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The Incomplete Revolution: Adapting to Women's New Roles

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Esping-Andersen's most recent work, *The Incomplete Revolution: Adapting to Women's New Roles*, concerns the new role of women in society and the incapability – so far – of society to adapt to it. Has, therefore, Esping-Andersen embraced feminism? I wouldn't say so. Quite the contrary, he recognizes to have invaded “upon a sociological territory dominated by feminist writers”, but he accuses existing literature to “have been rather unable to identify how revolutionary indeed is the changing role of women” and that “the issue has been hugely dominated by writers whose analytical lens see little other than gender inequalities”.

As other authors have already observed, the revolution of women's roles has changed how people behave in relation to education, marriage, parenting and employment. He goes further, arguing that all these changes, if not addressed by reforms to the welfare state, will lead to increased inequality for current and future generations. In fact, the so far “incomplete nature of the revolution is provoking serious disequilibria in our society”, new inequalities (i.e. income inequalities between dual and single earner couples) and greater social polarization, exacerbating social class inequalities especially in term of investment that highly educated and highly paid parents can make for their children, compared to those with low human capital.

The revolution is incomplete because “historically we are moving from one equilibrium to another and therefore find ourselves with an unstable equilibrium that produces sub-optimal outcomes”. And incomplete revolutions tend to be associated with major disequilibria, that he identifies in low fertility and especially that realized fertility is lower than desired (“far few children than we desire”), low children outcomes (“too little investment in the quality of our increasingly few children”) and population ageing.

His analysis aims to “tackle the efficiency issues related to the welfare state adaptation” and, therefore, he wants a welfare state that can face new inequalities because of disequilibrium (or multiple equilibria). Equity (also gender equity) is a “sine qua non for a workable remodeling of our society”, although the attention is elsewhere: the North America and the Nordic countries serve as ideal typical images of what is crystallizing throughout the advanced world. He thinks that the laggards will follow the leaders (such as Spain). However, this might be a too optimistic view, as it is not yet clear that “the male breadwinner family is becoming an endangered species”.

Therefore, if you expected from the title an attentive commentary on the position of women in the society, gender role-set or policies to further enhance gender equality you might get disappointed when reading the book. The author did not bring in the category of gender or gender perspective in his analyses, and unequal structure, politics of difference or gender power are pretty much absent. However, you will find in the book a holistic analysis of society and its trends and, in this sense, find much more than what you expect from

the title. He pulls together an incredible range of research findings and this book is therefore a must for the assumed readers of this journal (demographers and population scholars). In fact, the challenges of the new century, together with the necessity for institutions to adapt to the new role of women, are also “how to prepare our children for the knowledge economy” and “how to respond to the new demography in particular of low fertility and ageing population”. A large part of the book is devoted to scientific foundations of the necessity of state intervention against the intra-generational inequality that arises from population ageing and about the mechanism that explain life chances and how “we might force policies to secure the chances for all children”, investing in children’s early learning.

So Esping-Andersen’s perspective and preoccupation remains – as in his previous famous books – social classes’ stratification and welfare state. He wants a welfare state able to reconcile motherhood and employment, not in order to favor gender equality as a per se value or on behalf of women’s causes, but because otherwise there will be in the society the “two evils”: few children or few workers (and therefore too little family income). In the conclusion of the book, the author recognizes that embracing “a rational action perspective that aims to identify superior Pareto outcomes” and tackling “the efficiency issues related to the welfare state adaptation”, he has arrived pretty much at the “same precepts and conclusions” as feminist writers, i.e. accelerating the completion of the revolution of women’s roles, but the focus is nevertheless on the central harvest of “major equality and efficiency gains across the board”.