

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

MAUREEN BAKER, *Restructuring Family Policies: Convergences and Divergences*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006, ix + 255 p., index.

This book examines how external and internal pressures shape the restructuring of policies for families with children in countries belonging to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Baker examines the ways in which international bodies and labour markets, global communication and technological change affect policy reforms. Rather than assuming that these external forces are all-encompassing, she demonstrates how policy restructuring is negotiated within the parameters set by local and national histories as well as cultures and pre-existing institutions. She argues that international pressures are filtered through these internal conditions which provide a powerful “model of family.” She adds another layer to her analysis by examining the way both external and internal pressures are reinterpreted by political and special interest groups, sometimes leading to controversial policy solutions.

It is through the complex interaction among local, national and international forces that Baker explains why converging socio-demographic patterns such as declining rates of legal marriage and fertility, prevailing notions about human rights, and even similar constructions of social problems (e.g., “deadbeat dads”) or “policy talk,” sometime lead to radically different national policies. Baker argues that divergent policies emerge because they are based on different sets of values and assumptions which are grounded in local and national particularities. These mediate the political and rhetorical strategies evoked by local and national governments to justify the adoption or resistance to internationally directed policy formations, and greatly limit the ability of international bodies (or globalization processes more generally) to simply impose or transplant social programs in other jurisdictions.

Baker spends the first four chapters setting up this argument and defining key concepts and themes that run throughout the book. In these chapters, she analyzes family policy restructuring against the backdrop of socio-demographic and internationalizing trends, and welfare regimes. The next five chapters provide a more detailed account of policy restructuring in the areas of reproductive health and childbirth; work; gender and parenthood; child care and welfare; social housing and income support; and finally, divorce; child support and international migration. She concludes with an overview of the specific family programs that have been strengthened

(such as paid parental leave and childcare services) and those that have been weakened (such as reproductive health services and employment protection) in OECD countries.

Baker provides a powerful tool to explain the limits and possibilities of international policy initiatives. Drawing on international and national statistics and policy documents, and her own comparative research on family trends, Baker marshals an impressive body of evidence to illustrate the importance of local and national contexts of family policy formation and restructuring. As Baker notes, while this approach is somewhat superficial, comparative analyses allow us to take stock of how and why policy formation converges and diverges in seemingly unpredictable ways among countries that share similar socio-demographic and economic conditions, and that face common international pressures. Her analysis brings this “puzzle” into sharp relief against the backdrop of local and national cultures, and institutional and political traditions.

While Baker draws theoretically on Esping-Anderson’s “power-resource theory,” she also ushers in aspects of social movement (e.g., framing analysis) as well as organizational (e.g., institutionalism) and globalization theories. Although she notes the shortcomings of power-resource theory, she returns to its three regimes throughout the book – welfare, corporatist or conservative, and social democratic – as ideal-types that broadly shape the logic of family policy restructuring within nations. For instance, it explains why social democratic regimes such as Sweden provide more generous social programs, while liberal regimes such as the United States support notably fewer social provisions because the latter assumes that individuals (rather than the state) are responsible for their own personal and financial well-being. The lesson here is that even in the context of globalization, international policy initiatives are often trumped by domestic policies and national cultures and institutions. She argues that family policy formation and restructuring become somewhat “path dependent” within nations. New policy ideas are rarely successful unless interest groups and international bodies are able to convincingly reframe them in ways that appeal to existing patterns of social provision and cultural norms. Consequently, the diffusion of international policy is greatly tempered by the political and fiscal philosophies of national governments, and may even be loosely coupled (or decoupled) from a nation’s socio-demographic or economic realities.

Baker’s contribution to our understandings of family policy restructuring should be applauded. The strength of this book lies in its comparative design, and its even-handed presentation of evidence and concrete connections between her thesis and data. This book is refreshingly non-ideological and avoids simplistic, normatively-laden platitudes. In so doing, we not only actually learn something about family policy restructuring, but also learn about the dynamic interplay between macro and micro processes in a comparative context. This is no easy feat. These strengths make this book worth reading for anyone interested in policy, comparative research, and globalization.

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