

Reconciling Work and Family in a Multi-Active Society¹

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“The so-called normal work situation was tailored to men who had a wife in the background to care of ‘everything else – children, meals, washing and cleaning, emotional equilibrium, everyday therapy, and so on” (Ulrich Beck, *The Brave New World of Work*, 2001, p. 58)

Introduction

The feminisation of the labour market and the persisting inequalities between men and women; precarisation at work; flexibilisation of work and working hours; the geographic movement of people; the diversification of family models, of parenthood and parenting systems; the aging population; the narrowing of intra-familial and community support networks; individualism and the quest for personal fulfilment; the value of children’s well-being; the reconfiguration of spatial and temporal borders by information and communication technologies — these are among the wide-ranging factors that make work-family articulation not only a problem faced by many people, but also a challenge that today’s societies must find a way to surmount.

Institutions and governments are aware of this. Already, in the 1990s, the European Commission placed on its agenda the topic of ‘reconciliation of work and family life’. The European Directive on parental leave adopted in 1996 — first formulated in 1983 — constituted a strong signal in the countries of the European Union². In Belgium, many policies were pursued, including — among others — measures regarding leave of absences for family (parental, paternity, caring for seriously ill relatives, etc.) or time entitlement/career pause reasons, and those involving support structures for early childhood or services titles that enable externalising certain domestic tasks.

Still, we must acknowledge that these measures are ultimately corrections to concrete problems with work-family articulation, but do not manage to provide a satisfactory, lasting overall solution. Why? Our argument is that these measures do not address the problem’s root causes, that is, the way that productive functions (production of goods and services necessary to existence) and reproductive functions (the biological reproduction of humanity and its workforce) are societally given shape and

¹ This article is based on, and extends, the one published in *la Revue de l’Observatoire* (Fusulier B., ‘Travail/Famille : un tandem possible ?’ [Work/Family: is balance possible?], *Revue de l’Observatoire*, 78, 2013, pp. 5–10). It is part of a review conducted in a collective effort led by Chantal Nicole-Drancourt and extended within the ARTS (Articulation vie professionnelle/vie familiale et recomposition des temps sociaux, or ‘Professional and family life articulation and reconfiguration of social time’) Network of the Association Française de Sociologie (French Sociological Association).

² Fusulier B., ‘The European directive: making supra-national parental leave policy’, in Moss P. and Kamerman S. (Ed.), *The politics of parental leave policies. Children, parenting, gender and the labour market*, The Policy Press, Bristol, 2009 pp.243-258.

direction, which we call the work-family regime. At present, we are not only witnessing the erosion of labour society³ but a related crisis in the work-family regime.

The work-family regime in the labour society

To follow the analysis by Chantal Nicole-Drancourt⁴, in all labour societies 'invented' at the end of the 19th century, the mobilisation of the labour force to work was built around a common social norm: employment of a lone individual (man or woman), stripped of all relationship constraints, marital and familial. This 'producer' figure imposed thus implies that another figure exists, the 'carer', obliged in return to keep time available for the daily activities related to the caring for and reproduction of people. As men are historically defined as the head of family (*pater familias*) whose assumed traits are self-affirmation, technical ability, rationality and strength, it is men that are primarily assigned to the productive sphere and paid work. By contrast, as women have historically been considered sentimental beings whose virtues shine in service and caring relationships, women take primary responsibility for the family sphere and non-paid work. These naturalist fundamentals institutionalise a work-family articulation model (the 'male breadwinner and female carer model' formalised by Rosemary Crompton⁵) and justify the subordination of women (particularly of mothers), as well as justifying the occupation of 'feminine' secondary jobs in which career opportunities are few and working hours atypical.

Thus, the work-family regime in labour society is constructed on the basis of a dissociation between work and family, a hierarchisation (employment first and foremost) and sex-based division of labour (employment first for men, domestic work first for women). Based on this regime, institutions were designed in a way that is functionally coherent, yet at the same time very unequalitarian in terms of gender.

The current impasses

Today, this system is being questioned for both its values and its practices. In particular, with the feminisation of the labour market and the legitimate demand for true equality between the sexes, the very bases of the system are destabilised, which, consequently, renders the institutions of labour society unsuitable for reacting to the scope of this 'silent revolution'⁶. The problem for many people becomes an impossible double burden (mostly, but not only, for working women and mothers) as soon as the activities connected to employment and to family (to say nothing of civic activities) become too much to handle in certain circumstances and at certain points during the lifetime. Whether or not they hold educational credentials or are in a relationship, many active parents overwhelmed by their double burden look for solutions to fulfil all of their tasks. These needs for adjustment are found in many mothers who are trapped by multiple engagements (the need to take time for a newborn child, the need to re-balance one's time following a redundancy or the end of a marital relationship, the

³ Castel R., *Les Métamorphoses de la question sociale*, Fayard, Paris, 1995.

⁴ Nicole-Drancourt C., 'Donner du sens aux réformes. De l'équation sociale fordiste à la nouvelle équation sociale : L'enjeu des réformes dans l'ordre du genre' [Giving direction to reforms. From the Fordist social compact to the new social equation: The challenge of reforms to the gender system], *Habilitation thesis to supervise research*, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris, 2011. <http://tel.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-00637699/en/>.

⁵ Crompton R., *Restructuring gender relations and employment: the decline of the male bread winner*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999.

⁶ Méda D., *Le temps des femmes. Pour un nouveau partage des rôles*, Flammarion, Paris, 2001.

need to care for a parent who is aging and losing independence, the need to undertake professional training, etc.), and are at the root of complex life paths — that is, of dangerous periods of employment precariousness. These needs and paths potentially concern all of today's men and women. Neither are they concentrated any more in any particular period of life, but are distributed throughout the lifespan and therefore suppose a 'life course' approach.

In this context, true balance between work and family is impossible. And it will remain so as long as 'we'⁷ continue to think of work and family as 'two separate worlds'⁸ and minimise other socially useful activities — including those that fall into the category of care work performed in the private sphere — in the name of work. But everything happens as though 'we' remained prisoners of the world of yesterday: 'we' have trouble breaking free of the framework in which employment is the vector for social integration; we have trouble thinking of non-employment in ways other than as insurance (unemployment, illness and disability, retirement) or aid (social services) matters. The words used express well the manner in which 'we' perceive the 'social world'. For example, a person is called inactive if he or she is not present in the labour market, even though he or she may be deeply invested in following his or her children's schooling, in civic labour, etc. And when 'we' grant maternity, paternity or parental leave, 'we' give permission with reference to paid work (and not a recognition of a social investment with reference to care work).

Dare to imagine a new work-family regime

From the subject of work-family regime emerges a profound change that reaches the foundations of our society. One initial step toward supporting this change might be to take seriously the notion of 'decent work' promoted by the International Labour Organization⁹. It is not solely a question of having access to employment that is fairly remunerated and coupled with social protection (which is, of course, of primary importance), but also that this employment (and the work it involves) addresses the aspirations of the people doing it, and is not physically, psychologically or socially destructive. Decent work must ensure personal development, high-quality family engagement and civic participation. In so doing, the concept of decent work draws attention to the need to find balance between work and the other dimensions of personal and social life. However, it constitutes only one part of the new social model. It does not yet ensure full public recognition of socially useful activities, particularly care activities in the private sphere. To transform labour society into a multi-active society founded on a new combination of socially useful activities without any of them being hegemonic or exclusive to one sex or the other¹⁰, it is important that the State, meaning the authority that defines and administers the democratically founded social contract, support multi-activity with a logic of social investment. For example, we might not give parental leave any longer, but rather remunerate parental work using public money, because it contributes both to the well-being of individuals and to the production of a common good.

Employment would remain a linking activity for socioeconomic integration, but it would be redefined in relation to other activities that democratic society judges worthy of recognition and support. Here

⁷ 'We' refers to the dominant symbolic universe.

⁸ Kanter R.M., *Work and Family in the United States: a Critical Review and Agenda for Research and Policy*, New York, Russel Sage Foundation, 1977.

⁹ <http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/decent-work/lang-en/index.htm>

¹⁰ See Fusulier B., Nicole-Drancourt Ch. *Pursuing Gender Equality in a "Multi-Active Society"*, *Global Dialogue*, Vol. 5, no. 1, 2015, pp. 30-31.

there would be a democratic decision to finance — via economic redistribution and, consequently, the State — different kinds of extra-employment work, which is to say, socially useful activities, such as parental and filial work and forms of civic engagement. The labour market would still be a key factor in multi-activity, as much for men as for women. A voluntarism-type policy would be made explicit, in order to avoid turning multi-activity into a trap for the latter. Inactivity or non-employment would become rare. The formula that already exists in Belgium of ‘paid time credit system’¹¹, may serve as a reference for supporting a multi-active policy (even as we recalibrate and develop it: types of ‘time credit’, modalities of use, remuneration, etc.). The combination of private and public revenues may vary over the course of the lifetime. Programme flexibility would be a watchword, while keeping in mind constraints linked to the good organisation of paid labour: agents of social dialogue would take hold of this subject. Businesses and working environments could integrate work-family articulation into their organisational plans. The State would oversee the support of secure transitions and the links between work, family and citizenship, and lifelong learning would be generally available.

Fictitious example of a life course in a multi-active society

Following his master’s degree in economics, Paul, an only child, obtains a job in an insurance company. Single at the time, he dedicates 50 hours per week to his paid employment (and in so doing, contributes to his time savings account). At 27, he enters a relationship with Laetitia, a full-time nurse. Two years later, they have a child. Paul takes (obligatory) ‘paternity time credit’ of fifteen days, and Laetitia (obligatory) ‘maternity time credit’ of three months, which she extends with twelve months of full-time ‘parental care time credit’ combined with twice-weekly two-hour training sessions in nursing care, to maintain and further her professional skills. When she resumes her hospital work full-time, Paul takes 18 months of half-time ‘parental care time credit’ (without the obligation to undergo job training, because his half-time presence in his job ensures that his professional skills and knowledge are maintained). One year later, they have a second child, and in the same way, they use the time credit scheme once again. Following a restructuring, Paul loses his job, and he is unemployed for several months, which he takes advantage of to undertake a three-month financial statistics training course, at the end of which he begins a new job in a bank. To support him in this job, his father, 58, employed in a metalworking company, requests a 24-month half-time ‘descendant care time credit’ to take care of his grandchildren.

Then, Paul and Laetitia work for five years at 80% time, combined with a ‘parental care time credit’ to cover the remaining 20%. They resume their full-time professional work and, in accordance with company policy, Paul may telecommute one day per week from his home. Two years later, Laetitia’s mother passes away in a car crash, and her father has a serious heart attack, leaving him disabled. She decides to take an ‘elder relative care time credit’, 20% for six months, at the end of which she returns full-time to her nursing job. A few years later, Paul and Laetitia separate. In the face of the breakup’s brutality, Laetitia needs to take stock of her life, and takes three months of ‘time credit for personal needs’. Paul reuses a 25% time ‘parental care time credit’ for a year, in order to more closely support the schooling of one of his children, of whom he has alternating custody and who is in danger of dropping out of school.

Their children become independent. Paul and Laetitia, each of whom have found partners once again, continue working full-time in their professions. In her fifties, Laetitia takes a half-time ‘education time credit’ for one year,

¹¹ Time credit scheme has been promoted in 2002 in the private sector as a way to increase the quality of life with a specific emphasis on its relevance for ensuring a better work-family balance. It is a social drawing right, not an individual time accumulation scheme, although the latter could be a complementary measure. See Deven F., The Belgian career break / time credit system. A life course approach to ensure work-family balance, 2011 | <http://www.familyperspective.org/egmb/GP7-BelgianTimeCreditSystem.pdf>
Fusulier B., Articulating work and family? The gendered use of institutional measures, *Review of Leave Policies and Related Research - Employment Relations Research series* (ed. Moss P.), no. 102, 2009, pp. 14-31.

to complete a diploma in hospital management that will enable her to take a coordinator position, in which she will finish out her professional career full-time.

Paul and his second spouse, a teacher, decide at 56 and 54 years of age to temporarily reduce their time spent on their professions and devote one day per week to a social organisation supporting the integration of recent immigrants, through a 'civic time credit' of one year, renewable. Promoted to a management position in his bank, Paul does not renew his time credit and dedicates himself strongly to his new job. Five years later, he resumes an 'elder relative care time credit' for three months at half time, which he extends by one month at full time thanks to his time savings account, to support his mother, a widow for several years, in the last months of her life. He finishes his professional career at 80% time as a trainer of young recruits in his bank, taking one day per week of 'descendant care time credit' to support his children in their parental duties and professional lives.

This fictitious example underlines the way in which along the course of a rather typical life, work, time credit, and training can alternate and combine, at the same time as schemes specific to professional work are in place (flexible working hours, telecommuting, time savings account, etc.).

Conclusion

The challenge of work-family articulation is a way to analyse the limits of our current societal organisation. To respond to it, it is not enough to establish corrective measures; we must reimagine the system of work-family articulation by referring to a scenario showing another normativity: the organisation of a multi-active society. This scenario is still to be refined, and it is a utopian ideal as of now. However, it is not fantasy, because movements in this direction already exist.

Yet several questions of formidable complexity, to which we must respond, remain open. For example: how to determine the monetary 'value' of work outside employment, without at the same time damaging the 'value' of paid labour? What would be the source of financing for the various types of 'time credit'? How to ensure 'social drawing rights' (social investments through time credit formulas in the abovementioned case) without destabilising the organisation of professional employment? Would a multi-active society be financially sustainable by the State (or even beneficial for public finances)? Would it be effective and efficient enough to keep going in the context of interdependences between societies and international economic competitiveness? And more. An interdisciplinary approach to the scenario is thus shown to be essential. It would also be useful to discuss this type of scenario with the knowledge gained from studies on the economy of solidarity¹² and universal allowance¹³.

Whatever the case, today it is necessary, even urgent, to create an outline for a different society, in view of planning the measures to take so that we can surpass the impasses of today and contribute, as a society, to the common good and to the development of the well-being of people.

¹² Laville J.L., Bélanger P.R., Boucher J., Lévesque B., *L'économie solidaire : une perspective internationale* [The solidarity economy: an international perspective], Desclée de Brouwer, Paris, 1994.

¹³ Vanderborght Y., Van Parijs P., *L'allocation universelle* [Unconditional basic income], La Découverte (Repères n°412), Paris, 2005.