

BOOK REVIEW

Restructuring Family Policies: Convergences & Divergences. Maureen Baker. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006; xi + 297 pages; ISBN-13: 978-0-8020-8783-6; \$65.00 (cloth)

This book is a very thorough overview of the “restructuring” of family policies among countries that belong to the Organization for Economic and Cooperative Development (OECD). Author Maureen Baker first begins by outlining some of the major pressures on governments to re-define policies relating to families: international pressures, socio-demographic trends, national politics and the prevailing welfare regimes in each country. This forms the backdrop for her comparative analysis of the major family policy areas which follow: reproductive health and childbirth, work and parenthood, child welfare, social housing and income support, family breakdown and international migration. Her overall argument throughout is that globalization has a destabilizing effect on family policies which is attached to the gendered, 24-hour global employment model. While some governments have publicly approved of support for families in principle, their actual policies divert and, in some cases, undermine family stability—an environment which she links to the growing dominance of neo-liberalism.

One of Baker’s objectives is to locate those factors that have had the greatest impact on family policies in OECD countries. While her analysis enables her to outline and summarize those policy areas which are strengthened or eroded by governments, she stops short in providing a more sophisticated analysis of the overall trends and their relationship to the feminist political economy model she names as her framework at the outset of the book. For example, she notes that child welfare practices were improved in most of the jurisdictions she studied, as were policies like income tax deductions for childcare expenses for employed parents. On the other hand, she notes that universal family allowances have largely been eroded, as has direct public support for contraception. What is missing here is an analysis shaped by a feminist political economy discourse which locates these trends within a larger context to answer the questions: Why are certain kinds of family policies perceived as more favourable than others? Why is there divergence in some areas and convergence in others?

The author suggests that political pressure is one factor, but only seriously engages this debate in the chapter dealing with social housing and income support (Chapter 8) where she discusses the juxtaposition of the governing political parties and their respective bases of support in Australia and Canada in order to explain family policy restructuring in those two nation-states. The important role of political parties and community groups is otherwise given scant attention. In the latter case, community groups are only identified vaguely as

“mens’ rights” groups or feminist lobby groups, but rarely are specific examples to be found. This is a key critique of her work since an awareness and understanding of political parties and community groups who experience success in their advocacy efforts would have been a helpful contribution for all who wish to further an empowering family policy framework.

These theoretical critiques aside, *Restructuring Family Policies* is an extremely useful and highly readable narrative of family policies and approaches across a number of countries. Subsequently, this would be a useful text or companion for students in courses in the disciplines of social work, sociology, public policy and gender studies; as well as a strong foundational resource for researchers. Its use may not be limited to the academy, since community activists working in a number of family policy areas would also benefit from locating their work within the larger context that this book provides.

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