

Federal Minister Franz-Josef Wuermeling on the Task of Family Policy (1958)

Abstract

The family policy measures implemented by two totalitarian regimes – the National Socialists in the 1930s and 1940s, and the East German Communist government in the 1950s – helped discredit state-controlled family policy in West Germany in the 1950s. Furthermore, the concept of state-controlled family policy was difficult to reconcile with the CDU's Christian-individualistic ideas about society. Therefore, the new Federal Minister of Family Affairs, Franz-Josef Wuermeling, tried to underscore the special character of West German family policy: according to Wuermeling, the purpose was not to actively promote the establishment of families in the interest of the state, but rather to use state support to dismantle the economic and social obstacles that might prevent couples who wanted children from having them.

Source

1. Not for the sake of the collective

When a democratic state – one that has professed the freedom and dignity of the autonomous, God-centered person as the foundation of public order – engages in “family policy,” that is something fundamentally different from the “population policy” of National Socialism. Our new German family policy is still suffering from the fact that this distinction is not being made. This is because the practical measures associated with our family policy often resemble those of the National Socialist population policy, even though the starting point and the motives are completely different. Totalitarian regimes engage in “population policy” because the collective, whose interests alone are decisive, needs workers and possibly soldiers, in short, because the collective is interested in more children as the bearers of the collective functions of the next generation. The totalitarian state regards the family as the functionary of the collective, which is charged with raising children for the state and society. From this, the consequence is drawn, no differently under Hitler than in the Communist realm, that those children for whom an education in the sense of the prevailing, one-sided political doctrine is not assured, are not fostered – or are even separated entirely from their parents and placed into public child-rearing. It is consistent with this approach that the child allowance paid to families – under Hitler as in the entire Communist realm – is paid from state tax funds, because the state seems obligated to contribute to the costs of the children that are raised for it.* The starting point is always here: the state must care for its children. I have intentionally put it somewhat bluntly to bring out the basic difference between a totalitarian population policy and a democratic family policy.

We must counter this totalitarian view with this clear proposition: our children are not children of the state, but children of the family. Parents, with God's blessing, give them natural life, which calls them first of all to eternal life, and only secondarily to co-responsible citizenship on this earthly pilgrimage. That is why the parents, and not the state, bear the decisive responsibility for raising and educating them. Here, the state and other collective institutions must merely render aid to the extent that parents, with the multifarious and complex demands of today, can no longer live up to their task on their own. It is necessary to clearly emphasize this basic structure of the relationship between the family and the state, in order to preempt any slide into collectivist lines of thought and into correspondingly false consequences.

Thus, if state family policy today looks after the family and children, the reason is not, in the end, because the state needs children. The state has no right whatsoever to demand more – or fewer! – children from families, since it exceeds its boundaries with such demands and would invade the sanctified intimate sphere of marriage and family, which is reserved entirely to the parents' responsibility of conscience before God.

II. Intrusion of society into the freedom of the family

If we engage in family policy today, we do so because it is necessary to counter a – certainly unintentional – intrusion of society into the intimate sphere of marriage and family, an intrusion that is becoming ever clearer as a result of the division of labor, industrialization, and urbanization: today, the family with children is socially *déclassé*, its economic difficulties are – compared to previously! – so enormous that the vast majority of families find that today's economic-social order is preventing them from having the number of children they wish to have. Of course, an overvaluation of the material standard of living, the lack of an ethical willingness to make sacrifices, and other factors play a significant role here, one that must by no means be overlooked. It would also be unnatural if one could not and would not expect sacrifices from parents – appreciable sacrifices! – for the great joy of having children. But all these ethical aspects cannot eliminate the weighty fact that the social order, which is shaped by the division of labor and industrialization, has pushed the family with children into a shadowy existence, both economically and socially, and thereby decisively impeded its free, autonomous development. Many fail to see this intrusion of the state and society into the freedom of the sphere of responsibility of marriage and family, because it is an unwelcome side effect of the division of labor and industrialization. But that does not make this intrusion any less profound or any less impermissible. [...]

* That socialist governments in Western Europe have also introduced child allowances paid for by state tax revenues does not argue against the correctness of this idea, at most it reveals similar starting points.

Source: Franz-Joseph Wuermeling, "Familienpolitik um der Gerechtigkeit willen" ["Family Policy for the Sake of Justice"], *Deutsches Pfarrerbblatt*, no. 20 (1958). Sonderdruck; BA/Bestand B 191/109; reprinted in Klaus-Jörg Ruhl, ed., *Frauen in der Nachkriegszeit 1945-1963* [*Women in the Postwar Era, 1945-1963*]. Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuchverlag, 1988, pp. 135-37.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

Recommended Citation: Federal Minister Franz-Josef Wuermeling on the Task of Family Policy (1958), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/occupation-and-the-emergence-of-two-states-1945-1961/ghdi:document-4523>> [May 17, 2024].