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Politicising Parenthood in Scandinavia: Gender Relations in Welfare States

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Politicising Parenthood in Scandinavia: Gender Relations in Welfare States

Abstract

Book review of: Ellingsaeter A. L. and Leira A. (2006), *Politicising Parenthood in Scandinavia: Gender Relations in Welfare States*. Bristol: The Policy Press. £23.99. pp. 286, pbk.

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These are interesting and important findings – and indeed, taken as a whole, this volume provides a careful and detailed assessment of the current state of Baltic welfare. It is a pity, then, that a few slightly unsatisfactory features detract somewhat from the overall contribution. The lack of an index may have been beyond the author's control – but it is irritating nevertheless. More substantively, the book really is four distinct 'papers' (some were published as separate pieces before inclusion in this volume) and, although the opening chapter attempts to integrate the material, a proper conclusion is required to bring together the themes and issues which arise from the empirical studies. This need for greater integration is at its clearest in the material covered in Chapters 2 and 3. The extended consideration of changing social insurance institutions and the transformation of social policy in the Baltic countries demands a sustained analytical examination of the recurring binaries of universalism/particularism, collectivism/individualism, liberalism/corporatism and state/civil society. However, even without a more developed theoretical dimension Aidukaite provides a stimulating and accessible exploration of welfare development in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, which certainly contributes to our understanding of social policy change in post-socialist societies.

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A. L. Ellingsaeter and A. Leira (2006), *Politicising Parenthood in Scandinavia: Gender Relations in Welfare States*. Bristol: The Policy Press. £23.99. pp. 286, pbk.
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This book is a very valuable and timely contribution to writing in comparative social policy, family policy, gender and equality. This collection of essays written by two of Scandinavia's most insightful academic writers is a welcome publication. Leira with a long-established name in this field with her seminal *Welfare States and Working Mothers: The Scandinavian Experience* (1992) is joined here by Ellingsaeter to bring readers on an even more enlightening tour of Scandinavian welfare regimes. The focus is on parenthood policies. The authors show how in the context of deep economic problems and labour market restructuring since the 1990s, the Nordic welfare states have pursued wide ranging parenthood policy reform. They argue that there has been an expansion of core programmes in relation to early childhood which were instituted in previous periods; expansion is evident in Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Norway. Public expenditure on childcare has increased substantially. Innovative policy initiatives, including the 'daddy quota' and a more flexible arrangement of parental leave, are evident. The childcare related rights of parents and children have been strengthened.

Policy responses to meet the needs of working parents are a pressing issue in contemporary European welfare states. This book suggests that there is much to be learned from the Scandinavian experience in light of the European Council target set in Barcelona in 2002 that by 2010 childcare provision has to be in place for one in three of all children under three and for 90% of children between three years and mandatory school age. The Scandinavian countries are nearest to achieving this target. As the editors state: 'We can't all become Scandinavians. But we can profit from examples of best practice' (p. 3). The success of Scandinavian regimes is judged by the fact that the Nordic countries have the highest scores on United Nations gender equality indexes and Nordic fertility rates and mothers' employment rates are among the highest in Europe.

The contributors to this book highlight the similarities and differences between Nordic countries by examining empirical data. The authors focus on the legacies and challenges since

the 1990s, exploring the rights of both mothers and fathers as carers and as earners, particularly looking at how there has been both defamilisation and refamilisation in Nordic states. This book charts how the Scandinavian countries have succeeded in pioneering the transformation of parenthood into a political issue and shows how the private and public have been redefined. It outlines what is unique in social democratic regimes.

The book is organised in three parts. The first part 'Politicising Parenthood – Legacies and Challenges' consists of two chapters. Leira focuses on parenthood change and policy reform in Scandinavia from 1970–2000. She reminds us early on that 'Work/family policies to promote gender equality are widely regarded as a Scandinavian trademark' (p. 27). She reminds us that the interplay of policy reform and parental practices is complex. She focuses, as in her earlier work, on how the welfare state has addressed the two basic components of parenting – caring and earning – and focuses on the social rights of mothers and fathers.

In an extremely interesting chapter 'Nordic Fertility Patterns: Compatible with Gender Equality?' Ronsen and Skrede tackle a very complex topic. To my mind this is one of the most exciting and challenging chapters as the authors stress the necessity of going beyond crude fertility rates. They suggest: 'from a demographic perspective, the total fertility rate is a superficial measure of the underlying structural elements of fertility patterns as they develop over time with subsequent cohorts of women passing through their reproductive period' (p. 53). The authors suggest it is necessary to understand the trends among different socio-economic groups of women, taking into account different levels of education and the interplay of different labour market sectors. They draw attention to such issues as postponement of first birth, and increased rates of childlessness in the younger cohorts and differences between patterns in the public and private sector. The role of parenthood policies in explaining country-level fertility patterns is discussed. This chapter raises very important questions for policy makers throughout Europe concerned with ageing populations and decreasing fertility. The authors argue 'that family policies facilitating the combination of childrearing and labour market participation may be necessary prerequisites for a sustainable level of fertility' (p. 69). At the same time they advocate a more deliberate move towards gender equality.

The second part 'Gender Equality and Parental Choice in Welfare State Design' consists of four chapters which focus on mothers and fathers responses to policy reforms. Special attention is paid to the politicisation of fatherhood. This is a welcome contribution to an important policy area. Lammi-Taskula explores whether parental leave uptake by Nordic men can change gender relations and if the politicisation of fatherhood promotes active fathering. While families may have greater choice, obstacles like pay differentials for men and women's work are important factors that still need addressing. There are differences among Nordic countries with an interesting scenario unfolding in Iceland. Borchost discusses the about turn on 'daddy leave' in Denmark; Ellingsaeter focuses on the paradoxes in Norwegian childcare provision; and Salmi focuses on recent developments in parenthood policies in Finland.

The third part 'Work Family and the Welfare State: Redefining Family Models' consists of five chapters. The focus is on how work family models have been redesigned and concentrates on family/labour market interaction. Hiilamo compares Finland and Sweden and investigates whether in the light of the economic recession of the 1990s they can both still be seen as woman friendly regimes. The focus is on economic equality between parents. In a later chapter, Haataja and Nyberg address the dual carer/earner model in Sweden and Finland. Boje examines caring strategies of working parents in Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands and the UK. Skevik addressed the challenges for lone mothers as sole providers in the Nordic dual earner regimes.

Leira and Ellingsaeter conclude the book with an epilogue in which they argue that neo-liberal currents and a move towards 'flexibility' and 'choice' have crept into the Nordic welfare regimes at the same time as countries were dealing with economic recession and labour restructuring. During this period there has been a remarkable level of continuity. Nonetheless, they draw attention to possible policy challenges in the future.

This book is a very welcome addition to writing on gender, family policy and welfare regimes and will be of interest to policy analysts, policy makers and students who are willing to learn from the valuable experiences of the Nordic regimes.

Reference

Leira, A. (1992), *Welfare States and Working Mothers: The Scandinavian Experience*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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P. A. Kemp, A. Sundén and B. B. Tauritz (eds) (2006), *Sick Societies?: Trends in Disability Benefits in Post-Industrial Welfare States*. Geneva: International Social Security Association. CHF 40, pp. 241, pbk.
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This book provides a detailed account of disability benefit policies in six countries: Denmark, Britain, Israel, the Netherlands, Sweden and the US. The authors find that policy makers in all countries seem increasingly concerned about the numbers and the cost of people claiming disability benefits. Accordingly, policy makers have attempted to encourage claimants to leave disability benefits ('increasing outflow'), and to discourage claimants from applying for disability benefits ('decreasing inflow'). However, only the UK appears to have succeeded in these two policy aims, and there only with respect to new claimants. That said, the chapter by Kemp and Thornton predicts that, even in the UK, there is unlikely to be a substantial decline in the numbers of people claiming disability benefits.

The book is mainly concerned with 'enabling policy makers to consider national problems in an international context' (p. v). It provides an impressive amount of statistical material about claimant rates over the past few decades in the countries examined, and manages to demonstrate that the issues are not so simple as policy makers might believe. However, the voice of disabled people in the benefit system is notably absent. As Tauritz and Landheer comment: 'one important question remains unanswered. What happens to people, who under the current system would be considered disabled, in a system based on a (much) stricter criterion? Do they become active and self supporting? Do they reside in other welfare arrangements? Or do they find their way into disability anyway, but then with more serious complaints?' (p. 136).

Their point is pertinent, and there is evidence that restricting benefits deepens social divisions, disproportionately affecting the weakest. For example, Claussen (1998) found that when Norwegian disability pension rules were tightened, 'women, middle-aged [people], those living alone, those with short education, and applicants with "medically imprecise" diagnoses' (p. 1) were over-represented among those denied benefit. Kemp and Thornton briefly mention effects of the increasing harshness of Incapacity Benefit (IB) rules in the UK: 'The number of appeals [against disallowed of benefit] more than doubled between 1999 and 2002 and reached about 60,000 a year by the latter date. . .almost half of all claimants who appeal are successful.'