

Manuela Naldini

Kathleen Gerson, The Unfinished Revolution. How a New Generation is Reshaping Family, Work, and Gender in America. Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, 297 pp.

(doi: 10.2383/32723)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 2, maggio-giugno 2010

Ente di afferenza:

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

Licenza d'uso

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

Book reviews

Kathleen Gerson, *The Unfinished Revolution. How a New Generation is Reshaping Family, Work, and Gender in America.* Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, 297 pp.

doi: 10.2383/32723

Following her earlier pathbreaking studies of gender, Kathleen Gerson offers a new powerful account of how children of the gender revolution are reshaping family, work and gender in America. While politics seeks to freeze or polarize the dramatic family changes of the past several decades, and the media emphasize the negative effect of breaking the family on kids, Gerson revolutionizes a stale debate looking at family changes in an unconventional way. She uses the voices of children, focusing on the experience of young people (men and women between the ages of 18 and 32) who came of age during an era of increasing labor-force participation by women, rising divorce rates and unstable employment. She called her diverse sample of interviewees “children of the gender revolution.” These children have been growing in a variety of household types, from double income to male breadwinner, from single parent (mother) to re-composed family, with step siblings and step parents. How growing up in changing families have affected their life?

The answer can be found in part one of the book (“Growing Up in Changing Families”). In contrast to the popular claim that this generation feels neglected by working mothers, almost 80% of those brought up in double income families believed this to be the best option, a slight majority of those grown up in a male breadwinner family thought it would have been better if their mothers had worked. To the politicized debate on divorce and single mothers, “children of the gender revolution” tell that original family composition did not predict this much. For the majority of interviewees, being the child of a divorced parent did not adversely affect their childhood and adulthood. Almost half of those brought up in single parent families thought their parents’ divorce was for the best; 40% of those raised in traditional homes (“intact homes”) also felt their parents might have been better off splitting up. Most agreed that the concept of family was fluid and that the most successful families had been the most flexible in adapting to changing circumstances. What makes the difference is not the form of family but *how well* parents were able to provide economic and emotional support for their children. The narrative of these young men and women provide three fundamental lessons. First, it is crucial when looking at families to move from a (static) family type view to a (dynamic) family pathway. There is no *a priori* best family type for a child to grown up in. As Gerson states: “Family life is a film, not a snapshot. Families are not a stable set of relationships frozen in time but a dynamic process that changes daily, monthly, and yearly as children grow up” [p. 9]. The second lesson is that families with a flexible gender strategy meet the social and economic challenge better than families with rigid gender roles. These are two crucial results that should help to reframe debates around families and reform family and social policies also outside the USA.

The second part of the book explores the issue of “Facing the Future.” The children of the “gender revolution” confront a world that is very different from that of

their parents and their grandparents. They have inherited a mix of new options, challenges and uncertainties. Again the narrative of young men and women subverts some of the conventional ideas about family and women, decreasing commitment and the moral decline of the family; the rising individualism; increasing “opt-out revolution” of women (i.e. the widespread exodus of women at any educational level and marital status from the world of paid work). By contrast, Gerson’s book shows that the overwhelming majority of young men and women hope to forge a lifelong commitment with a single partner and a lasting marriage (or “marriage like”) and to strike a relative balance between paid work and family life in a flexible and egalitarian way. Although women in particular desire equality, most men agree. This is the case, at least, at level of people’s “ideals”.

To distinguish between “ideals” and enacted strategies, between people’s “values” and practical “gender strategies” in Arlie Hochschild’s words it is crucial also in this book in order to grasp the full story of the children of the gender revolution. Facing uncertainty in relationships, with workplace pressures and parenting pressures, “the children of the gender revolution” are developing strategies to be prepared for “second best” options. Concerned about the difficulty of finding a reliable and egalitarian partner to help them to blend work with family, most women see work as crucial to their own and their children’s survival, regardless of whether or not they marry. Worried about time-greedy workplaces, the majority of men feel they must prioritize work and will need to count on a partner (a woman) at home. As they prepare for second best options, the differing fallback positions of “self-reliant” women and “neo-traditional” men may point to a new gender divide. But this divide does not reflect a new generation’s highest aspirations. While Hochschild’s *The Second Shift* showed how gender strategies reproduce gender divisions in dual career households, the *Unfinished Revolution* shows when, how and why people strategies can undermine and change the nature of gender division.

Yet, gender revolution is *Unfinished* because the changing lives of young men and women are colliding with resistant institutions. The friction between changes in family values and rigid institutions is reflected in the gender gap between women’s reflecting self-reliant strategies and men’s seeking neo-traditionalism.

A third fundamental lesson of the book is that a gender revolution without any institutional changes will remain incomplete, although it is not easy to think of institutional changes, for instance a change in the labor market structure or support for working parents in terms of social policies during a recession such as is currently happening. This are some of the main recommendations which emerge in the book.

This is a very fascinating book. Yet, from a European perspective, young Americans, both men and women, appear too adaptive, too easily able to assume a very flexible approach to work and parenting in the face of both uncertainty in relationship and economic uncertainties. In other words, they appear too immune to the effects of economic life (although interviews were conducted well before the recent most dramatic economic recession in America since the 1930s). By contrast, family instability, unemployment and the growth of unstable jobs in Europe in the last two decades seem to be the main reasons why the young are reluctant to take long-term self-binding decisions (such as leaving the

parental home, getting married, having children, etc.) and to strike a balance between paid work and family life.

Manuela Naldini
University of Turin