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ON MARRIAGE AND FAMILY TRENDS IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC IN THE MID-1990S*

Abstract The paper discusses latest trends in marriage and family behaviour in the Czech republic. These trends show profound changes as compared with the situation before 1989. It is argued that decrease of marriage rate and fertility rate, and gradual increase of the mean age at first marriage and increase of illegitimacy rate are normal characteristics of modern democratic societies. Because the trend of development of Czech social and economic structures follows the way of Western societies, and because these structures have brought about particular demographic development described as the second demographic transition, it is obvious that also the Czech population started to behave demographically in the same pattern as Western ones did at the end of the 1960. Therefore, the paper claims, the witnessed changes in Czech marriage and family patterns are just another indicator of a normal and even sound development of transforming Czech society.

Popular press, part of the political opposition, as well as of the general public have in the course of the last two years repeatedly expressed concerns about the population trends witnessed in the Czech society after 1989. The major concern relates to the Czech fertility, however, marriage rates and the overall population climate in the country have been debated as well. Population indicators suggest that the mid-1990s Czech Republic could best be characterized, in terms of the population development, by the adjective “anti-natal” or “depopulational”. It has consequently been concluded that Czech family is facing a crisis since young people cease starting families, few children are born to families, and high proportion of marriages are getting divorced. Concerns have also been voiced regarding the future destiny of the Czech nation which could slowly start dying out under such conditions. This “disconsolate” situation has been implicitly, and

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often even explicitly, blamed on the Czech government's economic and social policy implemented after 1989.

The aim of this article is to show that 1. the current population trends — and so applies also to other areas of life in the Czech Republic — represent a shift toward standards typical of modern democratic societies, that 2. the Czech family is undergoing no crisis and that 3. generally speaking, the observed development is not only a logical but from a certain view point even a healthy part of the overall development trends of Czech society.

The latent cause of the problem of the Czech population and family (which sometimes assumes even the form of a panic¹) is the fact that incomparable things are being compared: namely, population trends typical of the Czech Republic in the era of the so called “real socialism” are confronted with the current development. Such comparisons make it clear that the then situation which was in the long-run more or less stable have in recent years undergone changes so profound that it is possible to talk with regards to the Czech Republic about *the second demographic transition*² — a term coined by van de Kaa (1987) and Lesthaeghe (1991) for trends in birthrates and marriage rates in Western Europe. The second demographic transition is characterized, according to van de Kaa, by a decline in fertility from levels slightly exceeding mere reproduction of the population (total fertility rate close to 2.1) to levels significantly lower.

As is well known, the Czech Republic, as well as the other countries of the so called real socialism, was characterized by a special extensive population régime which differed substantially from that of the modern democratic societies. According to Vereš (1991), the adjective “high” was very symptomatic of that régime: high nuptiality, high abortion rate, high birthrate (also high fertility at the very beginning of reproductive age, so that oftentimes it was children who were having children), high divorce rate and high death rate. This situation is to be blamed on the totalitarian socialism, a general and complex cause of the fact that the Czech Republic which in the pre-totalitarian period used to rank, even in demographic terms, among the Western European régimes³ gradually shifted closer to the Eastern European one after Communist coup in February 1948. Social changes at the beginning of the 1990s have been followed also by changes in demographic indicators: the direction has once again been uniform,

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- 1 Reflected for instance in some declamatory newspaper headlines, such as *We are standing on the verge of a double disaster* (Pick, 1996), or *A torn family. Sacred institution facing journey to the hell* (Holub, 1996).
 - 2 Also other Czech authors used this term to describe the current demographic changes in this country (see for example Kučera and Fialová (1996).
 - 3 The distinction between the Western and the Eastern European Régime coincides with the division suggested by Hajnal (1965) on the basis of the past marriage behaviour patterns. The borderline between the two régimes, known as “the Hajnal's line”, lied on the join between Petersburg and Terst on the map. In our region, this line traced approximately the borderline between Moravia and Slovakia.

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which makes it possible to replace the above used “high” with another expression “decline”: decline in marriage rate, abortion rate, birthrate, and death rate (death rate for males in particular). Divorce rate was the only indicator to stagnate, not decline. We illustrate this semantic license in the following figures 1 to 5:

Figure 1: Crude marriage rate (number of marriages per 1000 population) in the Czech Republic, 1950-1995.



Figure 2: Total fertility rate (average number of children born per 1 woman) in the Czech Republic, 1950-1994.

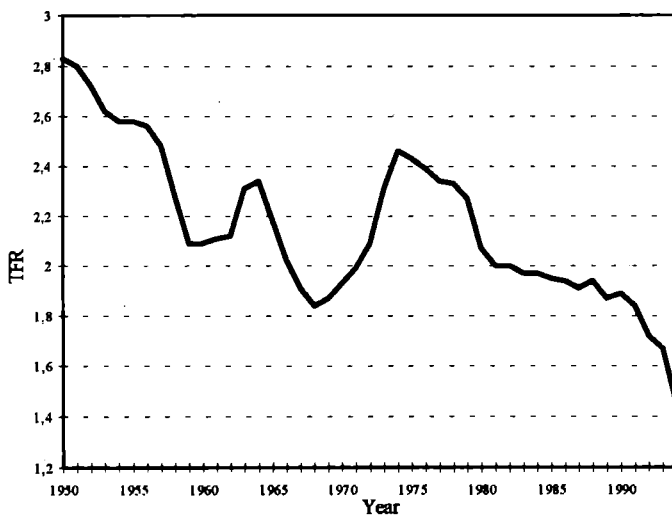
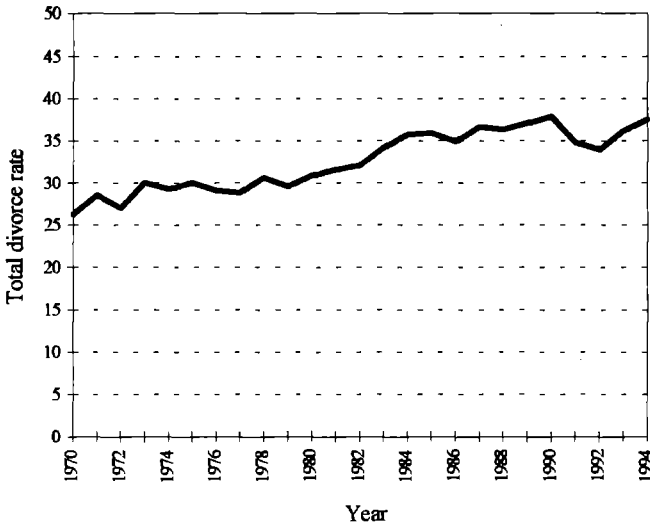


Figure 3: Legal abortion rate (number of abortions per 100 born children) in the Czech Republic, 1958-1994.



Figure 4: Total divorce rate (number of divorces per 100 marriages) in the Czech Republic, 1970-1994.



Calculations by J. Rychtaříková

While the decline in abortion rate and the stabilization of the divorce rate meet a very positive general reception, the decline in fertility and marriage rate

have on the contrary been perceived very negatively. Also the increasing illegitimacy rate (the proportion of children born out of wedlock) — it fluctuated around 5% of all live-born children in the course of the 1970s and the 1980s but jumped up almost to 15% in 1994 — is regarded negative.

In order to fully understand the processes occurring in the Czech Republic at present, a short sociological excursion to the modern family structure evolution is necessary. The issues of family stability and family crisis date back long to the past. They are discussed in European countries whenever values of relevant indicators change significantly. Sixty years ago, for example, Westermarck (1937, quoted from Hoffmann-Nowotny, 1987) recorded the notion that marriage and family were facing a crisis because the family had disintegrated beyond repair and that the time would come when both marriage and the family would cease to exist.

On the other hand, many people scholars maintain that marriage and family are some of the oldest social institutions which have so far survived all revolutions and macrostructural changes and therefore their future existence need not be doubted. The truth is, though, that since the dynamic period of socio-economic development in late 1960s, when industrialization and modernization processes in advanced democracies reached a degree that justified their conceptualization as post-industrialism and post-modernism, family and marriage have been changing substantially (hence the term “the second demographic transition”).

Basic features of the second demographic transition were summarized by van de Kaa in terms of four shifts: “1. Shift from the golden age of marriage to the dawn of cohabitation; 2. Shift from the era of the king-child with parents to that of the king-pair with a child; 3. Shift from preventive contraception to self-fulfilling conception; 4. Shift from uniform to pluralistic families and households” (van de Kaa, 1987:11).

Nuptiality has been on the decrease in Western European countries since the late 1960s. After marriage had become in the previous two decades a universal institution entered by almost 95% of the population at some point in their lifetime, during the 1970s marriage rate fell back to the low levels of the beginning of the century. They did not, however, retain that level and further declined. It is estimated (the data are borrowed from Hoffmann-Nowotny, 1987) that the proportion of males born in 1960 who will get married by the age of fifty will fluctuate between 49% (Sweden) and 72% (Great Britain). The corresponding proportion for females will be 55% (Sweden) to 77% (Great Britain). These low numbers of married people are and will be a consequence of the process of differentiation of intimate life-styles and forms of living together of a man and a woman (but also of a woman and women or of a man and man). Marriage and married life will continue to represent only one of many possible types of partnership (see e.g. Macklin and Rubin, 1983 or Rabušic, 1990 for further details).

A form which can substitute for marriage in certain phases of one's life cycle is unmarried cohabitation. Its popularity in Western European countries has been on the increase. Even though it has not become a true alternative to marriage (yet), it at least accounts for increase in the mean age at first marriage. That is currently somewhere between 26 and 28 years for females and close to 30 for males in Western Europe. When we consider marriage to be the first step towards starting a family, these data indicate that the postponing of marriages could be perceived, in fact, as the result of low fertility aspirations. This would of course mean, as Hoffmann-Nowotny (1987) suggests, that the declining marriage rates are not the cause, but the consequence of a decreasing willingness to form a family.

Birthrates have been declining in the democratic European countries since the late 1960s and have retained a very low level ever since. The total fertility rates fluctuate between 1.4-1.7 in most countries (Spain and Italy, with 1.2 children per woman, and Scandinavian countries, with 1.8 — 2.1 children per woman, represent the extremes). These low figures reflect careful planning of the reproduction process which in turn leads to increased voluntary childlessness and to a significant decrease in the number of families with three and more children. Effective family planning became possible with the introduction of the birth control pill at the end of 1960s.

Reducing the number of planned and wanted children is motivated by a number of factors which are conceptualized differently by different authors. Aries (1980) is probably not far from the truth by his emphasis on the importance of the shift of the focus of the family from children to the parents themselves (compare with van de Kaa's shift number 2). Families in the 19th and the early 20th centuries, says Aries, were reducing the number of their children because of the needed growing emotive and financial investments into them. Competitive pressures of modern society which opened up the access to life chances by means of social mobility forced the families who wished to help their children get ahead to invest both psychologically and materially into them much more than they did in traditional societies. That was of course possible only within families with less children. The current further decline in family size has been provoked, according to Aries, by the very opposite attitude: decision-making of individuals and couples no longer unwinds from the needs of the children, but primarily from their own well-being. The child's role in the family plans, which was once central, has been changed today and it is diminishing.

Observation of the present-day marriages and families in modern post-industrial societies reveal the gradual weakening of these social institutions. There has been a continuous decline in the number of marriages contracted and of families formed, with the family size reducing at the same time. Married couples break up earlier and more often, and remarriage has become less frequent. From the sociological point of view, family used to be a strong institution characterized by internalized norms and values which were socially shaped and

subject to a strong social control. It provided orientation and tied the family members together, may they like it or not. The above mentioned features of the modern family, which make it less strong an institution, are probably related to the fact that weaker institutions impose less intense control, and provide their members with greater personal autonomy and greater opportunities for independent choice.

The demographic behaviour parameters associated with family have thus in the second half of the 20th century got close to the figures recorded some 150 years ago, that is before industrialism gave rise to the so called conjugal (some scholars use the term "bourgeois") family. Similarity is of course purely external, the causes are very different: the present-day low nuptiality results from deliberate individual decisions, not from cultural and structural constraints which used to prevent relatively significant proportion of the population from getting married. The low number of children per family is a consequence of family planning, not of high death rate in infancy. Duration of marriage which is short due to divorce is not equivalent to that caused by the early death of one of the spouses. One-parent families (again due to divorce) do not resemble past one-parent families caused by the death of one of the partners. The present-day unmarried cohabitation differs significantly from cohabitation in the past which was associated with the fact that large segments of the population were prevented from getting married. The life-long unmarried population of today differs fundamentally from the bachelors and spinsters of the past (Hoffmann-Nowotny, (1987).

To summarize, the heterogeneity of the spectrum of dyadic and single household types of the past has been caused by massive biological, cultural and structural obstacles to contracting marriages and starting families. The succession and evolution of industrialism brought about gradual removal of these obstacles. Marriage thus became a uniform family life formation. Conjugal family gained a monopoly position⁴ and opened up to almost everybody. The fact that the uniformity of the dyadic life and the universality of the conjugal family monopoly have been shaken and have been disappearing indicates the existence of new structural and cultural factors which evoke and determine this transformation. These factors could be defined as factors of modernity.

Factors of Modernity and their Impact on Family Behaviour

Modern society is a society which is democratic, open and socially mobile. Social status is less dependent on ascription and more so on achievement. Individuals are given wide array of life chances (in theory at least) for which they

4 The golden age of the nuclear family were, according to Festy (1980), the first two decades after the second world war.

freely compete. Owing to the economic growth, it is a society with strong middle class and a relatively generous welfare system. At the cultural level, the important values are equality and participation.

Evolution of rationality has brought about complex bureaucratic organization of modern society. Specialized institutions have taken over some of the functions of the family — as for economics, production function has been transformed into consumption function, socialization function has been reduced to mere primary socialization and, moreover, has been further intervened to by peer groups. Owing to the openness, mobility and the meritocratic principle of distributive justice in modern society, the linkage between the parental status and that of their children has weakened. Sexual relationships are no longer legitimized by marriage and pre-marital sex has therefore become common. The protective and care-taking functions of family nets have been to a considerable degree taken over by various social institutions (hospitals, charity organizations, police, and professional clubs). All these factors have contributed to weakening the family as an institution and, parallelly, to strengthening the overall independence of an individual on the family structures. Such independence brought further support to the value of freedom and personal autonomy.

Complex structure of modern society is reflected in the plurality of opinions (and ideologies) and in the differentiation of philosophies of life. These phenomena enabled further diversification of values of life and life-styles, intimate-life styles included. It is evident in this context that the decision to get married and form the family is no longer subject to the rigid socio-economic appeal but is in the first place based on personal and emotional reasons — hence the framework for searching for a suitable partner. The stress on autonomy, freedom and dyadic partnership predetermined the increase in unmarried cohabitation, wanted childlessness and the decline in the number of wanted and conceived children. Since the modern society accentuates strongly the conditions of life of women and their status, the issues of female role and female aspirations are very important. Even the present-day family formation have a tendency to prescribe complementary male and female roles⁵, which brings forth an unequal division of labour, unfavourable for women.

The stress women lay on improving their social status and their modern professional career aspirations create an effect which has been, under the influence of Becker, defined in economic terms as *opportunity costs*: motherhood and the time spent out of the realm of education and the job market represent a loss so profound (in both the financial and social respect) that thorough contemplations are inevitable before taking such a move⁶. This shift in life orientation of women is considered by many authors (see e.g. Westoff, 1983; Lesthaeghe, 1991-2; Hoffmann-Nowotny, 1987; Keyfitz, 1986, among others) to be one of

5 See Možný (1990) for discussion on complementarity and universality.

6 In the late 1980s, the American Bureau of Census estimated that 22% of women born after 1958 will stay life-long childless (White, 1987).

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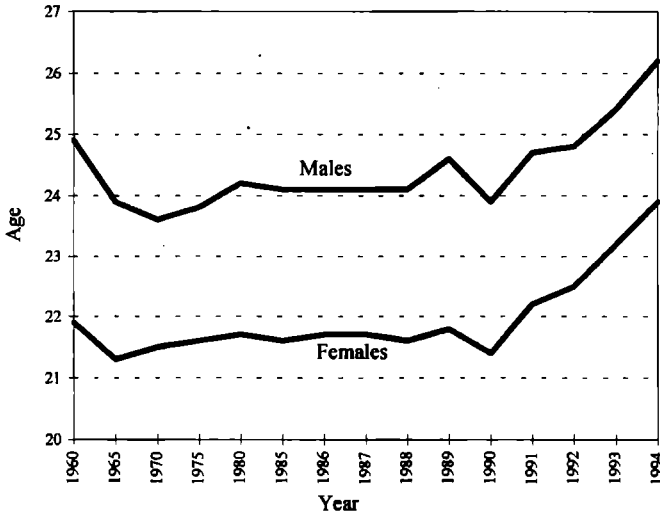
the most important factors in understanding the overall transformation of family structures.

* * *

For already six years, the Czech society has been making every effort to create conditions suitable for establishing modern political, economic and social structures. It is obvious that if these structures have the above outlined influence on marital and family behaviour (i.e. they give rise to the second demographic transition), then, in such an environment, Czech men and women cannot behave in any essentially different way. That is why the evolution of demographic indicators, which we have been witnessing in the Czech Republic during the first half of the 1990s, had been predicted by many Czech demographers and sociologists (see Možný, 1990; Vereš, 1991; Burcin, Kučera and Kučera, 1993; Rabušic, 1993, among others).

The current decrease in nuptiality in the Czech society should be regarded as a very natural phenomenon. Moreover, the coinciding increase in the mean age at first marriage (see figure 5) has had a positive outcome: people who enter a marriage are more mature in both social and economic respect⁷.

Figure 5: Mean Age at First Marriage for Czech Males and Females



⁷ Marriages contracted at older age result obviously in postponed childbearing which is also a very positive consequence (it is no longer children who have children).

As research among the young generation suggests, the current marriage trend is likely to sustain in the near future. Petrová (1994a) reports that 10% of the respondents in a representative survey of young people (aged 15 — 30 years) wished to live independently, only by themselves, other 15% wished to live in unmarried cohabitation with a partner. We also learn from this research (Petrová, 1994b) that 30% of all single respondents refused marriage and claimed they would never get married⁸. To make comparison, in the 1970s, about 95% of Czech single men and 97% of Czech single women, practically all⁹, were getting married (Kučera, Fialová, 1996). Similar increase in the proportion of children born out of wedlock¹⁰ indicates that unmarried cohabitation as an alternative intimate life-style has been on the increase in this country.

The current tendency toward postponing marriage, which we will continue to witness in the future, I dare say, is not due merely to the fact that the living conditions of young people have become more difficult owing to the economic transformation (decline in the family standard of living and the housing shortage), as some popular and, surprisingly enough, even expert interpretations claim¹¹. I believe that had the standard of living improved significantly during the last five years and had there been enough apartments, nuptiality would have declined anyways. The decrease in nuptiality in Western societies went arm in arm with the increase in the standards of living and with strengthening democracy, freedom and plurality of opinions, i.e. with processes which are central to the Czech transformation.

The decrease of fertility after 1989 was anticipated by experts, though not in such an extent, in some of the 1993 Czech population projections (however, not in the official projections of the Czech Statistical Office). From the demographic perspective, the sharp decrease in fertility (measured by the total fertility rate) from 1.9 in 1990 to 1.4 in 1994 is usually interpreted as a consequence of lower nuptiality and postponed parenthood since, according to the age-specific fertility indicators, fertility has been reduced mainly by young women aged 15 to 19 and 20 to 24 (Kučera, Fialová, 1996). Kučera and Fialová assume though that "postponing marriage and the birth of first child is only a temporary phenomenon which must not be interpreted as rejection of the very idea of hav-

8 These data correspond with data on unmarried cohabitation incidence in Moravian cities reported by Možný (1987) and Možný, Rabušič (1992).

9 Matrimoniologists estimate that about 10% of the population have such characteristics that make successful cohabitation absolutely impossible (Kovařík, Šmolka, 1996).

10 15% of children born out of wedlock in this country in 1994 make only a half of that proportion recorded in recent years in Great Britain, where this indicator reached the value of 32% in 1994 (Bennett, 1996).

11 For instance, Kuchařová, Lhotská and Petrová (1996:4) claim that the loss of the former social guarantees of full employment and of the system of flat-rate allowances, together with gradual income differentiation in the population, growing costs of apartment acquisition, of upbringing children and providing them with education, and increased demands on qualified work force are the basic factors leading to changes of a long-run more or less stable trend of family and reproductive behaviour of the Czech population in the early 1990s.

ing children" (1996:73). Let us once again take into consideration all what has been said about the transformation of the modern society, about the shift of the partners' attention from children to themselves, and about the opportunity costs. Let us add Easterlin's (1987) thesis which says that in advanced societies, fertility is inversely related to the relative size of an age cohort, for members of a larger cohort have to compete for resources of which they have lesser supply than do members of less numerous cohorts. Let us also remember that it is the mid-1970s baby-boom cohort that currently approaches their fertility peak. It is thus made evident that low birthrate will become, very likely, a long-term reality in this country. Zinsmeister (1986) reminds, that we should get used to the idea that fertility rate below the level of reproduction, associated with the decline in population size, may inevitably mark the end of the demographical transition. We should bear in mind that as for the advanced Western democracies, they have been experiencing fertility rate below the reproduction level for almost thirty years now.

Divorce rate in the Czech Republic under so called real socialism was high. Vereš (1991), who paid his attention to the Czech population development and its possible future trends shortly after the 1989 revolution, does not, however, attribute the high divorce rate, unlike the other negative aspects of the past population development, univocally to the influence of the totalitarian régime. Aleš (1995), who commented on Vereš's reflections four years later, does not agree with Vereš. He claims that there was a connection, since divorce was easily accessible and was tolerated, in the then social and economic context, as a means of solving the most banal disagreements between spouses. Kučera and Fialová (1996) have arrived to a similar conclusion as for the causes of high divorce rate. On the other hand, they correctly observe that among the major causes of high Czech divorce rate ranked high nuptiality among young couples and a frequent forced sharing a household with parents (both being the consequences of the existence of communism).

Divorce rate is relatively high in all modern societies. Taking into account all the modernity factors which tend to weaken the family bonds, it seems inevitable to be high. Economic needs which used to tie families together at first place, lost their central role since the achievements of the welfare state (with its provisions for pensions for seniors, orphans and widows, health insurance, poverty line, etc.) and together with greater economic independence of women they undermined the direct connection between economic well-being and marriage. Nowadays, families centre around emotional needs, that is, family relations are based on voluntariness. And we all know how fragile a quality can voluntariness be. We should not be surprised then that modern societies are societies of divorce¹².

12 It is probably caused also by the fact that the average number of years spent in marriage has been on the increase due to the growing life expectancy of the population. Marriage is thus be-

It is probably not realistic to anticipate any significant decline in divorce rate. Not even the expectations reposed in unmarried cohabitation have been met. In Western societies, unmarried cohabitation was hoped to assume an important social learning function as a form of preparation for marriage. Divorce rate has not been significantly impacted though, and the break-up rate for the cohabiting couples does not seem to be any lesser than the divorce rate.

The decrease in abortion rate after 1989¹³, although not yet satisfactory from the purely humane viewpoint and not yet comparable to the rates in advanced Western countries (where the abortion rate fluctuates between 25-30 per 100 born children, while in Eastern European countries, such as Hungary and Slovakia, it is about 60 and even 130 in Bulgaria) is a very positive phenomenon. It indicates a decrease in unwanted pregnancies and reflects more responsible sexual and reproductive behaviour of the Czech population and also the availability of a broad range of quality contraceptives.

Conclusion

I tried to show in this article that certain evolutionary stage of a society, in the present case the stage referred to as modernism, corresponds with a certain family and reproductive behaviour régime. In other words, certain social and economic structures correlate with particular population behaviour patterns. However, not to be blamed from strict sociologism and structuralist determinism, I do know that there clearly exists a mutual relationship between family and reproductive behaviour on one hand, and socio-economic structures on the other hand: certain pattern of reproductive behaviour further fosters and shapes the socio-economic structures.

The fact that the Czech Republic has been manifesting features of the second demographic transition can be understood as another indication of the fact that czech society has been really transforming itself and that it has really started entering the family of modern European countries.

Modern societies are able to intervene efficiently into the process of conception. Men and women are thus free to behave in a very rational way, with respect to the prosperity intended and in line with their interests and value preferences. Bearing this in mind, we should regard clamours of panic over the

coming much longer an engagement than it used to be in the past. It is a question whether man has been programmed for a long-term monogamy. Sociobiologists claim that monogamy was functional primarily in agrarian societies where it was necessary to preserve family estates. It was not observed in hunting and gathering societies. During industrialism when the proportion of people engaging in agriculture was decreasing, the functionality of monogamy has been problematized again.

13 While in 1989, the legal abortion rate was 83 abortions per 100 children born (with the average number of legal abortions per woman being 1.49), it dropped to 50 abortions (with only 0.74 average abortion per woman) in 1994 (Kučera, Fialová, 1996).

population development in this country with discretion and calm. There is not much to be done about the situation anyways. In democratic societies, there are no legitimate ways of forcing people to marry or to have more children than they want to. Research of the pronatalist population policy programs effectivity reveals that most such programs are not worth the money invested. They have never had a long-term impact and their occasional short-term effects are not desirable, as most demographers agree, for they only induce unfavourable demographic waves in the age structure.

It is obvious that the low reproduction trend will bring about all sorts of consequences, such as, above all, changes in pre-marital behaviour (proportion of life-long unmarried people in the population is likely to grow) which will then assert a change in the structure of the housing fund (more apartments for single person households). Partnership and family climate will change as well: children will cease to be the focus of the family existence and, moreover, they will seek independence and leave households of their parents at an earlier age than they have been doing so far. Last but not least, the combination of low fertility and growing life expectancy will lead to the overall demographic aging of the Czech population, which will bring about a whole spectrum of other effects¹⁴.

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14 As I tried to show in my book (see Rabušic, 1995).

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