Historical-Institutional Development

The previous chapter discussed the dynamics of present-day family policies in Central Europe. The question still arises, however, as to why these policies developed differently in the four countries, and why – with the partial exception of Hungary – none of the countries went in a degenderizing direction, but instead developed policies that either implicitly or explicitly supported traditional gender roles. This chapter elaborates a historical-institutional analysis that shows the logic by which these policies developed before and during communist rule. The remaining chapters will then show how these historical developments influence the present situation, through their influence on popular attitudes, the women’s movement and policymakers. The focus of this chapter is on four critical junctures. In contrast to those who see critical junctures as arising from exogenous shocks, and who portray policymakers as aware that they are making important choices (although they may not be aware of the outcomes of their choices), I argue that it is extremely doubtful that policymakers in Central Europe ever imagined that their decisions at these critical junctures would have a great impact on gender roles much later.

The four critical junctures in this chapter are the following:

1. the institutionalization of the two-tier model in the late nineteenth century, with separate care for younger and older pre-school children;
2. the decision in the first half of the twentieth century to make kindergartens for pre-school children from the age of three a fixed part of the national school system, under the supervision of the Ministry of Education;
3. the decision in the 1950s to place nurseries for children under three under the supervision of the Ministry of Health;
4. the decision in the 1960s to introduce a paid “extended maternity leave.”

The first critical juncture: the institutionalization of the two-tier model

The roots of public childcare in contemporary Central Europe go back to the nineteenth century. The territories which today comprise Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic were contained entirely within the Austrian Empire (after 1867 the Austro-Hungarian Empire), which included part of Poland as well. Although the larger part of Poland was ruled by Germany and Russia, all four countries established a two-tier system from the beginning: nurseries for children under three, kindergartens for older children.

When nurseries first arose in the 1850s, their purpose was to enable poor mothers to work (Fellner 1884; Lederer 2001; for Poland, Pietrusiński 1858). These nurseries did not have any pedagogical function. Instead they were seen as a place for poor mothers to put their children while they worked. The mid-nineteenth century also saw the development of kindergartens. The original purpose of the kindergartens, in keeping with the German Fröbelian model, was to provide pedagogical training for children aged 2–6 or 3–6, rather than to provide a place for working mothers to keep their children while they worked. Moreover, since kindergartens charged fees and were only open 4–5 hours per day, they catered mainly to the middle class (Mišurcová 1980; Erning 1987; Konrad 2004). A second type of kindergarten also emerged, known as a “Volkskindergarten,” which formed a contrast with the purely Fröbelian type. It combined Fröbelian pedagogy with long opening hours, so as to enable poor mothers to work (Helm 1851; Fellner 1884; Heckel 1969). Another important difference is that the Volkskindergärten taught in each area’s respective national language, while the purely Fröbelian kindergartens taught in German. Thus, the Volkskindergärten supported the rising national aspirations of Czechs, Hungarians, Poles and Slovaks. Not surprisingly, therefore, they became much more popular and widespread than the purely Fröbelian kindergartens.

Hungarian nationalism was more highly developed in the mid 1800s than its Czech, Slovak and Polish equivalents. Indeed, Hungary achieved equal status in the 1860s, when the empire renamed itself Austria-Hungary. Thereafter, while in the rest of the empire kindergartens were supervised by the Austrian Ministry of Education, those in Hungary were supervised by the Hungarian Ministry of Education,