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Understanding Family Policy Transformation in the light of Critical Political Economy

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Introduction

In a political economy context characterized by welfare state retrenchment and the austerity turn, family policy transformation constitutes a remarkable feature of social policy change in high-income countries. In particular, childcare expansion is considered a key element to promote female employment, gender equality and the conciliation of paid and unpaid work, as well as mitigating the social reproduction crisis. Policy-makers also support this expansion as a policy tool to moderate the so-called ‘new social risks’ and as a ‘social investment’ into women’s economic potential and children’s human capital.

This article interprets critically this transformation in terms of a retrenchment of compensatory income support policies for families (e.g. family allowances, unemployment, income maintenance), the expansion of services and active programmes (e.g. childcare, active labour market programmes) and the increasing commodification of social reproduction. We suggest (Ferragina, 2022) that family policy transformation – in conjunction with welfare state change – is part of a double movement: on the one hand towards commodification (especially for lower class women) and liberalization of the labour market, and on other towards increasing freedom for women from care and domestic tasks (especially for middle and upper class women). We illustrate these two movements by connecting the literatures on comparative social policy (to describe family policy and welfare state change) and critical political economy (to characterize the role of the social reproduction crisis in this context).

Family policy change, together with labour market and income maintenance policies, is situated at the meeting point of these two movements. On the one hand it can be a factor in the expansion of women’s freedom and bargaining power in the labour market (acting as a tool in the struggle against patriarchy), and on the other hand it can reinforce the segregation of lower class women in the labour market and the household. Our endeavour is driven by the following research question: How does family policy transformation relate to the political economy of welfare state change and

the commodification of social reproduction?

The article proceeds as follows. First, we position our contribution in the literature. Second, we examine empirically family policy transformation in relation to welfare state change, focusing on the evolution of compensatory and active policies. Data on family policy spending and some possible associated outcomes (gender differences in employment and childcare usage across the income distribution) help us to observe the double movement logic in action across countries. The analysis moves on to locate this policy change as part of the political economy of social reproduction.

The Context

Scholarship defines explicit family policy as a distinctive domain geared towards the support of families with young children. Classically, it includes child-income support (allowances based on tax deductions and cash benefits), childcare and employment-related leaves (Kamerman and Kahn 1978, 1994; Lewis 2006). Our analysis focuses on the relation between this policy package and other compensatory and active programmes which characterize the welfare state more broadly; in particular, we explore the transformation of family income allowances and childcare as they fall within the realm of compensatory and active support respectively¹. While the theoretical analysis embraces the long-standing transition from Fordism to a service-based economy, the empirical analysis uses spending data starting in the 1980 to punctually measure this transformation across high-income countries.

Family policy transformation is a core element of welfare state change, which, arguably, in its most recent iteration stimulates the advent of a more active model of social protection and the transition from the male breadwinner to

1. The transformation of leaves is analysed as background information to describe the progressive family policy convergence across high-income countries.

the dual earner model (Crompton 1999; 2006; Daly 2011; Gornick and Meyers 2003; Lewis 2001). Political economy scholarship has interpreted this transition in relation to the economic model, emphasizing the progressive end of the 'Fordist sexual contract' and the shift to a new 'post-Fordist sexual contract' (Macdowell 1991; Pateman 1988).

The male breadwinner model – associated with the Fordist system of industrial relations – relied on the split between informal household and care work (mostly performed by women) and formal labour (mostly performed by men). Under this model, the wage earned by men was in most cases sufficient to cover the basic needs of the household – the so-called 'family wage'. Family policy supported this system and the rigid gender roles associated with it, granting families child benefits and progressively extending maternity leaves (Daly and Ferragina 2018). In this way, family policy contributed to reinforce the Fordist sexual contract and the widely assumed distinction between 'productive' and 'unproductive' social reproduction activities (Laslett and Brenner 1989; Picchio 1992).

The decay of this model and the parallel rise of the service-based economy heralded the advent of a dual earner model; this model is conceptualized in family policy literature as a variety of adult worker models (Daly 2011; Lewis 2011). Moreover, the declining growth in productivity of the service-based economy – if compared to the Fordist system – and the subsequent wage stagnation fostered also the advent of a new political economy context (Ferragina et al. forthcoming), where the male breadwinner wage was insufficient to assure the basic household needs. In this new context, women were called upon to help to compensate the earnings gap and joined the labour market in great number (McDowell 1991).

The demise of the sexual Fordist contract was considered as a movement in the direction of women's emancipation and liberation from the oppression of patriarchy. Nevertheless, within the post-Fordist sexual contract, productive and reproductive activities continue to rest on a strong gender segregation which is intersectional to class (Einstein

2009). The degradation of labour market conditions in most high-income countries and the existence of a double burden for women seem to hinder gender equality. Only a minority of women – mostly upper and middle class – can access the core of the workforce and have the economic means to reduce the time they devote to social reproduction responsibilities, and seem to make benefit of the post-Fordist sexual contract. In contrast, lower class women seem to increasingly constitute a cheap reserve army available for the service-based economy.

Scholars argued that the neoliberal turn – intrinsically related to the service-based economy – seized control of the new sexual contract, and reduced greatly its potential emancipatory power (Fraser 2013; 2016). Scaling down 'old' compensatory income support policies – a hallmark of the Fordist and breadwinner model – and externalizing social reproduction were deemed to be essential steps to achieve gender equality; this view was widely accepted in high-income countries (Barker 2005; Fraser 2016). Accordingly, social reproduction activities came to be considered incompatible with gender equality, whereby gender equality can only be achieved through a stronger involvement of women in the labour market. In reality, the depreciation of women's work in the market is intrinsically related to the devaluation of social reproduction activities (Federici 2004; 2012): care and domestic work is mostly looked upon as labour for unskilled and low-paid workers (see the debate about care as 'dirty work' for women and migrants, Duffy 2007, England 2005). This socially constructed belief serves to moderate women's wages in care occupations and more broadly in low service sector jobs (Folbre 1994, 102). The shift to a new welfare and sexual contract in a service-based economy did not liberate women from the Fordist patriarchy, as many foretold; rather it strengthened the exploitation of women in the labour market and is in part responsible for the social reproduction crisis we currently observe in high-income countries (Ferragina 2019a; Fraser 2013).

This generates a paradox within the political economy of advanced capitalist societies. 'Capital' cannot extend its ca-

capacity to continuously extract surplus value from ‘labour’ without the support of unpaid social reproduction activities; but at the same time, the tendency of neoliberal capitalism to move towards the commodification of all human activities challenges fundamentally the societal conditions under which informal social reproduction activities are performed (Ferragina 2019a). As noted perceptively by Nancy Fraser (2016, p. 103), the “logic of economic production overrides that of social reproduction, destabilizing the very processes on which capital depends – compromising the social capacities, both domestic and public, that are needed to sustain accumulation over the long term. Destroying its own condition of possibility, capital’s accumulation dynamic effectively eats its own tail”. In other words, there is a marked contradiction between the necessity of capital to extract surplus value and the preservation (at least in the current social settings) of social reproduction activities (Bakker and Gill 2003, p. 4).

Family policy transformation is rooted in this context, and for this reason it has assumed a new centrality in the political economy of welfare state. We suggest that this centrality can be better understood if we integrate a classical comparative social policy approach with that of critical political economy.

Scholarship in critical political economy suggests that capitalism continuously commodifies new aspects of social life, boosts parental labour market activity rates, and reduces the number of hours that can be devoted to social reproduction (Fraser 2013; 2016). Such changes contribute to develop new social demands; governments consequently are called to replace ‘damaged’ informal and family ties with new services. From a Durkheimian perspective, it can be argued that, while capital attempts to increase its capacity to extract surplus value from parents, social reproduction activities require measures to help preserve them. Hence the breakdown of a mechanical form of solidarity is (at least partially) replaced with state-supported care services which enhance the development of organic solidarity (Ferragina 2009; 2017). But the creation of new forms of collective solidarity to counter the social reproduction crisis

has a considerable cost that has to be financed in a political economy context, where the neoliberal logic dominates and demands lower taxation. This places the budget allocated to ‘old’ compensatory forms of income support (those that support mechanic solidarity) under severe strain; these are considered out of step with the post-Fordist sexual contract.

These insights have been considered (at least partially) within institutional and comparative social policy literature to unravel how the shift from Fordism to a service-based economy has contributed to affect labour market reforms cumulatively (see for example Streeck and Thelen 2005), but family policy change has not been examined in connection with this shift. We propose to fill this gap by examining family policy holistically², that is, we relate it to both compensatory and active support policies, as a key element of welfare state transformation influenced by the broader political economy context. This viewpoint provides elements also to re-interpret the relation between family policy transformation and both gender and class issues in western countries and will show that the retrenchment and expansion of different policies is related to gender and class in a complex way (see Shalev 2008).

In summary, family policy change is often taken uncritically as a beneficial policy transformation – considering on the one hand the expansionary trend of childcare with its positive effects on women’s labour market participation, and on the other hand the retrenchment of family allowances with their detrimental impact on labour supply (Ferragina 2020). We argue that to investigate more critically the role played by family policy in this context, one has to place it in a theoretical context and analyse how its transformation is related to the political economy of the welfare state and the growing commodification of social reproduction.

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2. See Daly and Lewis (2000) for a holistic analysis of family policy under the rubric of care.

Family Policy Transformation in the Context of Welfare State Change

To capture the relative evolution of compensatory and active policies, we compare the over-time evolution of childcare spending with three other types of social spending: support for unemployment, family allowances, income maintenance, active labour market programmes and employment leaves. This analysis evaluates and underlines the movement from compensatory to active support across 22 countries³ divided in four welfare regimes. To run this analysis we constructed an indicator subtracting every spending category from childcare spending (Figures 1) for the period 1980-2015⁴. We employ childcare as a benchmark to evaluate spending trends as it is the domain where we observe the largest and more cross-nationally widespread increase over the period analysed. A negative score indicates that spending for family allowances, income assistance, unemployment, active labour market programmes and leave is larger than spending for childcare in a given year; a positive score indicates a higher spending for childcare in comparison to the other categories of welfare state spending.

The evidence shows that since the 1980s childcare spending has increased globally more than compensatory income support policies or active labour market programmes spending. Within this overall trend, regime variation continues to persist (for family policy regime analyses, see Ferragina and Seeleib-Kaiser 2015; Korpi 2000; Korpi et al. 2013; Thevenon 2011).

3. For the comparison between the evolution of spending across different welfare regimes, we divided the countries in to the 'continental' (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands), the 'Mediterranean' (Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain), the 'liberal and radical' (Australia, Canada, Ireland, Japan, New Zealand, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States), and the 'Scandinavian' (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden) groups.

4. For the empirical analyses contained in this paper we employed the following data sources: EU-Silc (2016), the Social Expenditure Database (2020), the Family Database (OECD 2017), and ILOSTAT (2020). On the limits of these data – the so-called 'dependent variable problem', see Clasen and Siegel (2007).

In the continental European countries (viz. Germany) (Figure 1a) childcare spending has caught up with family allowances and income support spending, but we do not observe a significant reduction of the gap with spending on unemployment support. Childcare spending has also increased more than spending for leaves and has also been catching up with spending on active labour market programmes. Overall childcare spending went from 0.18% of GDP in 1980 to 0.76% in 2015. This is a remarkable transformation, given that countries like Austria and Germany have relied hitherto on a strong male breadwinner model in family and labour market policy.

We observe a similar trend across Mediterranean countries (Figure 1b), although the level of spending on family policy continues to remain lower than in the continental group of countries. In the Mediterranean countries, spending on childcare went from 0.04% of GDP in 1980 to be 0.38% at the last available data point. The general trend is for spending on childcare to be in the process of catching up with spending on family allowances, and to overtake income maintenance; but the gap with unemployment spending has remained similar to that in 1980. Spending on childcare has progressively overtaken spending on leaves, but the gap between childcare spending and that on active labour market programmes has remained similar over time. In sum, despite a considerable increase of childcare spending, the 'modernization' of family policy in Mediterranean countries is limited if compared to the continental group of countries.

In liberal and so-called 'radical' countries⁵ (Figure 1c), childcare spending has overtaken income maintenance support, has caught up with unemployment spending, but has not closed the gap with income support through family allowances. This is because in several countries belonging to this cluster, spending on child income support through tax breaks increased during the 1990s and 2000s (see Daly and

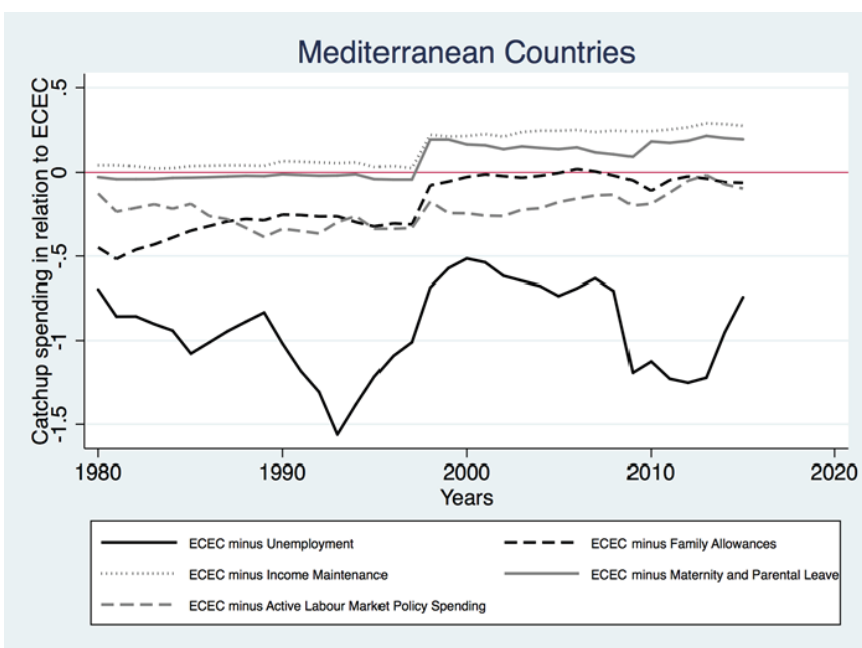
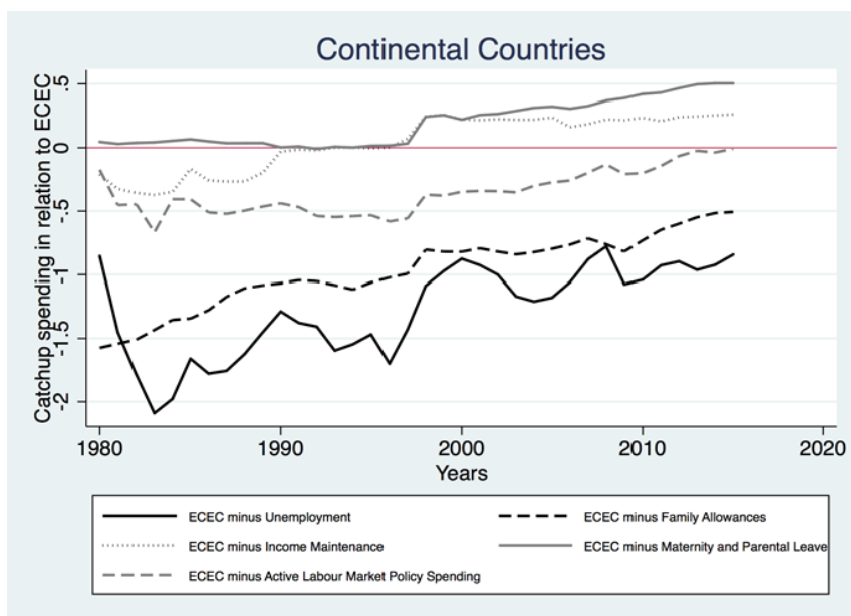
5. Castles and Mitchell (1992) suggested that Australia and New Zealand have some different characteristics from Liberal countries and labelled them as 'radical countries' in contrast to Esping-Andersen's classification (1990). Some empirical welfare regime analyses confirm this distinction when considering labour market and family policy (see Ferragina et al. 2013).

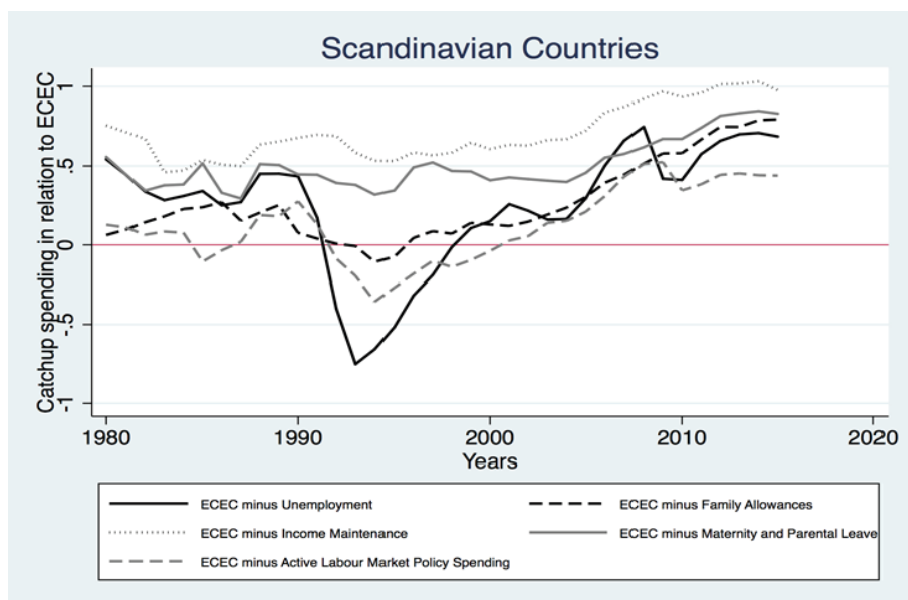
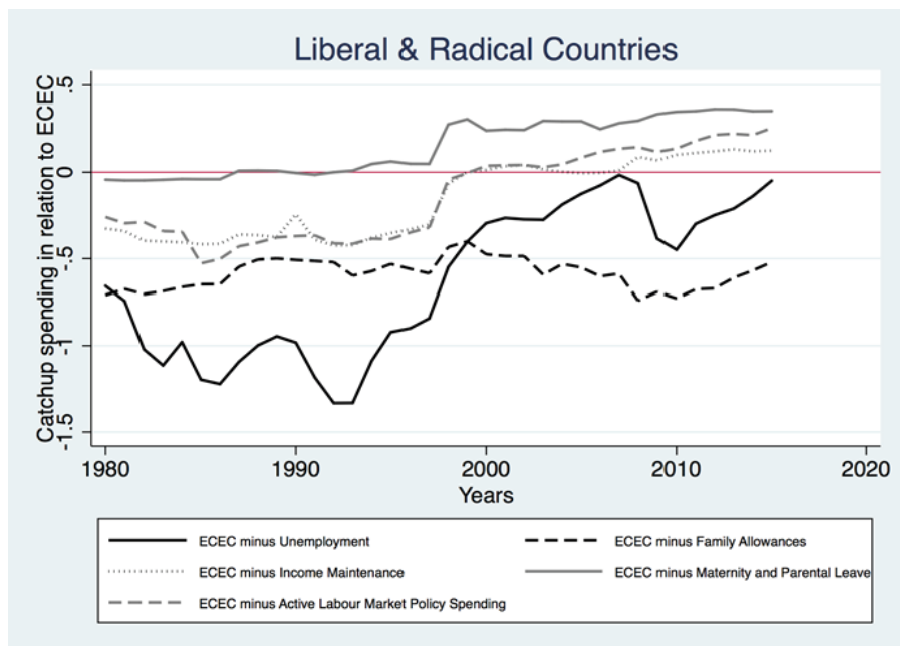
Ferragina 2018). Moreover, childcare spending has overtaken spending on leaves and active labour market programmes. Overall, we witness a strong increase in childcare spending in this part of the world, from 0.012% of GDP in 1980 to 0.50% of GDP at the latest available data point.

Scandinavian countries (Figure 1d) have been outliers in their childcare spending practices (see Daly and Ferragina 2018; Ferragina 2019b; Ferragina 2020). In the 1980s spending on childcare was already higher than that on family allowances, income maintenance, unemployment, active labour market programmes, and leaves. This gap has strengthened over time; childcare spending has increased from 0.98% of GDP in 1980 to 1.49% at the latest available data point.

In summary, since 1980 we observe at the empirical level a high degree of convergence among countries, although important differences persist across different regimes or models. Moreover, from a spending allocation perspective, childcare expansion on the one hand and retrenchment in family allowances on the other hand are the most prominent features of the family policy package transformation. This transformation has taken place in a context characterized also by a widespread retrenchment of compensatory income support policies, and the stagnation of active labour market programmes. Moving forward with an eye towards theory, we interpret these elements to position family policy transformation within the political economy of the welfare state and social reproduction.

Figures 1
Catch up Spending in relation to ECEC:
(a) Continental, (b) Mediterranean, (b)
Liberal & Radical, (d) Scandinavia





Discussion⁶

Social policy scholarship has pointed out how welfare state expansion after WWII⁷ contributed heavily to mitigate the classic conflict between labour and capital, and to improve the economic condition of the lower classes (Esping-Andersen 1985; Korpi 1983; Shalev 1983; Stephens 1979). However, this expansion also cemented the Fordist sexual contract and reinforced women's subordination in the pro-

6. Several parts of this section and the conclusion are an abridged version of Ferragina (2019a).

7. Albeit with remarkable differences across welfare regimes (see Esping-Andersen 1990; Ferragina and Seeleib-Kaiser 2011).

duction and reproduction spheres (Abramowitz 2017). This expansionary phase came to an end towards the end of the 1970s with the demise of Fordism and the new context of 'permanent austerity' (Pierson 2001) which favoured welfare state retrenchment (Hay and Wincott 2012; Hemerijck 2013; Starke 2006).

Childcare evolution seems an anomaly in this context, as a process of expansion has been taking place since the early 1980s (with the exception of Scandinavian countries where this process began earlier). This period of transformation

has been described in the literature as a phase during which a substantial institutional change was achieved by ‘layering’ (Daly and Ferragina 2018), that is the progressive addition of a new policy programme without the elimination of older ones. This process accelerated further during the 1990s and 2000s, as childcare became an essential part of overall welfare state transformation (with parental leaves also considerably expanded).

We suggest that two processes analysed in the political economy literature can help to interpret critically the connection between family policy transformation, the political economy of welfare state change, and the growing commodification of social reproduction. The first process concerns the progressive disembedding of the social sphere and the economy. As suggested by Polanyi (1957), the expansion of the capitalist accumulation process to new spheres disarticulates old societal functions and subjugates them solely to the economic logic. The second is the increasing influence of capitalist imperatives on social reproduction. These imperatives heavily condition social relationships and social reproduction (LeBaron 2010, p. 893). In this respect, family policy transformation – positioned at the focal point between markets, states and private relations – is part of a double movement: a movement towards commodification and liberalization, and, in opposition to this, a movement towards increasing freedom for women from care and domestic tasks.

On the one hand, one can consider childcare expansion as an attempt by government to activate individuals in society in the context of a shift from the male breadwinner to the dual earner model. This process – in an economy characterized by the exponential growth of precarious and low-paid jobs – also contributes to wage compression. But, as indicated by McDowell (1991), the emancipatory potential of the dual earner model and the post-Fordist sexual contract might well have been exaggerated, and this arrangement appears to be advantageous mainly for middle and upper class women. At the macroeconomic level, women (and other marginal groups, e.g. migrants, young people) are often exploited to enhance the labour market flexibility

process, picking up the slack of reduced public service provision (Bakker 2007, p. 546). Alternatively, a counter-movement interpretation might consider the expansion of childcare services and the parallel reduction of family allowances and other forms of compensatory income support as a way to foster an egalitarian family model along the lines of the Scandinavian blueprint. If the transformation of political economy has largely contributed to a crisis of social reproduction to perpetrate the current patterns of capital accumulation (Bakker 2007; Bakker and Gill 2003), then childcare expansion has a compensatory effect and can be considered anti-cyclical to this trend.

Following the first interpretation – which considers family policy transformation as a movement towards commodification and liberalization – one could read childcare expansion as complementary to the retrenchment of compensatory income support policies in accomplishing two objectives. The first is to increase labour supply with mothers accepting precarious positions and low salaries, and the second is to reduce the burden of social protection costs linked to unemployment, inactivity and income maintenance. Childcare expansion, accordingly, seems a component of the shift from the Keynesian Welfare State (KWS) to the Schumpeterian Workfare State (SWS) (Jessop 1993; Peck 2001). The SWS replaces the distributive logic of the KWS with a productivist logic under which the investment in market making measures is mirrored by the progressive retrenchment of market breaking policies. In the SWS, social policy is subordinated to the demands of labour market flexibility and the necessity to compete in the international market.

Jessop’s theoretical interpretation can be used to explain why compensatory income support policies are retrenched alongside an expansion of childcare, and why, even in countries historically dominated by the male breadwinner model, such as Germany, childcare has been expanded. It is almost as though the long-lasting Fordist economies are finally catching up with those countries that based their competitive advantage historically on non-Fordist niches. High-income countries, as they move on from Fordism, tend to

adopt a supply-side approach and manage their welfare states with a greater emphasis on competitiveness than Fordist economies (Jessop 1993). From this perspective, one could read the Scandinavian early move toward family policy expansion in a different light than is usually implied in comparative social policy literature; that is rather than gender equality being the primary motivation, it might play an ancillary role to the competitive imperative. In other words, the expansion of childcare can be interpreted more as a way to expand labour force participation than as a tool to reduce gender inequality. It is also important to add nuance to this critical reading, as the expansion of childcare in a period of increasing spending also for compensatory policy support (as was the case in Scandinavian countries during the 1960s and 1970s) is, in terms of gender and labour market outcomes, qualitatively different from a similar expansion in a context of retrenchment and labour market deregulation (as is the case currently in Germany for example).

From a distributional perspective, we seem to observe a politics of social policy based on a small and unequally distributed carrot (the expansion of childcare) and a bigger stick (overall reduction of income support policies). This choice contributes to boost women's employment rates but seems to generate concurrent negative distributional consequences for the lower classes (and stagnation in gender equality in pay across all classes).

When looking at outcomes across the 22 countries considered, female labour market activity rates have increased since 2000 and also have become more similar across countries (Table 1). This is the case also for the percentage of women employed in the service sector: from 82% in 2000 to 88% in 2015. Countries are becoming more similar to each other also, and the relative difference across them has reduced from 8.3 to 4.9 standard deviations (Table 2).

Country	2000	2014	Var. 2000-2014
Australia	54.73	58.65	3.93
Austria	48.48	54.67	6.19
Belgium	43.56	48.17	4.62
Canada	58.66	61.10	2.44
Denmark	60.02	58.07	-1.95
Finland	56.60	55.37	-1.22
France	48.44	50.91	2.48
Germany	49.41	54.50	5.09
Greece	40.29	44.05	3.76
Iceland	71.53	70.86	-0.66
Ireland	47.65	52.70	5.05
Italy	35.47	39.37	3.90
Japan	49.28	49.34	0.07
Luxembourg	41.38	52.01	10.63
Netherlands	53.31	57.71	4.41
New Zealand	56.76	62.63	5.86
Norway	60.24	61.21	0.97
Portugal	52.81	53.74	0.94
Spain	40.87	52.53	11.66
Sweden	58.09	60.91	2.82
Switzerland	57.72	62.70	4.99
United Kingdom	54.02	56.89	2.87
United States	59.06	56.12	-2.94
Average	52.10	55.40	
STD	8.29	6.72	
Relative STD	15.91	12.13	

Table 1

Over Time Variation Female Participation to the Labour Market (Full-Time Equivalent), 2000-2014 Measured as % of Women

Note:
Source: ILO (ILOSTAT, 2020)
<https://ilostat.ilo.org/>

Table 2
Employment in Service Sector Jobs, 2000-2015
Measured as % of the Total

Country	Female		Male	
	2000	2015	2000	2015
Australia	86.0	89.7	63.3	63.5
Austria	79.5	82.8	51.9	57.8
Belgium	87.2	90.9	61.4	65.8
Canada	87.0	90.3	63.4	67.4
Denmark	84.6	90.0	59.3	67.8
Finland	81.9	89.0	51.6	59.4
France	83.2	88.5	58.8	65.5
Germany	79.7	85.0	51.7	58.4
Greece	68.3	80.2	55.2	66.1
Iceland	84.8	90.3	54.8	65.8
Ireland	82.6	88.8	50.8	62.3
Italy	75.1	84.0	55.9	58.6
Japan	72.4	81.0	56.8	60.7
Luxembourg	92.1	95.2	66.6	82.5
Netherlands	88.1	92.7	65.5	72.4
New Zealand	81.9	85.8	56.6	59.3
Norway	88.4	91.7	61.4	64.8
Portugal	63.4	79.1	44.6	57.0
Spain	80.8	89.3	52.0	65.4
Sweden	87.3	91.9	59.7	68.2
Switzerland	85.8	86.9	63.7	66.8
United Kingdom	87.3	91.6	61.6	70.0
United States	86.6	92.0	65.4	71.7
Average	82.3	88.1	57.9	65.1
STD	6.9	4.3	5.6	5.9
Relative STD	8.3	4.9	9.7	9.0

Note:
Source: ILO (ILOSTAT, 2020)
<https://ilostat ilo.org/>

More importantly, and related to the suggested critical interpretation, the global earnings-gap with men has constantly increased everywhere⁸ during the last two decades (Table 3). The persistence of this gender-earning gap has deep roots and can be explained with reference to the worsening condition of employment and the precarization of the weakest segments of the workforce during the recent decades (for an extensive discussion in the literature see, e.g. Afshar 1998; Bergeron 2001, Elson and Pearson 1981; Standing 1989). In a nutshell, women entered en masse in the labour market at the worst possible time.

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8.. With the exception of Greece and Switzerland.

At a broader welfare state level, it has been shown that social spending focused on the so-called ‘old’ social risks (e.g. family allowances, income maintenance and unemployment) is more redistributive than spending on ‘new’ social provisions designed to stimulate employment (e.g. childcare care and active labour market programmes) (Cantillon et al. 2014). Traditional compensatory social spending is more targeted to the lower classes and the more vulnerable in society; instead employment-oriented policy appears to favour disproportionately the upper-middle classes (Pintelon et al. 2013). In a period of protracted austerity (Blyth 2013), countries are faced with a dilemma of choice: between pol-

Table 3
Gender Yearly Earning Differentials, 2000-2015
Measured as Annual Difference between Men and Women

Country	Years Variation	Female	Male	Annual Gender Gap
Australia	NA	NA	NA	NA
Austria	2000-2014	708	1090	25.47
Belgium	2009-2015	452	567	16.43
Canada	NA	NA	NA	NA
Denmark	NA	NA	NA	NA
Finland	2009-2014	34	138	17.33
France	2000-2013	1947	2121	12.43
Germany	2009-2016	877	1022	18.13
Greece	2007-2016	89	83	-0.60
Iceland	2009-2015	798	873	10.71
Ireland	NA	NA	NA	NA
Italy	NA	NA	NA	NA
Japan	2009-2016	423	995	71.50
Luxembourg	NA	NA	NA	NA
Netherlands	NA	NA	NA	NA
New Zealand	2009-2016	505	671	20.75
Norway	2009-2015	606	643	5.29
Portugal	2008-2016	244	275	3.44
Spain	2009-2014	218	382	27.33
Sweden	NA	NA	NA	NA
Switzerland	2009-2014	1012	845	-27.83
United Kingdom	2000-2015	594	1246	40.75
United States	NA	NA	NA	NA
Average		607.64	782.21	17.22

Note:

Source: ILO (ILOSTAT, 2020)

<https://ilostat.ilo.org/>

icies that foster employment or policies that substantive-ly reduce poverty (Vandenbroucke and Vleminckx 2011). Nieuwenhuis et al. (2016) demonstrated – in a sample of 15 OECD countries – that a 10% increase in women’s labour participation between 1971 and 2013 has corresponded to a reduction of poverty rates by only 1%. Therefore, the potential of an employment-oriented strategy to reduce poverty within high-income countries is low, and has been depleted by the large increase of women’s participation rates.

Looking at more specific mechanisms, generous policies that reconcile work and care have a positive effect on employment, primarily at the higher end of the gender wage distribution and not at its lower end (Christofides et al.

2013). Family-friendly policies in conjunction with the retrenchment of compensatory policies stimulate access to employment at the lower end of the income distribution, and worsen the condition of lower class working mothers especially. This is because the job territory occupied by lower class women is meagre, to a large extent as a result of the segregation strategies employers put into place (Bergman 2005; Folbre 1994; 2001).

In addition, we observe also that childcare usage is positively correlated with household income (Table 4) (OECD 2016; see also Van Lancker 2018). Following the retrenchment of compensatory policies, this unequal distribution of childcare use seems to further disadvantage lower class

women. In Europe, for every 10 children belonging to the top income tertile, only 6 in the bottom income tertile are enrolled in childcare (Table 4). Sweden, Denmark, Luxembourg, Portugal, Iceland (where the number goes up to 8), Greece, Norway (7) and Italy (6) are above or around this average. In all other countries – Finland, Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, France, United Kingdom, Switzerland and Ireland – the participation of lower class children in childcare is dramatically low. France, Ireland, Spain, Switzerland and the United Kingdom are especially unequal, where only between 3 or 4 children of the lower income sectors participate in formal childcare in comparison for every 10 of their high-income peers (Table 5). Despite the strong increase in childcare spending we documented above, inequality in childcare use has not decreased over time (Van Lancker 2018).

The second interpretation – dominant in comparative social policy literature and public discourse – is based on family policy’s liberating role for mothers, and in the manner that this policy package transforms the welfare state. Childcare expansion is seen as the ‘good face’ of activation. It signals a paradigm shift in the welfare state, from a focus on inequality of condition to a social protection model based on equality of opportunity (see for example Moss 1988), and from an economic point of view as an investment into women’s economic potential and children’s human capital (Esping-Andersen et al. 2002).

According to this interpretation, in times of ‘permanent austerity’ (Pierson 2001), childcare expansion appears to partially ease the pressure of social reproduction activities on women and families. Social reproduction in advanced

Table 4
Gender Yearly Earning Differentials, 2000-2015
Measured as Annual Difference between Men and Women

Country	Overall	1st Tertile (lowest)	2nd Tertile	3rd Tertile (highest)	Lowest/Highest ratio
Denmark	70.55	63.59	73.98	74.12	85.80%
Iceland	59.40	53.91	58.45	66.38	81.22%
France	56.66	31.33	63.38	74.05	42.31%
Netherlands	55.27	37.33	59.72	70.36	53.06%
Luxembourg	53.05	48.89	54.24	57.71	84.73%
Norway	52.51	44.22	50.86	62.82	70.39%
Portugal	52.13	49.19	46.84	59.81	82.23%
Belgium	51.26	45.15	56.80	51.07	88.40%
Sweden	47.99	29.48	53.47	59.96	49.16%
Spain	40.19	24.18	38.25	54.38	44.46%
Ireland	39.39	20.44	33.15	66.09	30.93%
Switzerland	37.95	19.43	38.91	51.21	37.94%
Italy	35.54	26.46	34.61	42.25	62.64%
Finland	33.02	24.76	35.11	43.31	57.18%
United Kingdom	31.55	19.14	28.95	46.23	41.39%
Austria	22.35	20.00	17.05	30.31	66.00%
Greece	11.55	10.78	8.16	15.17	71.06%
Average	44.14	33.43	44.23	54.43	61.42%

Note:

Retrieved from: <http://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm>

Missing cases: Australia, Canada, Germany, Japan, New Zealand, United States.

Source: OECD (2017) estimates on the base of EU-Silc (2016)

capitalist economies generates escalating intra-household conflicts and puts strain particularly upon women with a lack of material resources (Spike Peterson 2011). As the welfare state has been retrenched, it has usually determined that women assume increasingly the role of ‘shock absorber of last resort’ (Elson 2002). In this context, childcare expansion has been interpreted as a support for parents needing to reconcile the care of young children and their participation in the labour market (Jenson and Saint-Martin 2006). It is important to note that the liberalization not only refers to economic and labour market aspects, but has also important ramifications at the social and cultural level. The flexibility of labour markets and the expansion of employment-oriented family policy support the interests of employers and organized capital, but also intervene in gender relations; this offers women the possibility to acquire a freedom that had been greatly constrained under the Fordist family model.

Continuing this argument, if social reproduction is regarded as a positional struggle for resources and increased control of time in a capitalist economy, the expansion of childcare appears to be an important aid for individuals who seek to reconcile complicated life balances (Bakker 2007, p. 548). Instead of being conceived of as a component of the SWS, family policy expansion might constitute a piece of the institutional puzzle put in place to reduce new social risks, and converge towards what Jenson and Saint-Martin (2006), with reference to Scandinavian countries, have defined as the LEGO model. This model is conceived as future-oriented policy to improve human capital and community activity, and to reduce care and time deficits. Childcare expansion reduces the space for informal work, supports the professionalization of care, and contributes to create new jobs in a regulated state service. This new emphasis on childcare also follows the social investment perspective: the conspicuous investment in high-quality childcare has long-term advantages for the whole of society, through increased maternal employment (Stier et al. 2001) and enhanced children’s human capital (Heckman 2006).

The expansion of childcare is considered by governments, for reasons cited above, also to be an important tool to fight the social reproduction crisis precipitated by advanced capitalism (Dowling 2016). Childcare expansion is seen often, therefore, as a beneficial set of measures conducive to the assimilation of the dual earner model with dual care. The idea of a dual earner/dual career model has been theorized (Crompton 1999; 2006; Gornick and Meyers 2003) as the possibility to move to a new gender arrangement that maintains equilibrium between the couple’s paid and unpaid work. Care ought not to be delegated completely to external services, rather family policy expansion should open windows of opportunity for couples to share equally social reproductive work⁹.

When looking empirically at a macro-level, both movements appear to be at play here. Childcare expansion, in combination with welfare state retrenchment and liberalization, can be a tool to bolster maternal employment in low service sector jobs; simultaneously it can help families partially to balance work and care, and to mitigate some of the negative effects generated by the continuous extension of the market logic to social life.

To enrich this analysis, we calculated an indicator which evaluates the fluctuation of compensatory and active support spending for each country (Table 5). This indicator examines the spending level in 2015 to assess if it is closer to the maximum or minimum spending level that each country has ever attained. We follow three steps to construct this indicator across 22 countries: (1) we subtract the maximum and minimum values of spending ever attained from 2015 spending; (2) we add up the distances from the maximum and minimum values for each policy; (3) we add up these distances for compensatory policies on the one hand (unemployment, family allowances and income assistance) and for active policies on the other (ECEC and active labour market programs). A negative score indicates that a coun-

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9. Saraceno and Keck (2011) formulated three critiques of the dual earner/dual carer model, i.e. the fact that the theory takes for granted the availability of good jobs for everybody, the assumption of the heterosexual couple as the main mode of family organization, and the excessive focus on children.

try in 2015 is closer to its minimum rather than maximum level of spending ever attained (higher negative scores indicate a stronger proximity to the minimum value); a positive score indicates that the 2015 value is closer to the maximum rather than the minimum spending level ever recorded (higher positive values indicate a close proximity to the maximum value). A zero score indicates a value equidistant from the maximum and minimum values. The rationale for building this indicator is that countries historically have a variable level of spending and not all of them reached the maximum and minimum levels during the same year. We suggest this indicator provides a global outlook taking into account the specific evolution of national policy configurations. Hence, it allows us to avoid arbitrary cut-off points to evaluate country movements and their relative spending position in 2015.

Table 5 seems to show that the retrenchment of compensatory income support has been globally (in the 22 countries) stronger than the expansion of active policies. Overall, the movement away from compensatory income support seems almost twice as large as the movement in favour of active policies. However, it is important to note that the trend varies considerably across countries. While in 12 nations (Australia, Belgium, Canada, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States) the first movement prevails over the second, in 9 nations (Austria, Denmark, France, Greece, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, Portugal, Switzerland) the second movement is stronger than the first; only New Zealand displays movements of a similar size. Moreover, among the countries where the second movement is stronger than the first, childcare usage is almost equally spread across the income distribution in only three cases (Denmark, Luxembourg, Portugal) (Table 4).

Conclusion

Family policy transformation is one of the main features of welfare state change over recent decades. This chapter proposed a critical approach to understanding this transformation in relation to the political economy of welfare state change and the commodification of social reproduction in high-income countries.

Mainstream parties across the political spectrum, e.g. Tony Blair's Labour party in the UK and Angela Merkel's Christian Social Union in Germany, supported childcare expansion as a tool to pursue the transformation of the welfare state into an 'enabling state' (Gilbert 1989). This gained considerable electoral traction (for the German case, see Fleckenstein 2011). According to these views, compensatory income support policies mostly geared towards the poorest families are looked upon as a relic of the 'past', a type of social protection connected to the patriarchal male breadwinner model; while childcare is considered to be the 'future' of social protection and its expansion to be a necessary condition to both achieve greater gender equality and mitigate the social reproduction crisis in the context of the dual earner model. Few might disagree that we need to provide childcare services to 'good' parents (those who take care of their children and also work), just as few might disagree that 'good' working parents are more deserving than unemployed or poor people.

However, in the high-income countries considered here – affected by a structural economic crisis and the increasing precarization of employment in the period considered here (up to 2015) – this widespread discourse conceals a cruder reality for low-income mothers and families. Accordingly, we suggest the existence of a double movement. Childcare expansion – together with the retrenchment of compensatory income support policies – appears to provide further incentives for mothers to more readily accept low salaries in a service-based economy. It serves also to liberate mothers partially from social reproduction tasks, and it fosters the overall shift toward a dual earner model. The first movement suggests family policy expansion to be another tool to

Table 5
Relative distance from the maximum and minimum spending value ever achieved for each country in comparison to 2015, compensatory vs. active policies.
A negative value indicates a spending level in 2015 closer to the minimum ever achieved by each country, while a positive value indicates a spending level in 2015 closer to the maximum level ever achieved by each country

Country	Unemployment	Family Allowances	Income Maintenance	Total Compensatory	Total Compensatory Standardised	ECEC	Active Labour Market	Natives Labour Market	Total active standardised	Net movement
Australia	-0.78	0.30	0.16	-0.31	-0.10	0.63	-0.46	0.18	0.09	-0.02
Austria	0.44	-0.62	0.25	0.07	0.02	0.29	0.39	0.69	0.34	0.37
Belgium	-0.04	-1.18	0.00	-1.22	-0.41	0.80	-0.48	0.33	0.16	-0.24
Canada	-1.57	0.73	-0.88	-1.71	-0.57	0.14	-0.38	-0.24	-0.12	-0.69
Denmark	0.00	0.25	0.26	0.52	0.17	-0.12	1.36	1.24	0.62	0.79
Finland	-0.54	-1.02	0.27	-1.30	-0.43	0.47	-0.31	0.16	0.08	-0.35
France	-0.28	-0.85	0.48	-0.65	-0.22	1.14	0.21	1.35	0.67	0.46
Germany	-0.51	-0.69	-0.03	-1.23	-0.41	0.37	-0.68	-0.31	-0.15	-0.56
Greece	-0.29	0.34	0.00	0.05	0.02	0.03	0.06	0.08	0.04	0.06
Ireland	-1.04	-0.55	-0.31	-1.90	-0.63	0.15	-0.74	-0.58	-0.29	-0.92
Italy	0.31	-0.47	0.02	-0.15	-0.05	0.50	0.06	0.56	0.28	0.23
Japan	-0.41	0.30	0.12	0.02	0.01	0.44	-0.11	0.33	0.16	0.17
Luxembourg	1.00	-0.07	0.23	1.17	0.39	0.68	0.18	0.86	0.43	0.82
Netherlands	-1.66	-0.89	0.31	-2.24	-0.75	0.01	-0.41	-0.40	-0.20	-0.95
New Zealand	-1.40	-0.23	-0.14	-1.78	-0.59	0.94	0.24	1.18	0.59	0.00
Norway	-0.68	-0.89	-0.06	-1.64	-0.55	1.33	-0.58	0.74	0.37	-0.17
Portugal	0.18	-0.25	0.03	-0.03	-0.01	0.35	0.19	0.54	0.27	0.26
Spain	-2.16	0.33	0.13	-1.70	-0.57	0.45	0.11	0.55	0.28	-0.29
Sweden	-2.28	-0.45	-0.25	-2.98	-0.99	0.29	-1.01	-0.72	-0.36	-1.35
Switzerland	0.18	0.02	-0.04	0.15	0.05	0.34	0.25	0.59	0.29	0.35
United Kingdom	-1.78	0.90	-0.96	-1.84	-0.61	0.50	-0.57	-0.07	-0.03	-0.65
United States	-0.89	-0.38	0.28	-0.99	-0.33	0.24	-0.15	0.10	0.05	-0.28
Average	-0.68	-0.24	-0.01	-0.90	-0.30	0.45	-0.13	0.32	0.16	-0.14

Source: Author's elaboration on the basis of OECD data (2020)

foster neoliberal capitalism. The second movement, in contrast, indicates that family policy expansion is instrumental in supporting working parents with young children, and helps to meet increasing care costs in a more gender-friendly context.

On the basis of the empirical data considered in this chapter, the first movement or interpretation seems more robust than the second, and it prevails in a majority of high-income countries. Further, childcare usage is heavily influenced by household income level in most high-income countries; this magnifies the negative distributional effects of cutting compensatory income support policies.

If we relate these findings to critical feminist analyses (Hartmann 1979; McRobbie 2009; Spivak 1999), one might wonder whether family policy transformation (intended here as expansion of childcare spending and reduction of family allowances) has been (at least partially) instrumentalized within neoliberal discourses as yet another ‘faux feminist’ tool (Einstein 2009). The positive effects of high-quality childcare seem to overshadow the fact that expanding childcare, especially as it seems to be at the expense of compensatory programmes, has negative distributional effects for low-income families, and contributes to higher pressures on wages at the bottom end of the income distribution. The increasing participation of women in the labour market remains strongly characterized by persistent occupational and industrial segregation, wage differentials, and gender precariousness (LeBaron 2010, p. 91). In this respect, family policy transformation in a context of welfare state retrenchment does not seem to significantly challenge long-standing class and gender inequalities, and, in the transition from the Fordist to the post-Fordist sexual contract, contributes in a majority of the countries analysed to perpetrate these inequalities under new forms.

The empirical findings assembled in this chapter do not deny the potential subversive role of family policy and the welfare state vis-à-vis neoliberal capitalism and patriarchy, at either an absolute or theoretical level. However, they seem to show that this potential role in a majority of high-income

countries during the last four decades has been held back by a context in which retrenchment of compensatory policies has prevailed over the expansion of activation measures.

Besides the double movement interpretation and the empirical findings we have offered, it is hoped that, at a more abstract level, the chapter has made a case to connect the comparative analysis of family policy change to critical political economy. Policy expansion does not intrinsically carry positive or negative consequences for either the entire population or for any particular class or sector. Too often studies that measure only the marginal effect of policy change have dominated scholarship (Ferragina 2020). However, they ignore the source of finance and how a policy is positioned within the political economy of welfare state change and the social structure more broadly. Comparative social policy and political economy scholars should join forces to challenge simplistic narratives of the effect of policy change that pervade the public domain. Studies of this kind can help to further dialogue between two areas of study that, even though they share common ground, frequently remain isolated from each other.

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Abstract

In a political economy context characterized by welfare state retrenchment, family policy transformation is a prominent feature of social policy change in high-income countries. Childcare is a key element of this transformation, and its expansion has been championed to promote female employment, gender equality, the conciliation of paid and unpaid work, and the mitigation of the social reproduction crisis.

This paper interprets critically this transformation in terms of a retrenchment of compensatory income support policies for families (e.g. family allowances, unemployment, income maintenance), the expansion of services and active programmes (e.g. childcare, active labour market programmes) and the increasing commodification of social reproduction. Accordingly, we suggest the existence of a double movement. Childcare expansion – together with the retrenchment of compensatory income support policies – appears to provide further incentives for mothers to more readily accept low salaries in a service-based economy. It serves also to liberate mothers partially from social reproduction tasks, and it fosters the overall shift toward a dual earner model. The first movement suggests family policy expansion to be another tool to foster neoliberal capitalism. The second movement, in contrast, indicates that family policy expansion is instrumental in supporting working parents with young children, and helps to meet increasing care costs in a more gender-friendly context.

On the basis of our empirical data, the first movement seems to prevail over the second in a majority of high-income countries. Further, childcare usage is influenced by household income level in most countries; this magnifies the negative distributional effects of cutting compensatory income support policies. Family policy transformation in a context of welfare state retrenchment does not seem to significantly challenge long-standing class and gender inequalities, and, in the transition from the Fordist to the post-Fordist sexual contract, contributes in most countries to perpetrate these inequalities under new forms.

Keywords

family policies, welfare state, social reproduction, political economy

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