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0521840910 - Employment and the Family: The Reconfiguration of Work and Family Life
in Contemporary Societies

Rosemary Crompton

Excerpt

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1 Understanding change in employment, family and gender relations

All fixed, fast frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air ...

(Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* 1848)

Man for the field and woman for the hearth
Man for the sword and for the needle she
Man with the head and woman with the heart
Man to command and woman to obey
All else confusion.

(Tennyson, 'The Princess' 1847)

Introduction

These well-known quotations serve to convey two themes that are central to this book: first, that rapid social change is endemic in modern societies, but nevertheless, that sexual differences, as expressed in gender relations, are characterised by both change *and* continuity. We do not lack attempts that seek to develop totalising accounts of global social change (for example, Castells' (1997) three-volume *Information Age*), but, in this book, we focus on a particular 'slice' of this totality, that is, the inter-relationships between men, women, families and employment. However, this 'slice' will be (and will always have been) crucially affected by wider normative, political and economic contexts and the manner of their development. In order to understand the present, we have first to understand the past.

The growth of capitalist industrialism from the end of the eighteenth century was accompanied by technical innovation, the development of the factory system, and the expansion of independent wage labour, which required individuals to be freed from traditional restraints on their mobility and employment opportunities. These social and technical developments led to a rapid increase in productivity and wealth (albeit distributed highly unequally) in capitalist societies. Changes in family

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arrangements accompanied changes in production arrangements, in that an increasing proportion of households were narrowed down to the conjugal unit of parents and children (Zaretsky 1976). Production for use within the household became less important as families were transformed into units of consumption rather than production. A capitalist market society is dominated by market relations: 'Instead of economy being embedded in social relations, social relations are embedded in the economic system' (Polanyi 1957: 57).

The ideological accompaniment of capitalist market development was political liberalism, with its insistence on the contractual rights of free and autonomous individuals holding property in their persons. These rights, however, did not extend to women who were in law subordinate to patriarchal domination. As Mary Astell asked in the eighteenth century: 'if *all Men are born free*, how is it that all Women are born Slaves?' (cited in Pateman 1988: 90). The long struggle for women's political and civil rights, however, was accompanied (in Europe and the US) by a major shift in thinking about women and the family. Women had always been regarded as 'naturally' inferior to men. However, as market relationships became increasingly individualised the bourgeois ideal of the family as a 'haven in a heartless world', in which women were the morally *superior* carers and nurturers, gained ascendancy.

The ideology of 'separate spheres' – men being dominant in (and seen as more suited for) the public sphere of employment (and other aspects of civil society, such as politics), whereas women were responsible for the domestic or private sphere – was accompanied by the development of the 'male breadwinner' division of labour – men specialising in paid work, women in the unpaid labour of caring and domestic work. It is important to recognise, however, that even though women were no longer regarded as an inferior species in relation to men, both the prevailing ideology of separate spheres and its attendant division of labour were rooted in an essentialist model of the innate and natural character of differences between the sexes. The attributes specific to each gender were held to be of an intrinsic nature closely associated with physical, psychological and spiritual differences.

The male breadwinner model and its normative accompaniment, the ideology of domesticity, was buttressed by the institutional separation of women from both the political, and much of the economic, spheres of human activity. During the course of the twentieth century, the consolidation of the male breadwinner model was accompanied by institutional developments and arrangements that reflected its basic assumptions, from school hours to pensions and the delivery of health

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and welfare services (Esping-Andersen 1990; Sainsbury 1994). Men in full-time employment received a 'family wage' and related benefits, women gained benefits, often indirectly, as wives and mothers (Pateman 1989). This gender/welfare arrangement has been described by Crouch as part of the 'mid [twentieth] century social compromise' (1999: 53). This was in a broad sense a class 'compromise'. Governments of left and right supported social protections and increasing welfare, and left parties and their representatives did not seek to radically destabilise existing social arrangements. These arrangements may be described as characteristic of 'Fordism', a term that has been widely employed to describe the industrial and social order that emerged in many advanced capitalist societies after the Second World War. 'Fordism' was characterised by mass production, full employment (at least as far as men were concerned), the development of state welfare and rising standards of consumption.¹

In the later decades of the twentieth century, Fordism began to unravel, as did the 'male breadwinner' model of the articulation of employment and family life. However, the gendered ideology that holds women responsible for the domestic sphere, together with its accompanying (implicit or explicit) gender essentialism, has proved to have deeper roots. Nevertheless, the major shift in gender relations and associated norms and attitudes that is currently in process raises a series of important issues that will be explored in this book. How is the work of caring to be accomplished given that it can no longer be automatically assumed that it will be undertaken (unpaid) within the family?² How may sets of institutions moulded to the contours of the 'male breadwinner' arrangement be reconstructed in order to accommodate to new realities? How do families adjust to these changing circumstances and what is to be done about the growing conflict between paid employment and the demands of family life? Will social and economic inequalities, between women and men as well as between different social classes, be ameliorated or intensified by these recent changes?

¹ The concept has been extensively contested, but nevertheless, as Thompson (2003: 362) has recently argued, 'we may have to learn to live with Fordism as the least worst term available to describe a set of social relations that manifest a degree of connectedness and coherence'.

² It may also be noted that social and demographic changes are also shifting the contours of requirements for care, although this will not be discussed in any detail in this book. Birth rates have declined, but childcare inputs have risen in the case of individual children. Increased life expectancy has brought with it care responsibilities for the ageing population, often at a point in the family life cycle when adults are also assuming care responsibilities for grandchildren. See Brannen, Moss and Mooney 2004.

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Changes in employment, changes in women and the family

With considerable oversimplification, the characteristic workplaces of the Fordist era with which the 'male breadwinner' model of employment/family articulation was associated tended to be relatively large. Both production and administration were bureaucratically organised – that is, according to set routines, rules and regulations. In manufacturing (and here the motor industry was taken to be the exemplar), work tasks were broken down into sub-elements of the whole, and indeed, influential commentaries argued that such 'deskilling' was an inevitable accompaniment to capitalist development (Braverman 1974). Large bureaucratically organised workplaces offered stable (male) careers, particularly for administrative and managerial employees, and many employees spent their entire working lives with a single organisation. These features are no longer associated with much contemporary employment (Crompton *et al.* 1996). Technological change has removed many unskilled and semi-skilled jobs, particularly in manufacturing. Unskilled jobs in the burgeoning service sector tend to be found in smaller organisational units (fast food restaurants, care homes, supermarkets, etc.), unlikely locales for the generation of union membership and the development of workplace protections that were associated with Fordist organisations (Freedman 1984). Moreover, much lower-level employment in the service sector is highly flexible, dominated by women and young people, rather than the prime age males who predominated in semi-skilled manufacturing employment.

Flexible employment may be both numerical, which allows the number of workers or amount of labour time to be varied, and functional, where employees move from task to task (both strategies may be used simultaneously).³ Strategies of numerical and pay flexibility are guided by neoliberal economic theory, which stresses the efficiency gains that come from making the costs of factors of production as flexibly responsive as possible (Crouch 1999: 79; see also Atkinson 1984, Smith 1997). 'Functional' flexibility, in contrast, has been regarded more positively and incorporates the kinds of innovations in production often associated with new management techniques and 'high-commitment' management – teamworking, upskilling and multiskilling, and so on. Advocates of functional flexibility see flexible specialisation as facilitating innovation in both production activities and institutional regulation,

³ See O'Reilly 1992 as well as the example of 'Shopwell' discussed in the following chapters of this book.

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allowing for the exercise of strategic choice and the positive development of productive resources (Hirst and Zeitlin 1997). Critics of neoliberal numerical flexibility, however, tend to regard flexibilisation as part of a package of measures that facilitate the superexploitation of the workforce (Pollert 1988).

Employment change has been under way in a global economic context in which the speed of transactions and information processing has been but one element in increased competitive pressures worldwide. Major economies – particularly the US and Britain – have also been profoundly affected by neoliberal economic and political ideas that have encouraged competition and promoted deregulation, particularly in the field of employment. These policies have found their echo in theories of management that have encouraged the ‘lean organisation’ (Womack *et al.* 1990), together with the removal of what are seen as obsolete and rule-bound organisational structures (Kanter 1990). Competitive ‘de-layering’ has been accompanied by layoffs and increasing employment insecurity for many employees, including managers, and thus the decline of stable career paths. Organisations have not only ‘downsized’, but have also sought to outsource much of their activities to other firms and consultants. For example, they increasingly buy in services such as catering and cleaning, as well as other elements central to the organisations’ activities, such as essential components in manufacturing, and in banks key workers such as counter staff may be hired from an employment agency on a semi-permanent basis. In many countries (including Britain), public sector organisations have also been steered along neoliberal pathways. International companies in particular are no longer constrained by national boundaries, and can move production and services around the globe, taking advantage of lower wage rates and cheaper skills.

With the decline of the long-term single organisation bureaucratic career, individuals can no longer rely on structured progress through an organisational hierarchy in order to develop their careers, but rather, are supposed to self-develop their own career paths as they move from job to job, company to company. As Kanter (cited in McGovern *et al.* 1998) puts it: ‘reliance on organisations to give shape to a career is being replaced by reliance on self’. Thus Sennett (1998: 27) has argued that the development of flexible capitalism has resulted in the ‘corrosion of character ... particularly those qualities of character which bind human beings to one another and furnishes each with a sense of sustainable self’. That is, Sennett argues that the end of Fordism and the development of global, flexible capitalism has broken social bonds and undermined trust between individuals.

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During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the normative and material embedding of the 'male breadwinner' model of employment and family articulation and the increasing confinement of women to domesticity meant that as the modern occupational structure developed, women were systematically excluded from major professions such as medicine and the law, as well as from political life and higher-level administrative and managerial positions. Further down the occupational order, women were also kept out of the better-paid craft positions associated with the developing industrial economy – for example, in engineering, metalwork and printing. These exclusions were perfectly legal, but they did not mean that women were not employed – they were, for example as seamstresses, domestic servants, and in low-grade assembly and factory work – but their wages were considerably lower than those of men, even when working at the same tasks. This division of paid labour between the sexes was a significant aspect of women's subordination. As feminists argued, the *de jure* and *de facto* exclusion of women from better-paid and more prestigious occupations denied most women economic independence and increased their dependence, as wives, on men (Hartmann 1976; Walby 1986).

In the twentieth century, women in an increasing number of countries gradually acquired political and civil rights – although employment rights in relation to sex discrimination and equal pay were often not finally secured until after the Second World War. As a consequence of these and other changes including technological advances such as efficient contraception, as well as the changes in attitudes to gender roles and gender relations associated with second-wave feminism (organised feminist pressures were also key to the acquisition of civil rights for women), more and more women, including mothers, have entered and remained in employment at all levels. Changes in women's employment behaviour have been accompanied by changes in family formation and behaviour. Rates of marriage have declined, divorce rates have risen, and the numbers living in consensual unions have increased. The average age at marriage has risen – in England and Wales, the average age of first marriage was 28 for women and 31 for men in 2001, an increase of five years for both sexes as compared to 1961. These changes have been reflected in fertility rates, and in England and Wales the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) has fallen from 2.9 in 1964 to 1.7 in 2000. Births outside marriage have increased dramatically, from 7 per cent in 1964 to 40 per cent in 2000 in England and Wales (ONS data). These trends in women's employment, fertility and family behaviour are taking place

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in all 'Western' countries (for cross-nationally comparative empirical summaries of these developments, see Castells 1997: ch. 4, Crouch 2000: chs. 2, 7; see also Gonzalez-Lopez 2002; Drew 1998).

The increase in women's employment was paralleled by debates relating to employment flexibility (these first emerged in the 1980s). This is not surprising, given that women have always worked flexibly – in both the numerical and functional senses of the term. Castells has described 'new' social relationships of production as translating into 'a good fit between the "flexible woman" [forced to flexibility to cope with her multiple roles] and the network enterprise' (Castells 2000: 20). The growth of flexible capitalism has been regarded by some as making a contribution to the resolution of the tensions between employment and family 'work'. The non-flexible career bureaucrat was enabled to work in full-time, long-term employment because he could rely upon the unpaid work of a full-time homemaker. Flexible employment – part-time work, flexible scheduling, 'flexitime', etc. – might (indeed often does) enable an individual to combine both paid work and family work. Flexible working, therefore, is increasingly being presented as a possible 'win win' combination as far as employment and family life is concerned. With the rise in women's employment, both governments and employers have begun to turn their attention to the issue of work-life 'balance'. Work-life 'balance' has increasingly emerged as a major policy issue at the European level, as well as for national governments (COM 2001; Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) 2000, 2003). In all of these policy documents, flexible employment is seen as a key factor in achieving such a 'balance'.

Thus the more negative aspects of neoliberal numerical flexibility are being glossed as a positive contribution to the reconciliation of employment and family life, and employment and families might be viewed as changing in tandem with each other. However, as many authors have noted, flexible employment, which is concentrated amongst women, is not usually associated with individual success in the labour market, and flexible workers often tend to be in lower level positions. As Purcell *et al.* (1999) have argued, the 'uneasy reconciliation of work and family life in Britain has largely been achieved by means of a gender-segmented labour market and the part-time work of women'. Perrons' (1999) cross-national European study of flexible working in the retail industry demonstrated that in all of the countries studied (Britain, Sweden, France, Germany, Spain and Greece) it was women who worked flexibly, and took the major responsibility for caring work as well. As Lewis (2002) has argued, the fact that women continue, in aggregate, to be less

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advantaged in the labour market is the major reason why a 'modified male breadwinner' model of employment/family articulation persists empirically, despite the fact that in many states, official policy endorses an individualised 'adult worker' model in relation to legislation and welfare.

Developments in social theory – the inexorable rise of 'individualisation'

In the closing decades of the twentieth century, social and economic change was accompanied by wider political change – most notably, the collapse of the 'state socialist' societies of the Eastern bloc. These events contributed to an intensifying critique of encompassing, broadly materialist, theories such as Marxism. The 1980s and 1990s also witnessed a widespread 'turn to culture' in some sociological circles. This was accompanied by a renewed focus on the constitution of objects through discourse, that is, the *production* of meanings and dispositions. Thus meanings, symbols and representations became seen as more central to the study of social life, as compared to (indeed, rather than) concrete institutions. This intellectual shift was associated with theoretical commentaries that hailed the advent of 'postmodernism' (Featherstone 1991), as well as the influence of writers such as Foucault who emphasised the plurality and diversity of 'scientific' knowledge and the corresponding weaknesses of social science 'meta-narratives'. Many writers argued that 'culture' – meanings and symbolic practices – had become particularly significant in postmodernity and that indeed, that in contemporary social life, everything is 'cultural' (Baudrillard 1993).

Under the conditions of contemporary capitalism, these culturally oriented theorists argued that the distinctions between economy and culture have blurred and indeed, that 'cultural' considerations, broadly conceived, were driving economic activities. It was argued that 'cultural' rather than 'economic' issues had become more significant for our understanding of contemporary society. Indeed, many have suggested that the shift from 'economy' to 'culture' involves a larger societal shift, an epochal change towards 'postmodern' social conditions (Lash and Urry 1994; Crook *et al.* 1992). With globalisation and the speeding up of social and cultural change, it was argued that the nature of the world, and how people operate within it, have changed irrevocably.

Alongside the emphasis on culture there developed a growing emphasis on the significance of 'identity', particularly in respect of politics. The class-based politics of the Fordist era were seen to be increasingly irrelevant, and were being replaced with issue-based and identity

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politics, concerned with such matters as environmental issues and the rights of self-identified minorities such as, for example, gays, and sub-national and ethnic identities. The consequences of the apparent abandonment of a 'politics of redistribution' in favour of a 'politics of identity' have been extensively rehearsed (Fraser 2000; Frank 2000) and O'Neill (1999: 85), for example, has argued that there has been something of a 'convergence of a postmodern leftism with neoliberal defences of the market'. An emphasis on the reflexive individual and a focus on individual identities rather than collective actions and outcomes has many resonances with neoliberalism, and the promotion of individual rights and recognition meshes well with the arguments of those on the right who have criticised the way in which collective provision has 'disempowered' individuals.

Thus in 'reflexive modernity', the overwhelming importance of 'choice' is emphasised by left and right alike: 'The contemporary individual ... is characterised by choice, where previous generations had no such choices ... he or she must choose fast as in a reflex' (Lash 2002: ix). Here we find echoes of a much older theoretical debate concerning the utility of 'action-oriented' as opposed to 'structural' explanations of social behaviour. In the 1960s, the economist Duesenberry is reputed to have quipped that 'Economics is all about how people make choices, Sociology is all about how people don't have any choices to make.' Duesenberry was drawing a contrast between the self-maximising 'rational economic actor' of neoclassical economic theory and the excessively institutionalised, normatively regulated 'actor' of Parsonian sociology (Wrong 1964). However, in 'reflexive modernity' (Beck *et al.* 1994) individuals, it is argued, 'make themselves'; as Giddens (1991: 75) puts it: 'We are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves ... what the individual becomes is dependent on the reconstructive endeavours in which he or she engages.' Thus neither fixed family obligations, nor rigid labour market and/or organisational practices, serve to determine individual social positioning. In this process, it is argued, the positioning of individuals via class and status mechanisms is replaced by a focus on the construction of individual identities.

It is true that the emphasis on materialist (Marxist) explanations in the 1960s and 1970s sometimes resulted in a 'vulgar materialism', in which the totality of human behaviour might be explained by the workings of 'the system' and its associated institutions. However, it is equally the case that the 'cultural turn' has also sometimes resulted in a 'vulgar culturalism', in which economic inequalities are seen largely as expressions of cultural hierarchies, and thus the revaluation of unjustly devalued identities 'is simultaneously to attack ... deep sources of

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economic inequality' (Fraser 2000: 111). The position taken in this book is relatively sceptical as to the extent to which individual 'agency' and capacities for 'self-construction' have 'replaced' structural constraints (of all kinds).⁴ Rather, a guiding theme of this book will be that material (economic) institutions are embedded in cultural practices and vice versa (Granovetter and Swedberg 1992), and it is often problematic to attempt to disentangle the 'material' from the 'cultural' – although both have to be taken into account in social explanations. Important changes have indeed occurred, but a similarly sceptical stance will be taken regarding whether an 'epochal break' in the social order has taken place, requiring radically new concepts and approaches to social analysis (as authors such as Beck have argued). Rather, changes in material conditions, norms and cultures mean that institutions such as employment, class and the family are being reconfigured, but this does not mean that these institutions are redundant, or have been completely replaced.

Despite the claims of theorists of 'individuation', embedded normative and material patterns, even in 'reflexive modernity', still persist and have continuing power. As far as women are concerned, one of the most significant elements of embedded traditionalism is the persistence of the ideology of domesticity, in which the work of caring and nurturing is normatively assigned to women. As we shall see, women continue to carry out most of this work. This is yet another reason why it is essential to retain a simultaneous focus on both the material *and* the cultural in our attempt to understand the rearticulation of employment and the family. It will be argued that this approach not only will generate a better understanding of social change, but hopefully will also indicate positive strategies and responses to change. Taking this broad theoretical perspective, in the next sections of this chapter, a series of topics relating to the family, employment and their contemporary rearticulation will be critically examined.

Understanding family and employment behaviour: individual 'choice' versus social structure

Family life encompasses some of the most intimate aspects of human behaviour, and for most people it is their primary source of socialisation.

⁴ Nevertheless, the discourse of individualism has been influential – and, as has been suggested above, it has many resonances with neoliberal thinking. Margaret Thatcher once famously remarked that 'there is no such thing as society, just individuals and families'.