INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Family life is the overwhelming experience of Man. No standards of value, attitude and behaviour can hold good throughout society apart from the functions or achievements of the family. No wonder that all societal changes affecting the family are considered with suspicion and usually cause controversies about the family's future. Most debates encompass extreme standpoints of radicals who assume, in view of changes in family structure, the decay of Western civilization, and of those who feel obliged to accelerate the destruction of the institution of the family, in order to free men from a prison which prevents them from realising themselves. These extreme points of view may represent the two sides of one coin and each one takes the importance of the family for granted. The controversial debates appear to be an everlasting battle where ideological points of view are exchanged or a sort of partisanship is practised regardless of any facts.

Moreover there are several "waves" of interest in family studies and they are concomitant with new developments in the social, economic, and ideological spheres of a society with which family life is inevitably bound up. Nowadays, we are confronted with some changes in the life styles of family and in marriage patterns which give rise to the need for an explanation.

What demography, sociology, and social policy are dealing with is not so much the rise of completely unknown phenomena but the increasing occurrence of phenomena that were once rare or single cases and rather thinly scattered over the social scene: unmarried cohabitation, "sucessive polygamy", divorce, desertion, abortion and the like.

The rising occurrence of such phenomena must be the outcome of deep-rooted movements developing as our societies advance and the "operative units": the people, react in their own ways: for conservatives there is a threat, for radicals, encouragement.

Now, let us turn to a more systematic view and to some available facts to throw light upon the European family which in the last decade caused much concern and confusion, for social science and the public as well.

I. THE PRE-INDUSTRIAL OR PRE-MODERN FAMILY

1. Concept

Whenever we speak of "concept" we think of an instrument for understanding a special complex phenomenon and not so much a model covering all past or present realities of that kind. The following has to be read in a Weberian sense.

The family in pre-industrial or pre-modern times was characterized by a home-centred, fundamentally agrarian mode of production. The family was the basic unit in the whole economy. The head of the family was equally the owner of the "economy" (1) and also the employer of the members; the family had an authoritarian structure, backed by cultural, or even religious tradition and work practice: there were clear channels of power from male to female and from parents to children. Although the main responsibility was laid upon the owner, there was a rather sharp division of labour between the owner whose activities concentrated on fields, crops, animals and market trade, and his wife, entrusted with all home-bound work in the kitchen and the supervision of children and servants. The prestige and influence of a farmowner's wife was higher than is assumed in some contemporary feminist literature.

2. The meaning of the pre-modern family to the individual

To the individual member of the family, which encompassed also persons with only occupational ties beyond the regular consanguinous ones, the family represented the source of occupational skills, and of basic education, employment, nutrition and, in a wide sense, protection, an early form of "social security". The traditional standards of work and views governed everyone's life and relationships. Individual wishes and goals were usually subordinated to those of the kin or the "familial production community", notwithstanding the arbitrariness this may have meant on occasion. The socialization process of pre-modern man was likely to endow him with the subconscious fear of giving way too much to his own drives which would only endanger his survival.

3. The pre-modern family as "multifunctional" and "extended"

In terms of a "Social System Approach" the pre-modern (agrarian) family must be seen as "multifunctional", i.e. it embraced all functions necessary to maintain a system in its existence and to satisfy the needs of the individual members: socialization of the young, adaptation to cultural tradition and occupational skills, reproduction and maintenance of life and the satisfaction of emotional and physical needs - embedded in a historical frame.

(1) In German this term ("Wirtschaft") is still used to denote the farmstead.