

## FAMILIES, WELFARE SYSTEMS AND 'THIRD WAY' CONTRADICTIONS

*Analysing families: morality and rationality in policy and practice.* Alan Carling, Simon Duncan and Rosalind Edwards, editors, 2002. London: Routledge; ISBN 0415250404, 303 pp., £22.99, paper.

A central aim of this book is to offer a clear analysis of the social processes underlying the purpose and function of present-day families. Another is to present a critique of 'third way' politics regarding the inappropriateness of this philosophy for families, due to what the authors' declare is a 'grave rationality mistake'. The book describes a situation of policies failing to achieve planned outcomes because they have failed to grasp the normative and moral purposes, dilemmas, and individual needs of real people, living real lives. Women's needs and purposes are particularly misunderstood and disregarded, especially in the way they are meant to interpret their role as mothers. In this vein, perspectives from UK society are presented alongside studies from a number of other western democracies, including the USA. There are also contributions from writers on the subject of 'elective families', where individuals form permanent relationships outside 'traditional/biological norms'. The book is an adventurous enterprise. Its many contributions offer a comprehensive overview of family contexts and family structures within current western society. In common with current literature, we are alerted to an increasing separating out of the legal assumptions of 'copulation, co-residence and co-parenthood', without these being replaced by any other dominant form.

Following the lengthy introduction, the chapters in Part Two provide a range of perspectives on family policy, each with an analysis of the underlying assumptions of government intervention in family life, especially in the UK, but in other western countries also. Notions of *the family* as a 'sociological myth' at times become somewhat overstated, whereas the use of the definite article with this concept may perhaps not be, given the current range and variety in family formation. In Part Three, family types and practices are examined through a range of sociological perspectives, whereas in Part Four, the writers approach the topic from the economic viewpoint. These writers are in broad agreement with the other disciplines represented in the book, arguing that individuals often reject the theoretical notion of 'rational choice' in the idiosyncratic ways they choose to live their lives. For this reason, there is a fruitlessness in government 'rigging the costs and benefits' to get people involved in initiatives like New Deal, when such policies are built on an incomplete grasp of reality.

Third Way policy initiatives are further critiqued as contradictory and illogical – for example, when these claim to be 'non-judgemental' in their acknowledgement of a diversity of family structures, at the same time, promoting 'desirable structures', such as married parenthood (1998 Government Green Paper, *Supporting Families*). Returning to the main

theme, several contributors note that people's real lives are, overall, an interplay between welfare systems and personal choice – and this is determined by an intermix of life context, culture, social norms, educational level, moral commitments and aspirations. In summary, core sections of the book address the naivety of policies founded on a belief in people's 'rational choice assumptions', when life paths and priorities are infinitely more complex than any theory dreamed up by politicians.

To provide a historical perspective, the book includes a clear account of how the UK has witnessed a pendulum swing in family policy across the second half of the twentieth century – being quite prescriptive up to the 1970s, neutral for the next two decades, then, during the 1990s having an inclination towards being more directive, especially in relation to contexts for bringing up children. However, this is in contrast with tax and benefit policies which have inclined towards neutrality. Liberal/laissez faire versus conservative/paternalistic tensions in family policy both here and across the Atlantic are explored in detail, especially in Part Two.

Just a word about the book's structure: I had mixed feelings about Chapter One, 'Family policy, social theory and the state', authored by one of the editors, Alan Carling, which serves the dual purpose of stand alone 'scene setter' and 'Introduction'. An Introduction typically explains the purpose and structure of a book with signposts to the reader of what will follow. However, this 'Chapter One' part of the Introduction (there were two chapters) did all of that, but in some ways, it did very much more as it inclined towards distilling the main content of the book by rehearsing the key arguments of several chapters that would follow. That is not to say that Carling's chapter was not extremely well crafted in its presentation of the book's most powerful thesis, but to me, this went somewhat beyond providing an introduction. With this in mind, one might speculate whether such an important chapter might not more properly belong at the end of this book, thereby giving an opportunity to revisit the important central themes, perhaps offering further discussion of the critical elements of all that had had been addressed. However, I could not decide how this would work alongside Graham Crow's interesting and important final chapter: 'Families, moralities, rationalities and social change'. Chapter 2 also forms part of the Introduction, but as this is 'A portrait of western families', it perhaps more properly belongs at the beginning.

This is a structural quibble, the stated aim of this volume 'to take the debate on family change and social policy on to a new level' has been largely realized in this important contribution to the discourse around social policy and families.

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