

“Cherchez la femme”?

Women and the future of the welfare state¹

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Introduction

A new constellation of social needs pushes the question of care to the center of the welfare state’s agenda. Women, the traditional care-givers, massively entering into the workforce, the changing values and gender norms, the proliferation of mono-parental family arrangements, the rapidly ageing populations and increasing numbers of dependent elderly, the lowering fertility rates, all of these give evidence of what some have labeled the ‘care crisis’. And although the old welfare state is very likely the main trigger of most of the changes (just another illustration of the untiring workings of unintended consequences in the social world), it has admittedly been inadequate to respond to them. In fact, for the new set of questions traditional social protection answers seem plainly innocuous.

In most cases, adaptation has been slow and tentative, and, in any case, mediated by the usual country-variation culprits: welfare state design, cultural and socioeconomic factors, and economic, social and political institutions. However, in the last couple of decades, a new welfare state thinking has emerged that attempts to make sense of the new social needs, outlining causal connections and figuring out the interventions that can best respond to the identified needs. For

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example, the traditional emphasis on income maintenance has been replaced or complemented by a new emphasis on service provision, mirroring what has been labeled as the ‘activation turn’ of the welfare state (Kerstenetzky 2012; Bonoli 2014). This new emphasis, in turn, reflects the belief that enhancing aggregate productivity more than directly securing wellbeing should be the commitment of the new welfare state in an era of untamed uncertainty.

Still, what is sometimes presented as a coherent set of ideas actually hides important variation: more accurately, we should be talking about different ways of engaging with this new thinking. As Morel, Palier and Palme (2012) point out, we may nowadays identify at least three distinct variants of the so-called social investment perspective (SIP): a neoliberal ‘make work pay’ welfare, a make-work-pay-plus-targeted-service-provision ‘third way’ welfare, and a social democratic activation-oriented universal-service-provision-plus-social-security welfare³. All of them share some premises with supply side economics, but the social democratic one is eclectic in that it also includes demand side concerns: it yields importance to income transfers and public employment in the social service sector.

My focus in this paper falls on the third version, the social democratic social investment perspective, and my discussion peruses the prospects that it opens up for economic and political sustainability of the social democratic welfare state. So, in the first section, I briefly present the economic sustainability rationale of the SD social investment perspective, or SIP, for short. In the following two sections, where the core discussion of this paper stands, I go through arguments for the political sustainability of the welfare state based on the political economy of its core ‘work-family’ policies and investigation of different work-family regimes. My ultimate purpose is to see whether the female constituency is where hope lies as far as the continuance of the social democratic welfare state experiment goes, under the challenging circumstances of contemporaneity. In the final section, I discuss the main implications and challenges to the narrative here proposed.

The productivist welfare state: economic sustainability

³ A fourth variant might still be identified as a Bismarckian-style insider-outsider adaptation of workfare, but it is more a practice than a doctrine.

The emergence of a social investment perspective of the welfare state has been considered a ‘best response’ to the set of new sources of welfare insecurity that have become prominent since the early 1980s. A common list includes the technological revolution and the ensuing radical productive adjustments in industry, implying in work redundancies, the relative shrinking of the industrial sector, and the concomitant swelling of a service sector that must at once cater to the needs of the technology sector and the increasing demand for all kinds of consumer services. Admittedly, globalization has been a trigger to all that in that it extended market competition to the global scale and provoked convergence to the parameters of the new ‘knowledge economy’. Domestically, a major fallout has been the deterioration of labor markets, now increasingly dominated by the typically polarized jobs in the service sector, making the lack of skills – often associated with precarious contracts, low pay, and low unionization – an acute social risk and delivering long-term unemployment. Rising labor market inequality and in-work poverty has been the new and most prominent fallout.

Compounding the labor market insecurity are changes in the family: increasing divorce rates, multiple family arrangements, and the spread of mono-parental and single-member families. These promise to break down an age-old form of welfare guarantee, the male breadwinner-female caregiver implicit family contract. Also, women have been massively entering the labor market, further constraining the care supply pool. These changes have been accompanied by increasing care demands as populations age. Giving testimony to the resilience of the traditional gender norms, women cope by, e.g., postponing motherhood and lowering fertility rates, and showing precarious participation in the labor market, if not outright work abstinence, a condition that hits poor women the most. On the top of that, increasing socioeconomic endogamy, matching people with similar socioeconomic conditions, has reinforced societal segmentation and social inequalities. New sources of economic inequality and poverty, this time separating out well-off from poor women and driving in child poverty, have contributed to shape our contemporary societies.

In the face of labor market and family failures, welfare provision should be guaranteed by the welfare *state*, the third pillar of welfare provision. But, of course, the welfare state is under pressures of its own. On the one hand, for the state to jump in where markets and families are falling out it would need to be able to deploy additional resources. The discourse of income

maintenance would be certain to face resistance from taxpayers generally, and business in particular, on whose shoulders the additional bill would fall and who might respond by shrinking their ‘productive effort’. This is at least what tradeoff theories predict, although examination of social spending over the last three decades does not provide evidence of effective obstruction to expansion, defying ‘race-to-the bottom’ globalization theory, even while major social security institutional reforms were being implemented (Kerstenetzky 2012). But it would be surprising if the expansion went on indefinitely unchecked, especially when confronted with the increasingly dominant fiscalist and austerity discourses. On the other hand, while it is pretty clear where a major resistance to expansion would come from – the middle and upper classes on the finance supply side– it is not at all clear, in terms that make political sense nowadays, where support for the traditional income redistribution would come from (more on this in the next section). While postwar industrial welfare states rested on a clear-cut class-alliance logic, it is far from clear what the cleavages are that will give sense to and sustain a political alliance for the post-industrial welfare states of our times to do more of the same as the old one has traditionally done.

It is with its productivist turn that the social investment perspective aims to reduce the mentioned dissonance, modifying a winner-loser game into a win-win one. The strategy is to change the expenditure logic of the social state into an investment one. This translates into a hardcore of policies that while smoothing out various social inequities – in the opportunity structure, in the social and economic security spheres, in the welfare outcomes – promote economic activity and enhance productivity. Social policies are targeted to boost employment and qualification, an objective that under the social democratic version of the social investment perspective (the one I will be concerned with in this paper) goes hand in hand with social and economic security. Thus, a core argument is that unequal opportunities, besides being socially unjust, are a waste of valuable productive capacities and resources in view of increasing welfare demands. But the opportunity argument is accompanied by the proviso that in view of the uncertainty that characterizes the new knowledge economies, economic security is indispensable, not the least to avoid the divestment of human productive capacities. Under this narrative, background and foreground social justice become the shield and spear of (market-driven) economic progress.

Among the core policies are those directly related to the labor market, combining generous income benefits (e.g., unemployment benefits) with extensive activating up-skilling policies,

public employment in the social services sector and comprehensive quality education⁴. But the ones that will concern me here are those related to work-family reconciliation, which supports family life⁵. In terms of an investment perspective, external childcare promises to deliver two crucial results: it will facilitate mothers' employment (including full-time quality jobs with career perspectives) and enhance population quantity and quality, curbing the fertility decline and the backward educational start of children from low-income families. Population is an important economic factor, especially a highly productive one; in knowledge economies, it is what one needs in order to live up to the promise of high longevity with good living standards. Elderly care and parental leaves, other sorts of intervention that integrate the work-family package, are also instrumental to women's employment. They guarantee women some (opportunity) cost-free time for either work or care while keeping them active. Besides, social democratic SIP also advocates gender equality and is interested in the capacity of these policies to promote it: in addition to serving justice, gender equality has an investment component that is valuable from a productivist reasoning, as inequalities of conditions of all kinds are a waste of productive and creative capacities.

Characteristically, social democratic social investment is universalistic. Besides arguments based on public morality (social rights), the traditional rationale for universalism may be found in uncertainty (Kerstenetzky 2012), as in Richard Titmuss's social needs and social costs: as you do not know where and when bad chance will hit and you ignore where it comes from, the more extended prevention is the best protection you may provide for everyone. In the social investment narrative, universalism is also supported by arguments of expediency: if you put people from different social backgrounds together in the consumption of public goods, you will equalize or diminish their well-being and capability gaps (a conspicuous concern here is with quality) while being able to collect more resources to finance public provision and benefiting from some incentive effects. For one, children can be seen as a social externality, the 'raising' costs of which are privately borne (Esping-Andersen 2009): sharing the costs of children with their parents seems the right thing to do to, no matter the social background, if children are

⁴ A comprehensive overview of the approach is found in Morel, Palier & Palme eds. (2012). The main influence comes from Esping-Andersen's more recent work (1999, 2002, 2009).

⁵ A full range of SIP's work-family policies would include, besides elderly care, childcare, parental leave, part time work policies with appropriate schedules for daycare and preschools, availability of after-school care, and leaves that are decently paid and long (but not too long) (Morgan 2012).

socially desired as they should be from a social investment perspective. For another, the sharing of cultural and social capital among children of different backgrounds who join public childcare centers and schools seems an important influence (especially) on the life chances of those of them deprived of stimulating family and social environments – with expected positive aggregate results. In economic terms, universalism seems an efficient strategy, in line with the social investment economic rationale.

Living up to the promise of improving employment and productivity gives the social investment social state the prospect of economic sustainability. A growing and productive population will guarantee the sound fiscal base needed to finance the welfare state's costly but efficient redistributive policies. That's more or less the investment story.

Women-centered welfare state: political sustainability

A similar argument might be made concerning the social state's political sustainability under the auspices of the social investment perspective. Here one needs to show that the same set of policies that deliver economic sustainability could – actually should – also deliver political sustainability. The major premise is that, being the immediate beneficiaries of the work-family policies, women might constitute the bulk of the social investment social state's political support. One question to address is women's transition from, say, a 'being-in-itself' condition (identity) to a 'being-for-itself' (self-consciousness) and then to a 'being-for-others' (political action), a path, to freely paraphrase Sartre, one would expect political agents to have traveled. In this section, I first provide the abstract situational logic and then set out to amass what stylized facts are known that testify to women's political support for the set of work-family policies of the SIP, care in particular.

The multiplication of vulnerabilities in the contemporary era has had a correspondence in the fragmentation of the political support for the welfare state. Unionized industrial workers, in alliance first with farmers and then with urban white-collar workers accommodated within a political coalition, typically led by social democratic parties, made up the political base of the old social security social state, which then responded with a set of policies that mainly addressed the social needs of these groups. This sociopolitical stratification and the full-employment domestic economies to which it corresponded is nowhere to be found anymore: the radical economic and

societal changes of the last decades have worked their effects on the politics of the welfare state, blurring the usual class cleavages and opportunities for cross-class alliances. Industrial workers are a shrinking lot among workers, and have been subject to differentiated conditions and contracts, against the backdrop of increasing global competition for productivity gains within the industrial sector; the swelling of the service sector has multiplied heterogeneity of conditions and situations among workers, rendering solidarity across the board less likely; fierce market competition, tertiarization, and increasing heterogeneity are known factors behind the weakening of unions. The traditional constituencies of parties that have strongly supported the welfare state seem to be evaporating (Morgan 2012, 2013, Bonoli & Reber 2010).

To the extent that the equation of the new social needs is the social investment perspective, and contains work-family policies, it seems reasonable to assume that their women-friendliness shall appeal to women voters in the first place. While women are not a homogeneous lot, it seems plausible to assume that because of gender differences (i.e., different social representations of women's and men's social roles) the degree of heterogeneity between women and men is higher than among women as far as policy priorities go. Different shared experiences and social expectations as they crystallize in social norms – for example, the norm that women should care – account for the bulk of gender differences. As women are decidedly entering the labor market (an important identity change), the question of care and other employment obstacles become prominent concerns for them. Also, as partners with men in the business of 'breadwinning', women began to challenge the objective substratum of age old and resilient care norms (a consciousness change). Politically, several consequences seem reasonable to expect: first, that women's issue priority give pride of place to women-friendly policies, among them work-family policies; and second, to the extent that the left parties are the ones that traditionally advocate women-friendly policies, women are expected to vote for them (perhaps even more than men are?); third, women need women representatives and more generally political women for their perspective and concerns to be brought to the political sphere; fourth, and as a condition to the former, there should be alignment of issue priority between political women and the mass female public; and fifth, there may be an opportunity for a new gender-generation political alliance at the mass public level between the elderly and care-giver-worker women, making political women potential representatives of the elderly as well. In sum, women may be the new protagonists of an updated version of the classic power resources theory of the welfare state

(Bonoli & Reber 2010), a new political force that will drive most of the needed changes (an action change).

To what extent is all this true, and if so, how is it happening?

Fortunately, the empirical literature⁶ on many of these problems is prolific and has been growing, especially as from the late 1990s and the 2000s. Its remote origins are to be found both in the welfare state and the feminist scholarships. Since the rehabilitation of the welfare state from its ‘patriarchal’ exile⁷, undertaken by revisionist feminist scholars starting from the end of the 1980s (Hernes 1987⁸), which in turn converged with the slow approximation of mainstream welfare state analysis to family and gender issues (Esping-Andersen 1999, 2002, 2009), there has been increasing attention to the intersect (Borschorst & Birte 2002). My interest is to assess whether political sustainability of the SIP is a reasonable expectation in light of the known facts.

From Hannah Pitkin’s (1967) now classic discussion of representation, feminist scholars have picked up the categories of descriptive and substantive representation to make the case that women need other women (descriptive representation) for their substantive interests and priorities to be advanced in the representative spheres of the political system (Philips 1995, 1998). This belief has been substantiated by an impressive amount of empirical work, and there seems to be evidence for many countries around the world (Campbell, Childs & Lovenduski 2009 is an overview). Also, coming from a study on Sub-Saharan Africa, there is indication of the positive influence of women’s political representation on women’s political engagement more generally (Barnes & Burchard 2012), lending support to the idea that to the extent their interests are echoing in the political sphere, politics is becoming more interesting for them. Other scholarship has emphasized the need for a critical mass of women for gender to make a political difference in representative bodies: something between 25-35 percent of parliament members (confirmed in Barnes & Burchard’s study, for literature overview see Childs & Krook 2008),

⁶ Unless otherwise noted, this is based on statistically representative samples of country data and econometric exercises.

⁷ To which it was confined by feminist “marginalization theories”: according to these, the welfare state was a form of patriarchal oppression of women. Having in mind the Scandinavian one, Hernes objected that the welfare state might be an instrument for the empowerment of women instead, as long as it improved their situation as workers, mothers, and citizens. See Orloff (1996) and Borschorst & Birte (2002) for a review. See also Pateman (1988) for the patriarchal welfare state view.

⁸ Famously, Hernes coined the term women-friendly state, “a state that would not force harder choices on women than on men, or permit unjust treatment on the basis of sex” (p.15), having in mind the Scandinavian one.

although some studies have also suggested that even with so-called ‘token’ levels of representation, the presence of women is still substantively felt even if not very effective (Taylor-Robinson & Heath 2003). And although it is parties on the left that have usually advanced these interests and perspectives, there remains a perceptible issue choice difference between political women and men within the same party even after controlling for other sources of variation, so that gender matters (Campbell, Childs & Lovenduski 2009).

Empirically, these interests have been shown to revolve around multiple welfare and women’s rights issues. There is substantial evidence for welfare issues salience ranging from support to education, health, family policies to women’s rights more generally for much of the developed world, but also for the developing one, especially India and Latin America (Bolzendahl & Brooks 2007, Gibson 2012, Taylor-Robinson & Heath 2003). Interestingly, a study on Kerala shows welfare issues salience also in participatory settings and even in the absence of a critical mass of women at the level of parliaments, so that redistribution is more effective whenever women are more politically engaged (Gibson 2012). Also, over the last three decades women’s interests have increasingly clustered around work-family policies with some overlap with gender equality concerns (Bolzendahl & Brooks 2007 review many of these papers). In fact, while women suffrage and women’s movements are widely perceived as important impetuses to postwar social welfare spending (Orloff 1996, Orloff 2010, Annesley 2007), the most conspicuous expression of which being the introduction of family policies in many countries already in the 1940s (family allowances, for one), increasing female political participation through voting and political representation over the last decades has been positively associated with and even a key factor for SIP-style spending and coverage rates of childcare and parental leave (Morgan 2012, 2013, Naumann 2012, Bonoli & Reber 2010).

The alignment of issue salience among political women and the mass female public has also been directly substantiated, backing the hypothesis that women vote for women⁹. On a general level, though, there seems to be significant superposition of ideological and gender factors (Campbell, Childs & Lovenduski 2009). Actually, there is considerable empirical support from rich countries for the thesis of a new gender political gap: traditionally conservative voters,

⁹But also that while generational influences seem to operate more intensely on the public, it is party affiliation that better illuminates attitudes at the level of the political elite, especially when it comes to the norm that women should participate politically (Campbell, Childs & Lovenduski 2009).

women have begun to shift to the left as from the 1980s and now have overcome men in their preference for left parties (Abendschon & Steinmetz 2014; Morgan 2012; Morgan 2013).¹⁰

An accelerating factor behind women's political participation and shifting political preferences is their flocking to the labor market starting in the 1970s, as many studies have shown (Stockemer & Byrne 2011; Bolzendahl & Brooks 2007; Abendschon & Steinmetz 2014). In this sense, urgent and increasing needs have inclined women to press for social services, thus constituting a new interest group which political women responded to the most: in fact, soaring economic participation rates were followed by increasing political participation, and these, in turn, are associated with growing welfare spending in many developed countries, including of a universalist kind (Bolzendahl & Brooks 2007; Orloff 1996). But it was usually left parties that led the expansion: although, historically, the relationship between left parties and unions and political/working women has not been linear¹¹, left parties were the first to encourage women's political participation and once in the parties, women were able to sensitize the party leadership to put women-friendly issues at the forefront of the party agenda (Naumann 2012; Morgan 2012; Barnes & Burchard 2012). Some studies bring evidence that right-of-center parties have started to follow suit (Naumann 2012; Morgan 2012, 2013), but the strength of the left seems to be a continuing influence (Bonoli & Reber 2010). In any case, such factors as the weakening of religious cleavages in the public sphere and increasing labor force participation may have pushed women's views towards left parties, social equality, gender egalitarian norms, and further support for social spending, for which evidence has also been provided (Morgan 2013; Naumann 2012). In particular, the strength of religious parties has been shown to be negatively associated with public spending levels in childcare (Bonoli & Reber 2010).

Finally, these behavioral and worldview changes that women underwent have recently started to enter the strategic calculations of political parties at large. While women-friendly policies, work-family in particular, are traditional pieces of the ideological mosaic of social democratic parties, the fact that female support became pivotal as more and more women turned out to vote (and mostly for the left) while traditional constituencies seemed to melt into the air, has pushed other

¹⁰Other political gaps referred to in the literature are women's smaller political interest and engagement, which still persist. See Chibber 2002 for comparative numbers around the world.

¹¹Some social democratic parties and unions in Europe, in the last century, looked at working women with diffidence, predicting lower wages for their male constituencies. This was not the experience of the Nordic countries, where women were already active in unions and parties from a very early time. (Bonoli & Reber 2010)

parties also to embrace these policies. In fact, the fierce competition for the female vote has boosted this agenda since the late 1990s¹²: European parties to the right of the political spectrum, but also those backward social democratic ones like the British Labor Party, started to deploy strategies such as recruitment of women, promotion of women to leadership, adoption of quotas and targets, and plain alteration of electoral platforms so as to encompass work-family policies (Morel et al. 2012; Morgan 2012; Morgan 2013; Naumann 2012). The case of the New Labor is conspicuous (Morgan 2012). In the 1997 watershed election, New Labor openly favored women candidates, thus succeeding in grabbing women's vote; while in Parliament, these women started a frantic process of legislation production in an amazing case of paradigm change that has dramatically altered the landscape of family policies in Britain. More generally, it has been shown that the growing competition for the female vote and related changes in electoral politics, being a consequence of powerful forces such as the growing private and public empowerment of women and the decline of religious and class identities, are the main political drivers behind recent changes in the welfare state towards the adoption of work-family policies (Morgan 2012).

It may be of additional interest to note that while some studies have found a strong competition in laggard welfare states between childcare policies and aging-related ones such as pension expenditure, suggesting generational cleavage as a feature of the new welfare state (Bonoli & Reber 2010), others have found that the proportion of the elderly in the population is strongly associated with women's representation (Bozendahl & Brooks 2007) – although in this case it was not clear whether it was because of women's greater sensitivity to the elderly's needs or to their own needs as care-givers and workers at once (ibidem). In any case, this latter study also found that political women alone exerted a high degree of influence on welfare state spending – only slightly less than the proportion of the elderly, a traditional welfare constituency, in the population did.

Women's preferences and outcomes: welfare state or culture?

¹² True, electoral competition for the female vote was a factor behind the progressive work-family policies championed by the social democratic party also in Sweden, a pioneer country in this policy area, as early as the 1970s (Morgan 2012).

The policy convergence promoted by electoral competition has not necessarily been towards the *social democratic* SIP. The latter includes a concern with gender equality that is not consensual across policy communities.

The marriage of the welfare regimes literature with welfare-friendly feminism gave birth to a better understanding of the variety of care regimes, framing of, and policy responses to the care crisis. In each country/regime, framing and policies were mediated by religious and cultural factors inherent in the welfare state architecture and dominant political discourses that would approach/set apart ‘women’s issues’ to/from a gender equality perspective. In fact, three distinct care regimes have been identified, ranging from maternalist to gender blind and gender equalizing, according to policies reinforcing women’s care roles, being mute to the division of unpaid labor within the household, or stimulating an equal division of work and care between women and men (see Orloff 1996 and Borchorst & Birte 2002 for literature overviews, Annesley 2007). This branch of the literature seems especially helpful to shed light on the contextual factors that help shape women’s actual political preferences and outcomes when it comes to work-family interventions.

On their side, feminist scholars warn that women-friendly policies do not perfectly overlap with gender interests, gender equality in particular (Orloff 1996; Borchorst & Birte 2002). The full agenda of gender equality is ambitious: it asks that at least three inequalities be redressed, namely, in political representation, where women are less present than men; in the labor market, where women find lower pay and more difficult access to quality jobs and positions; and in the family, where the bulk of unpaid work still falls on them. Different welfare state normative models (in that they directly attend to labor market and family failures) are sensitive and respond differently to these demands. For example, some may emphasize women as citizen-workers (the so-called adult-worker or double-earner model), while others favor women as citizen-caregivers, and still others push for equality in paid and unpaid work. Each model has its own set of women-friendly policies and of course the results will vary according to the model it undertakes to promote: citizen-workers, citizen-caregivers, or citizen-workers-and-caregivers (see Orloff 1996; Fraser 1997, cited in Borchorst & Birte 2002). So, while the first may deliver some equality in the market (equality of participation) as its package of work-family policies stresses mothers’ employment (childcare and parental licenses), the citizen-caregiver model caters to stay-at-home

mothers as it guarantees them rights to social protection and income benefits related to having children¹³, and the third model responds to equality at both the market place and within the family, as it not only facilitates women's employment but also tries to balance unpaid domestic work, guaranteeing father's leaves and other incentives for more extended paternal take up of parental leaves, in addition to flexible work time for women and men. The full-fledged third model, which may appeal to social democrats and feminists alike, is nowhere to be found though: the Nordic countries, which are closest to its realization, displaying the highest rate of political women in the rich countries, still struggle with their labor market (men in the private sector, women in the public one) and household asymmetries (women spending more hours doing housework than men, and taking most of the parental leave) in spite of having the most extended range of gender equality measures within their women-friendly policy repertoire (Orloff 1996; Borchorst & Birte 2002). In fact, some studies have shown that cultural norms still weigh heavily (Busdig, Misra & Boeckmann 2012; Tamilina & Tamilina 2014).

Empirically, what do we know about the connection between welfare state design and gendered outcomes? Of course it all depends on how we frame the outcomes, equality in paid and unpaid work being one possibility. So, while childcare provision and parental leave have been positively associated with mothers in the labor market, in Keck's and Saraceno's (2013) empirical work, Geist (2003) amassed evidence that the usual regime trichotomy actually impacts on the division of labor at home, a core variable for gender equality perspectives. In particular, this division is shown to be more equal in the Nordic European countries and less so in familist continental Europe. Also Tamilina and Tamilina (2014) show that symmetry in the allocation of domestic work between men and women is achieved via two kinds of public intervention, one affecting values (education and labor market policies), the other facilitating compliance (childcare or poverty alleviation policies), and that the exclusive use of one of them is negatively consequential. Mothers' higher earnings are shown to respond to the presence of childcare and leaves, provided a supportive culture is also present (non-male breadwinner/female caregiver), as noted by Budig, Misra & Boeckmann (2012).

¹³ Other related policies are flexible, part time employment, long periods of maternity leave and contributions to pension schemes for women who have undertaken caring responsibilities (Annesley 2007).

So welfare state regimes seem to matter for gendered outcomes, even while it is not clear to what extent they are shaping preferences or merely reflecting/reinforcing certain cultural views already in place. Perhaps the two causations are at work. In fact, an element to support the hypothesis that the welfare design is a considerable influence is provided by empirical work comparing countries in terms of both individual level differences and country level contextual factors, finding that the latter matter even more than the former: contextual factors, welfare state design included, have been shown to play a more important role than couple level dynamics¹⁴ in the division of household's unpaid work (Geist 2003). Of course, we cannot dismiss culture's influence, since cultural factors operate at both individual and country levels, but in the latter case their influence seems to be filtered (reinforced/thwarted) through powerful macro-institutional factors that can be tracked, welfare design and politics included. In fact, Morgan's analysis of European countries, of diverging family traditions, provides thick-description evidence of recent path shifting towards work-family policies undertaken by recalcitrant conservative welfare states – but also that traditional culture somehow managed to fight back. In fact, Germany and the Netherlands, two laggard countries in this respect, moved decidedly towards the promotion of women's employment in the 2000s, but the aim of gender equality was less of a factor than seemingly consensual demographic (plunging fertility rates, in the case of Germany) and fiscal concerns (soaring pension expenditures, in the case of the Netherlands) (Morgan 2013; Naumann 2012). Although gender equality has not surfaced in the dominant public discourse in these countries, the participation of political women, especially at the executive level, was crucial for the changes to come about, as was their ability discursively to couch equalizing practices in terms other than gender egalitarian ones (Naumann 2012). Some observers see in the recent transitions from the male-breadwinner to the adult-worker model a window of opportunity for women's political agency and the advancement of the gender equality agenda (Annesley 2007).

As a last point, while care seems to be an important factor behind women's shedding from or asymmetric participation in the public space (market and politics)¹⁵, economic inequality, in itself a contextual factor, is still another one. And while the welfare state may detect the failure

¹⁴ Couples negotiate the allocation of time within the household.

¹⁵ E.g., lower pay and poorer access to desired job positions as a form of motherhood penalty; motherhood as a factor barring the access to leading positions within political parties.

and make up for it in the case of care, economic inequalities present a subtle and insidious challenge when they also take on the form of a *solution* to the care problem.

In general, the poorer of both sexes do more housework than the richer do, and this is also true of women (Heisig 2011). Part of the problem is unequal access to time-saving technologies, but the other part is economic inequalities, especially as they present themselves in poorly regulated job markets (*ibidem*). These find expression in the polarization that confronts well paid women/well-off families with poor women who do paid care for them, either indoors or in external facilities. In such circumstances, poor women join the consumption service labor market, where, in the absence of public provision, private childcare thrives and where they find precarious job insertion and low pay. Thus, in the regulation-lean liberal welfare states, private childcare is able to cater to all budgets. In fact, the seeming paradox is that in gender-blind regulation lean welfare states, such as the U.S., childcare coverage is almost as extended as it is in gender-equalizing regulation strong welfare states with a high level of public spending in childcare (Bonoli & Reber 2010). But in the former, it rests on a fundamental form of economic inequality, one which depresses poor women's economic prospects.

So it is possible to have extended childcare coverage with either public or private spending, and then to have mothers working across the board, but with care quality proportional to capacity to pay and roots in the precarious labor market attachment of poor women as distinctive features of the private option. Gender equality of economic participation may conflict with other egalitarian outcomes, including economic equality and giving children an equal quality early start across the board. Again, the welfare state design seems to matter, as it can exert some control over the labor market and provide quality social services, including opening the opportunity for better jobs to women entering in the labor market through the entrance gate of services such as childcare. On the dark side, though, it can alternatively make it more difficult to have all women on the same political side, especially when it works in tandem with economic inequalities.

Discussion

The social democratic social investment perspective has this vision of an enduring, life-long marriage between social justice and material progress. Much depends, both materially and symbolically, on the truth-content of the predicted economic consequences of its social policy,

which I took for granted in this paper, but much seems also to depend (though non-exclusively) on women's recognizing their interests in it and politically mobilizing to promote it.

While the women friendliness of social investment strategies varies across care regimes, I have tracked some convergence to work-family initiatives in the recent reforms. But the seeming convergence hides a negotiation between progressive views and resilient cultural traits, making compromises and recourse to framing quite common strategies behind the advances. For the time being, productivism promises enhanced justice while power driven politics is delivering more substantively committed agendas. And women seem to be a critical liaison for the elective affinities to come about. But what if the chemical combination fails? What will happen if tradeoffs appear, and, maybe prior to that, what are the odds that these will appear?

As a first point I should note a number of paradoxes, whose solution seems to turn on the helping hand of the welfare state. To begin with, SIP's productivism means further commodification of citizens, an outcome that flies in the face of social democracy's classic commitment to decommodification. But the agenda seems to propose commodification to better decommodify, i.e., more and better labor market attachment of the citizens for the welfare state to afford the provision of more decommodified services, including, with increasing emphasis, care services. But, relatedly, the SIP undertakes to promote social justice to boost material advancement, i.e., capability enhancing social services to render the extant labor force more productive and creative. This seems to be the material condition for the possibility to keep it all going. A third alignment of seeming adversaries is that between individual or group interests and encompassing ones, which is done via the translation of women's interests into general ones, once care becomes the core of the SIP and the new frontier of equality (the classic banner of social democracy). And a fourth one seems to be that between power politics and ideological politics, when political democracy, via electoral competition for de-aligned votes as women's over the last decades, delivers social democratic outcomes. As long as social rights are electoral champions, and welfare state's normative pedagogy is a factor behind the formation of political preferences, this may come as less of a surprise.

Now, tensions are also to be expected. Commodification may be a nice material strategy to reach decommodification, but what about symbolic fallouts, such as the deepening of the market ethos? Also, what can be said of economic inequalities that are likely to come about whenever

the dominium of the markets is extended? This confronts social investment with social democracy. Moreover, social investment and feminism do not make a perfect match: the “difference” perspective, for one, claims the right of women to choose to care instead of work, an expectation that is behind the citizen-caregiver model I mentioned earlier. Relatedly, social democracy and feminism do not comfortably overlap: while social democracy ranks social equality first, (some versions of) feminism may give priority to difference instead, and these may conflict in actual life and make an alignment of interests and perspectives more unlikely among, say, women workers at both the lower and the upper ends of the labor markets for services (Orloff 2010). And, of course, I also discounted electoral demography as a respectable possible obstacle (Van Kersbergen & Vis 2013), even though the relationship between demographic groups and attitudes and political preferences is complex (Meuleman & Chung 2012).

Perhaps the *possibility* of deep alignments is all one may safely claim. Still, even being just a possibility, it is no small one. And if we take the long run we can see that the building of the century-old welfare state counted as much on improbable alignments (notably between capital and labor), and that much of the engineering was done after the fact, trying to cope with unintended consequences. After all, the art of the welfare state is the (incomplete) art of paradox-fixing. In any case, in view of the present challenging circumstances, the social democratic social investment seems a possibility we cannot afford to dismiss.

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