

Who Cares? Women's Work, Childcare and Welfare State Redesign

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by Jane Jenson and Mariette Sineau, with Franca Bimbi, Anne-Marie Daune-Richard, Vincent Della Sala, Rianne Mahon, Berengere Marques-Pereira, Olivier Paye, and George Ross

Reviewed by Ann Doris Duffy¹

Jane Jenson and Mariette Sineau (et al.) have created an important and ambitious synthesis of scholarship on the interlocking histories of the state, the economy and social policy from the postwar “compromise” to modern neo-liberalism. In the course of developing



¹Department of Sociology, Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario. E-Mail: aduffy@paradigm.soci.brocku.ca

their argument they touch upon the central issues of our times: gender inequality, globalization, the growing gap between haves and have-nots, the problems of unemployment and underemployment and many more. The result is an impressive, thoughtful and challenging discussion of changing social policies in Western Europe.

On the surface, as represented in the title, their book targets childcare arrangements as they have emerged in contemporary Western Europe. Indeed, the core of the book is devoted to a series of chapters, authored by a variety of researchers, carefully documenting the evolution of childcare policy arrangements in Belgium, France, Italy, Sweden and the European Union. However, it is clear from the first that the authors intend much more than a traditional “compare and contrast” of childcare alternatives. Rather, this is a timely effort to locate changes in social policy, notably the transformation of the welfare state, in the midst of the tremendous economic, political and institutional upheaval of the second half of the twentieth century.

The authors mount a convincing array of extensively documented arguments (and, given the detail, a subject index would be a helpful addition). Rejecting any notion of the demise of the welfare state, they adopt the view that while services may be threadbare and benefits diminished, the welfare state remains, in most instances, alive and well. However, clearly there has been, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, a rethinking of the role of the state, a process which, according to the authors, must be understood as informed by prevailing notions of citizenship. Under the post-war citizenship regimes, social policy was premised on support for class, regional (territorial) and, later, gender equality. Such policy was designed to sustain and enhance equality amongst the citizenry. In the course of the last two decades of the twentieth century, these citizenship regimes have given way to a state which, under pressure to cut costs, privatize and decentralize has tended to prioritize the rights of the citizen-as-consumer to “choose” services. Increasingly social policy is developed around concerns with budgetary constraint and diversity of choice rather than rights and equality.

In terms of childcare provisions, this shift has been reflected in a dramatic redirection of social policy. In the 1960s, gender equality emerged as an important cornerstone for the design of state policies and, in this context, the provision of childcare was generally envisioned as a public service which would ensure women’s equal opportunities in employment. As the authors describe, two crucial ideas are implied in these developments; first, that gender equality would be won when women were fully integrated into a single, non-gendered labour market and, secondly, that men and women should be helped to share child-caring responsibilities. However, as Jenson and Sineau (et al.) explain, the move to gender equality, as reflected in progressive

childcare policies, was short-lived. In all five case studies, they indicate that the egalitarian model of gender relations was eroded. Although the amount and direction of this erosion varied from one national context to another, the general movement was clear. Childcare came under attack, for example, as too costly and as a local rather than federal responsibility. Universal public services gave way to a diversity of individual arrangements, often funded by personal tax credits. Childcare was represented as an individual concern and rather than remedying inequalities, childcare alternatives, ranging from live-in nannies to parental leave to mother-provided care, often reinforced social inequities.

Jenson and Sineau (et al.) locate this shift in childcare policy amidst other social changes, notably changes in employment patterns, particularly women's employment. The decline in traditional industrial employment, with its secure, unionized, well-paid work, coincided with declines in the institutional clout of unions (important advocates for the equality agenda), increases in rates of unemployment and the expansion of non-standardized, part-time work. In a series of tables, the authors summarize current patterns of employment amongst women from the four countries studied. Predictably, women, notably married women with young children tended to predominate in the part-time labour force. Women's participation in poorly paid, part-time work simultaneously undermined the movement toward gender equality and the argument for universal publicly-funded childcare. Shifts in employment patterns were not the only forces at work; numerous other factors entered into the fray. In France, for example, in recent years childcare policy has been shaped amidst concerns for declining national birth rates and a renewed pro-natalist discourse. As birth rates plummet while an aging generation of baby boomers nears retirement, politicians publicly worry about future funding for social programs. In Belgium, the authors note, discussions of childcare policy are shaped around a "new familialism" in which mothers are represented as the natural care-providers for young children. A myriad of factors push and pull on the development of social policy but the overall thrust of change is, according to the authors, clear.

As apparent from the overview above, this is an intriguing, informative and disconcerting book. North Americans, particularly those of us who have viewed some states in Western Europe as progressive ideals, will find much to ponder here. Certainly, anyone who seeks to be informed about social policy and the modern state, including advanced students of social policy, women's studies and the sociology of work, will also find much of value. Finally, those interested in the study of citizenship, human rights and equity issues will find this well-documented presentation worthwhile.