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## Recensioni

**Anne Lise Ellingsæter e Arnlaug Leira (eds.), *Politicising Parenthood in Scandinavia. Gender Relations in Welfare States*. University of Bristol: The Policy Press, 2006, 286 pp.**

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In recent decades, numerous empirical evidence has treated the Scandinavian Welfare States as homogenous, particularly when compared to Anglo-Saxon, Continental and Southern European countries, where the role of the private sector and the family in providing social care and welfare is more relevant. However, there are differences with respect to national legislation and priorities in the region. An important contribution of this book is to precisely prove in a systematic and detailed way these intra-Nordic differences with regard to mothers' employment patterns and family policies aimed at harmonising work and childcare.

Within the Nordic context, the main question in the book is whether the Welfare State should support and guarantee the economic provider and carer responsibilities of both mothers and fathers, i.e., the dual-earner/dual-carer family model. The research issue is therefore gender equality and whether the Welfare State changes gender relations in Scandinavia. From different approaches, the book examines a variety of policies targeting parents, including the expansion of childcare services as a social right of parents and children, parental leave legislation with special leave for fathers, the introduction of daddy quotas and establishment of cash benefits for childcare. The work nicely illustrates how changing patterns of welfare needs and risks challenge the relationship between the contemporary Welfare State and parents with young children.

The volume consists of twelve chapters divided into three main parts. After an introductory chapter dealing with the question of politicising parenthood in Scandinavia, the first part explains the legacies and challenges of this practice. Part Two mainly looks at the issue of gender equality and parental choice in Welfare State redesign. Part Three describes the relationship between the family, Welfare State and labour market and shows diverse family models. Several contributions argue that national differences are important in explaining reforms and policies taken after the recession period. In short, updated, complete and accurate documentation and summary of the Scandinavian experience of combining work and childcare since the 1990s, a period of economic fluctuations and ideological shifts, is provided in the volume. From this point of view, it constitutes a very nice piece of work. The contributions are not excessively technical or specialized, which makes them easy and enjoyable to read.

The period of analysis in the book – characterized by the economic crisis of the 1990s and the recovery of the 2000s – successfully tests the sustainability of gender equality policy objectives in Scandinavia since expansion of parenthood policies took place during this period of austerity. A lot can be learned from these countries and the examples of best practice of parenthood policies described. Of particular interest is the idea that equality between women and men, the main goal of Scandinavian politics, regards not only participation in the labour force and independence in economic terms, but also work/family arrangements [p. 7]. The vast majority of research on the

intertwining of the family, labour market and State has not traditionally included the role of fathers in the analysis, and this book contributes by adding and emphasizing the role of the caring father.

However, the most interesting question addressed, in my opinion, is to what extent the influence of the policy rationale of “free choice” in childcare reforms and parental response threatens gender equality as a key aim of work/family policy in Scandinavian Welfare States. In trying to explain this, the book touches two important issues. On the one hand, the boundaries between the private and the public, i.e. to what extent the rights of the individual should prevail with respect to collective (e.g. family) concerns. On the other hand, which type of family, if any, the Welfare State should support. Of particular relevance is the debate presented in the volume on how changes in policy discourse stressing neoliberal individualism, flexibility and freedom of choice affected the regulationist, universalist and egalitarian traditions of the Scandinavian welfare model [p. 11].

Two aspects of Nordic parenthood legislation in relation to these arguments are described and discussed in detail in the book. First, the “daddy quota” in Finland, Sweden and Norway (the daddy quota in Denmark was abolished in 2002 because the new right-wing parties in power thought it interfered with the privacy of Danish families). At an institutional level, the probability of sharing childcare between parents of young children is, as repeatedly described in the volume, quite generous and widespread in Scandinavia. However, in practice, a symmetrical and equal division between the sexes is still some way off. Fathers seldom have the primary care responsibility. A well-known finding, stressed in one of the contributions to the volume, is that fathers who share joint parental leave are highly educated, with high incomes, and a partner in a good position in the labour market [p. 6]. This outcome reinforces intra-women differences. From this perspective, the daddy quota is viewed as an effective instrument in promoting the father’s involvement and duration when on leave, not leaving the decision entirely to the woman’s bargaining power within the couple’s relationship or to the spouses’ supportive conditions in the labour market. The authors maintain that the quota countries have more incentives towards promoting fathercare and gender equality [p. 94].

Second, childcare cash grants legislation. In the 1990s, Norway and Finland expanded opportunities for parental choice when cash grants for parental childcare were introduced as an entitlement. In doing so, the old controversy over which type of family to encourage (families where mothers are employed or families where they are housewives) was raised again. The main issue is to what extent gender-neutral family policies emphasising choice with respect to childcare may have had long-term gendered effects. As discussed in several contributions, in the everyday life of couples with young children, “choice” usually means women making the choices since men’s choices between paid employment and caring for children are rarely an issue, with the exception of a father’s parental leave rights [p. 271]. Generally speaking, as noted in several chapters, gender-neutral legislation that includes parental choice concerning childcare for children offers much more scope/opportunities and a more balanced sharing of childcare for fathers than they actually use [pp. 47 and 273]. The authors conclude with an important idea that should be born in mind in the on-going public debate on the shifts and redesigning of contemporary Welfare States: much more attention has to be paid to people’s real

choices, the opportunities for choosing and the choices actually made [p. 271]. A constant theme in the book is that lack of daycare means strong constraints on women's paid employment – so that “free choice” becomes an illusion [p. 138].

An interesting point is also the critical view of the assumption that a high level of female participation in the labour market is compatible with relatively high levels of fertility due to the Nordic family policies that make gender equality compatible with sustainable fertility rates. The authors indicate that the role of current family services and benefits in explaining high fertility levels is overestimated, and that a sustainable level of fertility in the long-term will depend much more on parenthood policies with a stronger emphasis on gender equality [p. 53]. They therefore suggest that gender-equal parenthood practices should not be viewed as a choice but as a goal in itself. This means that, despite current parenthood legislation, there is still some way to go to achieve an equal share of paid and unpaid work between women and men. Family policies are seen as the main means to encourage changes in that direction with stronger incentives and more normative elements towards gender equality [p. 70]. However, the ideal dual-earner/dual-carer model cannot only concern mothers, fathers and the State. Working life regulations and especially the workplace play a decisive role in how State policies affect people's everyday life. How much gender equality is hit by cash grant benefits, home care allowances or family leave schemes – often seen as “traps” for women as long as they predominantly remain at home taking care of children – depends not only on mothers but especially on the labour market as to whether, and how soon, they return to employment [p. 10]. This complementary view is of special interest in the book, together with the issue of occupational segregation, the other side of the gender equality coin in Scandinavia.

In short, according to the authors parenthood policies in Scandinavia are a successful example, but this does not mean that the gender equality project is finished or that it should be taken for granted [pp. 267 and 275]. The male-breadwinner model is not under discussion in Nordic countries but we cannot forget, as the authors remind us, that women spend on average less time than men in the labour market, have lower incomes and are still primary child carers with all the implications of this in terms of opportunities, resources and outcomes [p. 274]. A new volume is awaited in the future in which the authors will analyse whether family and gender equality services actually fulfil the demands of Scandinavian societies, in spite of the increasing number of different family types (marital dissolution is comparatively high in these countries), and the internal “threat” of dismantling the gender equality model, should individual and free choices about services and benefits continue to have repercussions and implications in the years to come.

That said, the positive gains of Nordic policies are remarkable. In fact, this work reminds us that politicising parenthood changes, even if slowly, gender relations not only from a discursive perspective but also in labour market practices and the everyday life of families with young children [p. 97]; in particular, gender equality does not only concern and affect women, but also society at large. Moreover, gender equality makes it worth thinking twice before including reforms that limit collective solidarity, even if they are for individual choice. Not all individuals, especially women, are equally free to choose how many children they want to have or how many jobs they can pursue in the

labour market. As the authors argue, the potential role of fathers in alleviating the work/care trade-off in Scandinavia, thanks to several policies targeting both parents, should not be understated [p. 275]. Since the 1970s, care for children has been conceived as a social and universal right of parents and children in Scandinavia, and this is unique. The State does not interfere with parental choice if the State aims to guarantee equal living conditions for all individuals, irrespective of their personal resources, opportunities and/or constraints. In my opinion, this is the main lesson we can learn from this book.

Nordic countries are a good example of how politicising parenthood has guaranteed the right of mothers to work over the last few decades. It remains open to debate though whether this good practice could be applied in other contexts, such as Spain and other lowest-low fertility countries, where the main problem is the opposite, i.e., guaranteeing the right of working women to become mothers. The challenge consists in family policies ensuring access to paid employment, but also male entry into unpaid work. The book offers stimulating comparisons and discussions on this issue. In Continental and Southern Europe, gender equality still remains utopian. However, the book successfully makes us aware of the fact that the first path to gender equality is to stress it as the objective/ambition of family policy. In fact, the authors conclude, “through an increasing politicising of parenthood based on equal division of labour in paid work as well as care, it might be possible slowly to change norms and values concerning gender roles in society” [p. 207].

Finally, some weaknesses in the work can be described as follows. First, the different chapters describe how policy reforms are received by working parents of young children, without further exploring the mechanisms at work. For instance, it is repeatedly stated that female employment is an important factor explaining the expansion of welfare state services. However, more services may also encourage more women to participate in the labour market because they can better combine work and family life. The book is mostly descriptive and no causal relationships can be fully established between family policies and family change. Secondly, I do not think that science has to be or can be value-free, but the authors sometimes phrase their statements rather normatively. Some emotional stigmas should have been removed from the work. Thirdly, the book is about retrenchment in a period of economic recession rather than reform, although the latter term is often used and it is a bit confusing for the reader. More than studying whether the shifts that occurred in the 1990s and early 2000s led Nordic countries towards a particular new family policy or Welfare State model, the diverse contributions in the volume evaluate whether or not these shifts imply a departure from the Nordic gender equality ambition [p. 174]. This division is not always clear.

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