . reveal an immediate understanding when they see that the means of achieving this policy correspond to what they have already been striving for on other grounds for decades."⁴⁴

The Myrdals predicted that population policy would become the critical political issue for decades to come; thus it had to govern social policy and to do this from a mainly qualitative stand on population.⁴⁵ This, in turn, led to a strong emphasis on the family as a social institution.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10

⁴⁰ A. Myrdal, new ed. 1967, p. XVIII.

⁴¹ G. Myrdal 1940, p. 207

⁴² A. Myrdal 1941, p. XXII

⁴³ G. Myrdal 1940, p. 207.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 208 f.

⁴⁵ A. Myrdal 1941, p. XXII, p. 2.

The Myrdals accounted for their position on the population question in an unusually extensive and coherent manner. Apart from their influence on the Swedish population policies of the 1930's which will be discussed below, they also have a special significance in having more than anyone else propagated their views on Swedish population policy, its main goals and most important expressions to a domestic and international audience.⁴⁶

The publishing of *Kris i befolkningsfrågan* gave rise to an intense debate—books, pamphlets, and articles were published on the subject. The political opposition to the right greeted the Myrdals' contribution rather favourably, although their extensive social policy programme met with suspicion. From the far right the criticism was severe, however, for their refusal to introduce racial motives.⁴⁷ To the left it also encountered suspicion and criticism, but for other reasons. The Communist Party denounced pronatalist policy from a Marxist point of view, maintaining that it was only aiming at securing the reproduction of labour and military force in order to keep labour superfluous enough to keep wages down and supply soldiers in an atmosphere of military armament.⁴⁸

Proposed and Adopted Policies

Despite the Myrdals' book it was, however, not the Social Democrats, but rather the Conservative and Liberal parties that raised the question in the *riksdag* in 1935. The Conservatives put forward two bills on the issue, the Liberals likewise two.⁴⁹ Even more active in the matter were the three *riksdag* members of the so-called *Nationella gruppen* (the National Group)—the representatives of the aforementioned former youth organisation of the Conservative Party. They introduced no less than six bills in the Second Chamber of the *riksdag*, one of them demanding the introduction of marriage loans after German fashion.⁵⁰

In the bills and during the ensuing debate the parties generally defined the problem as concerning no less than the continued existence of the Swedish people. The right-wing press eagerly followed up the debate and underlined

⁴⁶ A. Myrdal 1941, p. XXII, p. 2.

⁴⁷ On the debate see Cervin 1971, passim. Hatje 1974, pp. 16 ff. Racist criticism by e.g. Åkerlund 1935.

⁴⁸ Cervin 1971, pp. 92 ff. Hatje 1974, p. 16.

⁴⁹ MFK 1935: 1, 230, 231, MAK 1935:407

⁵⁰ MAK 1935:3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9.

the importance of the population problem; the liberal newspapers showed less interest.⁵¹

It was generally argued that the expected population decline would lead to unfavourable economic consequences and that the age structure would be distorted with too great a proportion of old people as a consequence. The Conservatives and other right-wing politicians in particular stressed that population decline would mean that Sweden's existence as a nation was threatened—immigration was not seen as a desirable solution.⁵²

Roughly two alternative arguments dealing with the reasons for the decline of the birth rate are discernible. According to the first the decline in the birth rate was connected with a general rise in the standard of living, accompanied by a wish for a comfortable life and for other things instead of children. It also implied a "moral" deterioration (meaning the use of family limitation) and a diminishing feeling of responsibility for the nation and succeeding generations. According to the second view, the decline was caused by the current economic crisis. Unemployment and general economic difficulties made it impossible for families to have children. This explanation was propounded by the Social Democrats. The Liberals meant that the development was caused by a combination of these two factors—that is, an ongoing long-term decline had been aggravated by the present crisis.⁵³

Many concrete proposals on policy measures were also launched: employment security for women at childbirth, improved aid at delivery and increased economic support at childbirth, support to widows and other persons unable to provide for their children, special pensions for mothers with at least four children, free meals and free books for children at school, family insurance, tax reductions, improved housing, marriage loans, and better salaries for young employees with a higher education.

The latter measure was proposed by the National Group which showed a particular concern for middle class groups and also used racist arguments. Also the Conservatives considered the middle class as a group of strategic importance for a qualitatively valuable demographic reproduction.

The rural population was considered by all three parties to be of great importance. Out-migration from the countryside ought to be prevented by support to agriculture and by better housing (an investigation of housing in the countryside had recently revealed shockingly bad conditions).⁵⁴

Although the political opposition to the right was suspicious of the social

⁵¹ Summaries of the debate are given in Cervin 1971, pp. 41 IT., Hatje 1974, p. 20.

⁵² Cervin 1971, pp. 48 IT.

⁵³ Kälveborn 1977:2, pp. 112ff.

⁵⁴ Cervin 1971, pp. 58 f. Hatje 1974, pp. 20 ff.

policy programme of the Social Democrats, many of their population policy proposals contained clear social policy elements. As the somewhat surprised Social Democrats pointed out, this meant something of a breakthrough for a new attitude in this respect within the Liberal and Conservative parties.⁵⁵

As a result of the various bills and decisions in the *riksdag*, a Royal Committee on Population was appointed. The Minister of Social Affairs drew up a set of guiding principles for the committee. Through effective information on the population problem a sense of responsibility for the future of the nation was to be aroused among the Swedish people. Suggestions on appropriate measures to promote earlier marriages and increased fertility were to be made. Within the social policy area the main goal should be to lower the costs of having children for individual families, a goal which would also result in an improvement in the quality of the Swedish population. A large number of the proposals put forward in the *riksdag* were also mentioned in the guidelines. Politicians from the Conservative, Liberal, Agrarian and Social Democratic parties, with Gunnar Myrdal being one of the most active, were included in the committee.⁵⁶

During the period 1935-38 the committee published no less than 18 reports. These reports contained the results of a large number of investigations as well as proposals for action in different areas. Trying to promote the idea of "voluntary parenthood", the committee proposed that information on birth control and sexual matters be given at birth clinics and maternity centres. Special courses and centres should also be created for this purpose. The law on contraceptives of 1910 ought to be done away with and all pharmacies should be obliged to stock contraceptives. The results of this far-reaching proposal were minimal; the already obsolete law against contraceptives was repealed in 1938, and a very limited economic support for the instruction of high school teachers on sexual matters was implemented.

Pronatalist motives, however, evidently influenced the new law on abortion of 1938. This law was prepared by a special committee, but the population committee when requested to comment upon it, rejected social grounds for abortion. Legislation and measures introduced in the birth control and abortion policy area thus promoted direct pronatalist goals rather than the idea of "voluntary parenthood" purposed by the Myrdals and the population committee.⁵⁷

A main principle of the population committee was that society should pay the economic costs of childbirth. Free deliveries and free preventive mother and child care ought to be made available. The decision of the *riksdag* was

⁵⁵ Cf. Hatje 1974, pp. 26 ff.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 27 ff.

⁵⁷ Hatje 1974, pp. 32ff., pp. 119ff. Cf. also Liljeström 1974.

based on these principles; the implementation of the decision, however, rested with the county councils (*landsting*) which were and still are responsible for hospitals and medical care within their respective areas.⁵⁸

The committee also proposed the introduction of general allowances to every woman at childbirth, regardless of her economic position. This proposal was, however, rejected in the *riksdag*. Another proposal on maternity relief to mothers in "special need of help" was, on the other hand, passed and constituted one of the main results of the population committee. The major responsibility for the maternity relief programme was placed on the above-mentioned county councils. Maternity relief was to be given—preferably in kind—by the local child welfare boards. This reform, its background, implementation and possible effects will be treated more extensively below.

The committee also proposed a modified version of the marriage loan originally suggested by the National Group. Also in this case the committee met with success. A sum of 2 million Sw. crowns was initially granted and the handling of the loans was given to the National Bank of Sweden. The marriage loans constitute the most outspoken pronatalist reform proposed by the population committee and will also be treated extensively below.

But the major and more expensive of the committee proposals were turned down. These proposals aimed at a redistribution of income between families with and families without children. Allowances were to be given in the form of free school meals, free clothing and shoes, free medicine, and what was classified as "essential food" to those in need. These allowances were to be given out not in cash, but in kind. This, in turn, implied that a rather complicated administration would have had to be created. Only an insignificant amount of money was actually granted—some for free medicine, and even less, for free school meals.

An important achievement was, however, the passing of a new law in 1939 that provided job security for women at marriage, during pregnancy and childbirth. In this context the committee also proposed the building of day-care centres to facilitate the possibilities for mothers to work. But here nothing much happened as a result of the committee's efforts. In other respects, women's position in society may have been unfavourably influenced by the population debate and measures. As mentioned above, the new law on abortion in 1938 was no doubt influenced by pronatalist motives. The difficult position of unmarried mothers was also disregarded. The goal was to make unmarried mothers "respected" members of society, rather than to make abortion the acceptable alternative.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Hatje 1974, pp. 32 fT. Cf. also Nevéus 1972, p. 58, p. 115, and Nilsson 1966, pp. 162 f.

⁵⁹ Hatje 1974, pp. 39 f., p. 42, pp. 191 f., p. 196.

Ann-Katrin Hatje, in analysing the achievements of the committee, found that ... "no comprehensive reforms were carried out in the latter part of the thirties".⁶⁰ The areas in which the committee met with success had, moreover, generally been prepared in advance by other committees and governmental investigations.⁶¹

Social policy and population policy motives were mixed in the work of the Committee on Population. A majority spoke for social policy, i.e., they advocated qualitative population policy goals, but there were also spokesmen for a rather radical quantitative pronatalism.⁶²

The hypothetical outcome of those policies of the committee, which were implemented will be considered in the following sections against the background of the prevailing fertility patterns in Sweden.

Population Policies and Fertility Patterns— a Theoretical Perspective

The success of pronatalist policies is naturally dependent on how well they are adapted to the specific patterns of fertility which they are intended to affect. Conversely, different fertility (and marriage) patterns will require different types of policies. To facilitate a discussion of the relationship between fertility patterns and pronatalist policies in Sweden in the 1930's, a simplified outline of the different possibilities, as they apply to the Swedish context, are presented below.

With regard to fertility, one extreme possibility is a pattern of non-planning. In reality, however, marriage plays a decisive role. Therefore such a fertility pattern will be defined as one where fertility within marriage is *not* subject to planning, control or limitation, but fertility outside marriage *is* subject to such control, as well as being considered unacceptable. The other extreme is a fertility pattern where planning, control and limitation are realised throughout. In practice, however, various degrees of consistency in planning and limitation are attainable. A pattern of consistent planning seems to have been realised in Sweden of today where access to birth control is general and abortions are free.⁶³

In the 1930's, however, Sweden was experiencing rapid fertility changes. As shown above, the Swedish fertility pattern was very varied in spite of a general rapid decline in overall fertility. Childbearing outside marriage, though no

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 239.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 43 ff., 66 ff.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁶³ Swedish Legislation on Birth Control. (The Swedish Institute 1977). Sundström 1976.

longer legally punished, was not socially accepted. Marriage thus served as one important regulator of fertility. Furthermore, the transition to a fertility pattern characterised by small families and the consistent use of birth control was still going on. Some groups in the population had fewer children than others. Especially in the large cities there were few children per family and completed family size was small. In other parts of Sweden, particularly in the north, the existing high fertility rates probably indicate that consistent family limitation was not general. The same might also have been true of specific strata among the population in areas otherwise showing low fertility.

In a discussion on the impact of different types of population policies it becomes necessary to consider the determinants of fertility, particularly in the so-called developed countries. What determines desired and actual family size? Why do people limit the size of their families? What determines the extent to which birth control is used?

The connection between poverty and large families is well-known.⁶⁴ Lack of resources, a feeling of helplessness, short time horizons, poor communications between husband and wife, and usually also a difficult situation for wives, are among the determining factors. These determinants appear to be roughly applicable in Norrland, an area known for its poverty, and to the poor among the working classes both in the countryside and in the cities. An example of such behaviour is discernible among a group of agricultural workers who worked on the large estates in the middle of Sweden. These workers, paid in kind, were well-known for their poverty and for their large families. A study of these labourers has shown that while fertility fell among other rural groups, such as farmers, it remained persistently high among these workers.⁶⁵ Their family patterns point towards the absence of or only the limited use of family planning.

It seems likely that some groups in the Swedish population did not engage in family planning, and probably did not use birth control or only used it inconsistently. A regional variation, with Norrland as a high fertility area, and the large families among the rural population and among the poor in the cities support this assumption.

Although the absolute size of those not engaging in family planning or engaging in it in only a limited fashion was not large, they are important both because the expected impact of pronatalist policies might be quite different for them than for others, and because one of the reforms under investigation here, housing for large families, focuses precisely on this kind of fertility pattern.

The discussion on the determinants of fertility in advanced countries, how-

⁶⁴ Askham 1975, Rainwater 1960.

⁶⁵ Eriksson & Rogers 1978.

ever, concentrates mainly upon birth control, family limitation and the reasons for it. The role of access to knowledge of birth control practices and contraceptives in affecting fertility will, however, not be considered. As mentioned above, knowledge of birth control practices was probably widespread in Swedish society and though access to contraceptives may have been more limited, they were rapidly being dispersed, not least as a result of the efforts of the neo-Malthusian organisations. Unfavourable attitudes, especially religious attitudes, to birth control may have affected some strata of the population, but these strata were probably numerically insignificant.

In the vast literature on the determinants of fertility in advanced countries, the cost—benefit argument is one of the most often recurring. According to this argument the size of the family is principally determined by two factors: the cost of children and the benefit from children. In the economic oriented argument children are seen as "consumer goods" to be compared with, for instance, the buying of a car, a house or other commodities. The modern, industrialised society offers a variety of goods that may effectively compete with the wish to have children. Thus the cost of having children plays a central role.

On the other hand, since parents in a modern society no longer obtained substantial additions to the family income from the work of their children, and are no longer dependent on them to the same extent for support in old age or in the case of illness, the economic benefit is less important.⁶⁶ In pre-modern societies economic benefit is considered to have had far greater significance.

Sociological arguments run much along the same lines, but a wider concept of "cost" and "benefit" is adopted. Sociologists stress the importance of the possible conflict between demands of children and the demands of other social values.⁶⁷ In an open society, where social opportunities are numerous, the demands of the cost and care of children are presumed to have a negative influence on the social opportunities of parents (and also of children if there are too many). Social aspirations become factors of importance and "those with relatively small families can utilize for their advancement the energy and resources that otherwise would be devoted to raising additional children".⁶⁸ A particular problem within this area is created by an increase in the amount of time spent by women working outside the home in a situation where childcare facilities are insufficient and sex roles unchanged.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ For an introduction to economic theories on fertility see Schultz 1974, Spengler 1974, Easterlin 1976, Blayo 1978.

⁶⁷ Introductions to sociological theory and research on factors influencing fertility are given in Petersen 1969, pp. 50 ff., Freedman 1970, Hawthorn 1970, Andorka 1978, Blayo 1978.

⁶⁸ Freedman 1970, p. 48

⁶⁹ See e.g., Andorka 1978, pp. 292 ff.

According to these very briefly outlined arguments, social and economic considerations would operate towards smaller families and lower fertility in a society like Sweden in the 1930's, where knowledge and acceptance of and access to birth control practices were already widespread.

Inherent in the cost-benefit argument is the assumption that children are generally regarded as desirable, but that obstacles or competing social and economic objects influence parents so that they do not have as many children as they would like to had such competing objects or obstacles not existed. This assumption, in my opinion, excludes an alternative possibility that is of interest in this particular context. One must also consider the possibility, that a radically different type of family planning may exist, a type associated with those who already have had the children they want and those who do not want children under any circumstances.⁷⁰

One might theoretically distinguish between two different reasons for the existence of family planning in advanced societies:

1. people are prevented from having the children they would like to have.
2. people have had the number of children they want—if they wanted any at all.

This means that, at least theoretically, we have to deal with three types of behaviour in the context of Sweden in the 1930's. The first is the more or less unplanned one, where marriage serves as the main regulator of fertility. The two others are the cases where people plan and limit their families, but where they plan and limit them for different reasons.

What could then be the expected impact of different pronatalist policies when applied to these patterns? And what would the content of the policies have to be in order for them to be effective? Last, but not least, what kind of motives govern the implementation of such policies in each different circumstance?

Let us first look at the non-planning families, where marriage serves as the only regulator of fertility. It may sound like a paradox to talk of pronatalist policies in such a context, but in a society where such policies are decided on and implemented, they may also be aimed at these families and may, furthermore, have an effect on them.

The main way to increase the fertility of people with a non-planning family pattern would be by affecting nuptiality. By promoting early marriages and thereby lengthening the fertile period of women inside marriage, the number of children born should increase. Also within a fertility pattern where birth

⁷⁰ At present a pattern of voluntary childlessness seems to have become more common in Sweden. Cf. Gonäs 1978. On voluntary childlessness generally see Veevers 1979, Blake 1979.

control is applied only inconsistently such a policy would have an effect. Such a policy would from an economic point of view be cheap, since it would involve only a one-time cost for public sources. The actual cost of the children would be paid by the parents.

But is such a policy compatible with the concept of voluntary parenthood, a concept developed by the Myrdals and the Committee on Population? This is doubtful, to say the least, since a policy of affecting marriage, though maybe not repressive in character, must be looked upon as a way of *manipulating* people into having children. Notwithstanding, as mentioned above, one of the most important ingredients of Swedish population policy in the 1930's was the marriage loan. In this case then, there is a conflict between the concept of voluntary parenthood and the reforms actually carried through. The point will be discussed further in the chapter on the marriage loans. It should also be remembered that the effect of measures affecting nuptiality are reversely correlated to the degree of birth control in use—the higher the use of birth control the lesser the effect on the fertility.

Policies intended to affect a population with a widespread and consistent use of family planning will have to be directly aimed at increasing childbearing. But their content may vary considerably, not least due to whether they are directed at people that are prevented from having the children they want—regardless of how strong that wish may be—or whether they are aimed at people who do not want any (more) children.

In both cases repressive policies such as prohibiting contraceptives and abortions are applicable. Such measures are, of course, not in conformance with the concept of voluntary parenthood. But as mentioned above, the abortion law of 1938 and the committee's consideration of the situation of unmarried mothers contained such elements.

Policies intended to better conditions at childbirth, to alleviate the economic and other obstacles to having children, to provide care for children, etc., would, on the other hand, be in conformance with this concept. These are policies directed at people prevented from having the children that they would like to have. The law on job security for working women in 1939 belongs to this kind of policy. The same is true of maternity relief and improved housing for large families. These are naturally policies with a social policy content.

To influence people to have more children than they want, or to influence them to have children when they would prefer to be childless would be harder to fit into the notion of voluntary parenthood. In this case the policies would have to be of the kind where children are "bought" with public money—the child will be seen almost exclusively as an economic asset for society or some part of society. No clear-cut policy of this kind can, however, be said to have been included in the Swedish policy measures carried through in the 1930's.

But considerations of this kind can be found in some of the views, expressed both by official authorities and politicians, on both maternity relief and improved housing on large families.

Policy contents are ambiguous and vary depending on whose point of view is considered. These issues will be further discussed when the three policy measures concerning marriage loans, maternity relief and improved housing for large families are treated in detail in the following chapters.