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Recensioni

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The debate on the person-society link, namely, the significance of structural opportunities and constraints versus individual preferences and intentions, has a long tradition in the social sciences. This debate has recently taken a further turn within sociology in response to increasingly popular theories of “individualisation” and “reflexive modernity.” It has been ignited in the women’s employment literature by Hakim’s “Preference Theory,” which, in contrast with dominant feminists views, emphasises the role of women’s heterogeneous sex-role preferences and work orientations in shaping their family-employment careers and, in turn, their life chances.

Crompton’s book joins this old-new debate by addressing the reconfiguration of work and family life, one of the most important changes undergone by advanced societies in the second half of the twentieth century. As well known, this reconfiguration has been accompanied by changes in many spheres: in women’s behaviours, with their increasing entry and permanence in the labour market throughout the period of family formation; in (to some extent) the behaviour of men, who now devote more time to unpaid domestic and care work; in gender relations, attitudes and norms; in employment relations and organizational contexts; in public policies; and in the age structure of the population. Also well-known is how persons and couples build their careers and their families and allocate their time between paid and unpaid work, and how this allocation is gender – and class – structured, with important implications both at the micro and macro level. At the micro level, these varying work-family arrangements affect levels of individual and family income, autonomy, stress, correspondence between “desired” and “realised” goals (in terms of number of children, type of labour market participation and career progression, amount of time for the family and for leisure etc). At the macro level, because different micro work-family solutions affect employment, fertility and poverty rates, they not only imply different profiles of inequalities but also different levels of tax revenues, that is, of welfare and social-economic sustainability.

Crompton’s book analyses changes in the work-family articulation through four important lenses which, I believe, make the book particularly valuable. First, drawing on Glucksmann’s concept of the “total social organisation of labour,” Crompton looks at the interdependence between the various forms of work (paid or unpaid; production or reproduction) and the various institutions in which such work is performed (the formal or informal labour market, the family, the state). In analysing the gender division of labour as a whole, Crompton mainly uses conceptual devices, theories and empirical material derived from the feminist literature, without, however, ignoring the mainstream literature, especially when she deals with changes in the world of employment. Second, she looks at both gender and class, two dimensions of stratification which are closely interconnected and which, in contrast to individualisation-based arguments, still discriminate among attitudes, behaviours and life opportunities and outcomes. Third, Crompton

ton builds analytical frameworks which comprise both material and cultural factors. As non-neoclassical rational choice economists and sociologists claim, women do make choices on the basis of their preferences and their human capital investments, but their choices are embedded within an array of social, economic, institutional and normative arrangements. These arrangements not only delineate “concrete” opportunities and constraints but they also define normality models. In economic terms, norms affect both preferences and constraints via intrinsic or extrinsic motivation. Put in more sociological terms, preferences are socially structured. This means that individuals are not only guided by different material opportunities, different positive beliefs about their probability of success, and different individually-based instrumental rational calculations. They also use “cognitive rationality”, and they are also influenced by moral and socially-negotiated views about right and proper behaviours. Finally, Crompton uses a cross-country comparative approach in this book. In line with her theoretical framework in which the macro context plays a crucial role in shaping individual and couples’ choices, she compares Britain against countries with different welfare regimes: namely, France, Norway, Finland and the United States. Moreover, she draws on both qualitative and quantitative data to show that an integration rather than a “war” between methodologies and perspectives can generate better understanding of social change and of adequate policy responses.

The structure and contents of the book well illustrate the above-mentioned distinctive features of Crompton’s study. The first chapter provides an overview of changes in women’s employment, the family, gender and care norms, the gender division of labour and the post-fordist world of “work,” and discusses the main theoretical approaches taken to account for such changes. In particular, the author critically examines the “cultural turn” and the “individualisation turn” in social theory, with their emphases on “choices” and on the “individualised” construction of the self and of the life course in late modernity. Crompton’s position in this debate is made clear: individual freedom and heterogeneity of preferences, she argues, have certainly increased in recent decades, but social structure still matters. Indeed, although the ideology of domesticity has persisted everywhere beyond the decline of the male-breadwinner family, its strength and its effect on women’s and couples’ family-work arrangements, and thus on women’s, men’s (and children’s) “welfare,” varies significantly across classes and across countries. The following three chapters focus on the British case and draw on data from the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey and on qualitative data from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) 2001-2002 research on “Organisations, Careers and Caring” consisting of interviews with men and women at all organisational levels up to middle management in three service sectors (retail banking, supermarket retail and local government). More precisely, chapter two starts with a brief historical description of the emergence of the “modern family” in Britain, with its gender assumptions (the bourgeois ideology of “separate spheres” and of female purity and selflessness) and with its economic and social assumptions. Then chapter two moves to analysis of changes in attitudes to the family, gender roles and mother’s employment, and changes in behaviour regarding the distribution of market work between couples. It emerges that, although gender attitudes have generally become less “traditional,” class differences still persist in both attitudes and behaviours: which raises the question as to whether “the class distribution of apparent

preferences is in fact more of a rationalisation of the constraints of class-related inequalities” [p. 27].

Chapter three focuses on the effect of post-fordist workplace changes, and on the impact of the still prevailing ideology of domesticity on men’s and women’s career progressions. In particular, Crompton uses items from the BSA survey and some parts of the qualitative interviews of the JRF project to explore how promotions aspirations and work-life conflict vary by sex and class. She shows that the pressure of high-performance management practices towards long working hours and work intensification has a clear gender – and class-impact, because it makes it difficult for people with caring responsibilities to be promoted and it increases work-life stress. Tensions between caring responsibilities and career success cut across classes and types of organisation, even though they appear to be lower in “family-friendly” organisations with “individualised” promotion structures, while they are higher in some groups (aspiring managerial and professional women and men in routine and manual occupations).

Chapter four further explores the changing nature of employer-employee relations, together with developments in government and employer policies affecting work-life articulation. Crompton uses BSA data on average hours worked per week by sex and presence of children, on couples’ work-hours strategies, and on their association with different levels of work-life conflict, to show that some employer practices, such as performance-related pay or, above all, pressure to work longer hours, have a negative influence on the ability to combine family with work responsibilities. She concludes that the extent to which public policies constrain employer behaviour is crucial for work-family articulations, thus preparing for the analyses and the discussions that form the remaining part of the book.

Indeed, by using ISSP data, chapter five and six place the British case within a cross-country framework which evidences how different institutional and cultural contexts affect attitudes and behaviours. More in detail, in chapter five Crompton analyses how full and part-time employment and the associated level of work-life conflict vary by sex and country. She finds that everywhere longer working hours entail higher reconciliation conflicts, but that these conflicts are less marked in those countries, such as those of Scandinavia, where the support for parental responsibilities is generous and universal. However the case of France, where family policies are good, work hours relatively short but work-life conflict relatively high, suggests that state policies are important but are only part of the picture. Also crucial is the cultural dimension.

Chapter six examines the other side of the “total organisation of labour:” that is, the gender division of domestic work and gender role norms. It emerges that state policies do not affect, in general, the gendered allocation of housework and that only in France is such distribution associated with levels of work-life stress. Attitudes seem more important: low domestic traditionalism means a lower work-life conflict and greater women’s happiness. Also the evidence from Portugal, where female full-time employment is relatively high but traditionalism in gender role attitudes and housework behaviour predominates, suggests that “the strength of gender role traditionalism seem to be more important than the impact of material factors – the hours spent in market work, the resources brought into the household – that have been demonstrated to have an impact on the gendered allocation of domestic work more generally” [p. 209].

In chapter seven the discussion returns to the issue of “choice” and “class.” Crompton shows that the effect of motherhood on women’s labour market attachment is class – but also institutional-shaped. Indeed, low-educated low-class women tend everywhere to reduce working hours or withdraw from the labour market when they have young children, compared to women with high educations and advantaged occupational groups. Also, everywhere individuals of lower occupational status are more traditional in their gender attitudes. However, class inequalities are stronger where policies in support of dual-earner families are weaker. This suggests that social structure still matters and that “theories of individuation and ‘choice’ in respect of women’s employment have the effect of systematically removing from critical examination the embedded practices and institutions that reproduce inequalities” [p. 185].

Finally, in chapter eight Crompton brings together the main empirical findings and theoretical debates outlined throughout the book in order to draw some policy conclusions. Policies based solely on preferences, she argues, tend to reproduce inequalities because they fail to consider that preferences are socially structured and that there are unjust background conditions and powerful normative assumptions within which family-employment choices are made. In order to reduce class and gender inequalities it is therefore necessary to promote encompassing social policies and generous universal support for dual-earner families. However, the cases of France and Portugal demonstrate that cultural factors shaping the domestic division of labour are also crucial. Moreover, given that state policies directed at a more equal gender distribution of domestic and caring work have not been particularly successful, changing men (making “men more like women,” that is, encouraging them to be both workers and carers) is not a sufficient condition for achieving a better gender and class balance between work and family life. Crucial in this regard are employer practices and state labour market regulations, particularly in the field of working hours. This policy suggestion, with which Crompton ends her book, is quite original in the literature on employment and the family, where the attention has been typically focused on parenting policies.

By providing a comprehensive, well-written and clearly structured review of the most recent theoretical and empirical evidence, Crompton’s book is a very useful and interesting tool for any scholar interested in post-industrial rearrangements in the family-employment interface. I think, however, that three criticisms can be made of her book. The first concerns Crompton’s exclusive focus on the consequences of family-work type of arrangements in terms of stress. While this measure is certainly an interesting indicator of the degree of difficulty encountered by individuals in reconciling family with paid work, I believe that deeper discussion of other implications, such as those to do with poverty or fertility, would complete the picture. The second criticism concerns the lack of discussion on the effect of another important family change on caring needs, policy responses and families’ reconciliation strategies, namely the ageing of the population, which is also an ageing of the kinship network and, hence, an increase in caring demands. The third criticism is, in many respects, the other side of the coin of this ageing of the population: the role performed by grandparents, and more generally intergenerational-kinship relations, in helping women and couples with young children to cope with the new income and caring needs, and to which, in my opinion, Crompton pays too little attention. Although these last two criticisms are largely justified by

her focus on the British case, where the ageing of the population is less severe and family and kinship solidarity is weaker than other countries (such as the Mediterranean ones), more references to work in this area could have helpfully complemented her book.

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