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Phillis Moen and Patricia Roehling, The Career Mystique. Cracks in the American Dream. New York and Oxford: Rowman Littlefield Publisher Inc., 2005, 291 pp.

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Book reviews

Phillis Moen and Patricia Roehling, *The Career Mystique. Cracks in the American Dream*. New York and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publisher Inc., 2005, 291 pp.

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Reconciling work and family has become a topic also in the US, where collective (public) responsibility for solving this problem does not have the same tradition as in most European countries. In this book Phillis Moen and Patricia Roehling illustrate, through work-life dilemmas, the growing cracks in the American Dream.

The title of the book, *The Career Mystique*, is indebted to Betty Friedan's book, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) which showed the underside of the myth of domestic fulfillment. As shown in the movie *Revolutionary Road* (directed by Sam Mendes), in the middle of the twentieth century the breadwinner/homemaker family model and style of life was an icon of success for men and women. For men, success was having a job-career and work-career was seen as a ladder to climb, which would enable their wives to stay at home. For women, "success" meant being married to a "successful" man: taking care of children and home, living in a house in the suburbs and having a car in the carport. Just as April in *Revolutionary Road*, however, many middle-class women felt frustrated and depressed by the absence of opportunities to use their education and talent. Betty Friedan pointed out the social and cultural contradiction of assigning full-time homemaking to women, but she forgot to pay attention to its mirror image, the *career mystique*.

The career mystique is the "myth that hard work, long hours, and continuous employment pay off" [p. 8]. The career myth goes along with the American dream of rugged individualism: hard work and putting in long hours continuously throughout adulthood is the path to success and to a good life and today American workers (men and women) are fully committed to their career. Moen and Roehling's central thesis is that most Americans and American institutions continue to presuppose the career mystique, although it is out of date and out of place. The career mystique, in fact, requires two conditions: "1) expanding economy with upward or at least secure occupational paths, and 2) workers with someone else – a full-time homemaker – to provide back up on the domestic front" [p. 9]. Neither of these two conditions is satisfied today. The career mystique is a "false myth," which is becoming irrelevant for most contemporary Americans.

The task that the authors take on in the book is to convince readers (the book targets not only researchers, but also practitioners and policy makers) of these facts and to urge people to think differently when they contemplate their lives and careers.

This book has a number of distinctive features that make it stand out from many others published in this area. Firstly, it is based on a comprehensive gathering of an impressive collection of primary research and it comprises a variety of sources. Secondly, and most importantly, the authors are extremely successful in their use of the life-course approach to structure their thesis and to show how the career mystique permeates men's and women's life courses at different ages and stages and how people strategize about their options and goals.

After providing a brief overview of the main thesis of the book (chapter 1), the following chapter (chapter 2) moves on to consider the learning processes, values and expectations during childhood. Here one can observe an excessive importance attributed to socialization theory in explaining the origins of values and expectations. Socialization theory conceives the parents as the main socialization agency and the socialization process as a top-down process of learning from parents/adults to children, but not vice-versa. In the following chapter (chapter 3) the authors present the life-stage of transition to adulthood among contemporary American young adults, showing why becoming an adult is more complicated today than it was 35 years ago. This change also makes the applicability of the “lockstep life course” (full-time and continuous education, followed by full-time and continuous employment, finally followed by full-time and continuous retirement) neither possible, nor desirable.

The two middle chapters (4 and 5) are less original, because based on a largely investigated theme, i.e. the issue of how people combine work and family. The chapters, however, very efficiently show how the ideological template of the career mystique is no longer in line with current realities at home and in the workplace. The following chapter (chapter 6) provides an interesting and less studied analysis on retirement and on what the authors call people’s “second act” in life: to work less, switching to a more flexible, less demanding, but often more meaningful activity, such as community services and so on.

The authors conclude with a chapter in which US policies and practices designed to address the issue of combining family and work over the life-course are discussed. The chapter clearly illustrates a scanty role on behalf of the US government in this field compared with most European governments. Also the role of Corporation policies is limited, because it is difficult for an American employee to take advantage of the existing types of enterprise policies, i.e. parental leave and childcare services. It is clear in this chapter that the authors look at the European welfare state, and particularly at its childcare policy tradition, as a model to imitate. Two are the limitations of this way of looking at the policy issues of combining work and family. First, they do not pay attention to the fact that among European countries there are differing approaches to reconciling work and family. Second, the authors fail to recognize that social policies designed to help families to combine family and work are probably one of the fields of social policy in which in many European countries, Italy included, one can find signals of an “Americanization” of part of Europe’s welfare states.

One criticism that can be raised about the book it is that it focuses on careers (job careers, family careers), on the lockstep career and lifestyle of middle-class men and women, without fully recognizing that the *career mystique* is built not only on a gender divide, but also on a particular socio-economic divide. In this book, by contrast, the hierarchical socio-economic division between middle class families (mainly based on dual-earner households) and jobless households (low-class families, namely composed by underemployed women and unemployed men) remains a question that is not fully explored.

In conclusion, this is an inspiring book, that encourages the reader to think about the gap between reality and myth, about the fact that the career mystique is, indeed, just a historical invention, an obsolete metaphor, which entails several mismatches (between

work and family, risk and safety nets, etc.). It leads the reader to question the false career myth and the role of policies and practices, of institutional arrangements embedded in the lockstep career regime. It suggests a way of looking beyond the career mystique and it indicates a path to unlock the lockstep of the life course.

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