

Challenging Family Rhythms

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Transformations of work disrupt family time. Relying on a rigorous statistical approach, Laurent Lesnard draws attention to the consequences produced in family life by the turmoil of atypical working hours. While his demonstration of this phenomenon is convincing, his interpretation of it is more questionable.

Reviewed: Laurent Lesnard, *La famille désarticulée. Les nouvelles contraintes de l'emploi du temps*, Paris, PUF, collection "Le lien social", 2009, 213 pp., 23 €.

In *The Dislocated Family (La famille désarticulée)*, Laurent Lesnard suggests a reading of the transformations of family life assessed through the prism of the evolutions of wage-earning society. His argument can be summarized in this way: the increase in the rate of women's participation in economic activity, principally in the services sector, leads to a more complex management of daily family life and, in the end, introduces fragility into conjugal relationships and into individual constructions of identity. This implicates the labour market and its demands, which sometimes produce situations in which men and women end up passing close by each other in their daily lives without ever actually seeing each other. So two different assertions are being made: that there is a link between labour market evolutions and pressures on family members' uses of time (these uses are more or less compatible, or synchronized); and that there is a relation between a certain desynchronization of the couple and the "undermining of the familial connection". Although the first assertion is very convincingly demonstrated in this book, the second remains more debatable.

The book relies on a secondary analysis of two of the INSEE series of Time Use (*Emploi du Temps*) surveys, those done in 1985-1986 and 1998-1999, thus allowing us to see some changes over almost fifteen years. In his analysis, Lesnard applies complex statistical techniques (optimal matching analysis, classification methods), but the results are always presented in an accessible fashion, most often in the form of contingency tables. The great clarity of the book's style makes it very agreeable to read.

Transformations of familial sociability

The book is organized into three parts and six chapters. The first part adopts a historical perspective on the evolutions of the family and of its relation to time. The transformations in work by women since the French Revolution are analysed here, along with changes in the wage-earning society and in the temporal structure of job offers.

Using the Durkheimian distinction between organic solidarity (where social connection is ensured by a complementarity of roles and of the division of labour) and mechanical solidarity (where social connection is ensured principally by individuals' strong identification with a community of which they are members because of a strong similarity in their characteristics), Lesnard asserts there has been the transition from a family based on an organic solidarity (with a strong division of roles and of work) to a family functioning essentially on mechanical solidarity. The proof of this is the importance of affection previously at the core of familial relations, when productive and collective work was the centre of the family (as was the case in families living by agriculture, by craft industry, and by commerce). Another proof suggested here is the fading away of a certain division of roles between men and women, since today large numbers of women are in salaried employment. In short, men and women resemble each other more and more, and the tie that binds them depends on strong affection rather than on material interests.

The second part of the book examines the way in which family time is structured within the population and how it evolved from 1985 to 1999. For the author this is a matter of showing the importance of interpersonal relations in the period of time spent as part of a family, and of seeing how this importance varied as a function of familial morphology (number of children, age of the youngest child, bi- or mono-parental) and of the combination of professional activities in the couple (couples bi- or mono-active, and in what type of employment). The data presented are quite fascinating, and revise our view of domestic work

connected with children. For rather than not treating the activities of childcare (washing, helping with homework, and so on) as an index of parental work, the definition of that work is here broadened to include the co-presence of one or more of the parents with their children. Being present with the children, no matter what activity is going on, is part of looking after them; it already counts as one task of parental work. We learn from the data that although childcare is still a source of great inequalities between women and men, the fun time spent with children in front of the television or in another leisure activity is less unequally divided. So the increase between 1985 and 1999 in the average time spent with the children has led to a contraction of the inequalities between fathers and mothers, something that cannot be spotted by looking only at the care given directly to the children (chapter 4). Chapter Three presents some data on the evolution of conjugal time, and of time spent as a couple with one or more children; these are little known and very useful data on the family, in that they allow us to compare the portion of the conjugal connection in relation to "family" time. With these, Lesnard shows that the more numerous the children, and the older they are, the more family time de-conjugalizes (i.e. the less the spouses spend time together on their own).

This second part concludes by discussing the growing importance of interpersonal relations in family time measured with the yardstick of leisure activities, while bearing in mind the inequalities (albeit decreasing) between fathers and mothers in time spent and activities pursued with the children. The family functions more and more on the basis of mechanical solidarity (individuals resemble each other and are bound together by strong affective ties that the leisure activities are meant to celebrate and to rekindle), but it also functions to a smaller extent on the basis of organic solidarity (with a specialization of roles that strengthens as the number of children goes up, and with day-to-day collaboration). This perspective makes for a more complex view of the family.

The interesting and novel features of these analyses, especially with regard to fifteen years of evolutions in familial sociability, are, however, weakened by the nature of the data that they utilize. The grid used in the INSEE Time Use survey in 1998-1999 in which respondents could describe their day differed from the one used in the 1985-1986 survey. This earlier survey divided the day into "slices" of five minutes, which allowed a precise account of activities. But for the more recent survey this changed to periods of fifteen minutes. The statistical consequences of this modification of the statistical unit being filled in were not referred to in the body of the text. What happens if, for example, during a family dinner of

half an hour, the children leave the table after twenty minutes? How should one fill in the survey grid? Family meal for the first fifteen minutes and conjugal meal afterwards, or family meal for the entire half hour, since the beginning of each of the two quarter hours were familial? Again, for a meal of twenty minutes, what do the respondents fill in? In 1985 they could record four periods of five minutes. In 1999, are they going to record one period of fifteen minutes, or two? So the effects of this transformation of the statistical unit in the respondent diaries ought to have been discussed, in order to avoid doubts about the observed increase in familial sociability. That does not call into question the connections observed in each survey between the desynchronization of work hours and familial sociability.

Family desynchronization

The third part of the book is the one that really tests the hypothesis set out at the beginning. Once familial sociability has been examined, the impact on it of the more or less strong desynchronization of the hours of professional work can be examined. Chapter Five presents a typology of individuals' professional work schedules (more or less standard, more or less atypical). The standard day running from 8 am to 5:30 pm is the most common type, but from 1985 to 1999 it lost ground to atypical days with long or fragmented or staggered work schedules. The author shows that social background has an influence on the type of working day and on the freedom one has to choose one's work schedule. The higher up the social ladder, the more frequent are the opportunities to choose one's working hours, and the greater is the tendency to choose days that are either standard or long. The lower down the scale, the more one is at the mercy of the constraints of the firm in which one works, and the more one is stuck with staggered or fragmented hours (this is especially true in low-level jobs in the service sector like catering and cleaning).

Chapter Six studies the relation between the types of desynchronization and familial sociability. Lesnard establishes a typology of working days, for couples this time, and observes that from 1985 to 1999 the most synchronous days (a couple with two standard days) declined in number from 49% to 45% of conjugal working days. The effect of the desynchronization of working days on conjugal sociability is more complex than one might expect, and two effects can be distinguished: first of all the most synchronous days of couples, in comparison to the atypical days, have a negative impact on global family time. Families spend more total time with their children when one or both of the two parents have staggered hours, for example, and this is especially true if the working hours occupy the morning and

leave a parent available in the evening at the time when school finishes. The second observed effect is that the desynchronization of a couple's work schedules favours a desynchronization of family time: the more synchronous the working days of the father with those of the mother, the more family time brings together father, mother and children. True, one of the two parents having staggered days tends to increase the time spent with the children, but without the other parent. So the father or the mother spends more time alone with their child than in synchronous families. The participation of the father in parental work is greater than in synchronous families, even though the inequalities between men and women remain clear. In the end, one could say that the desynchronization of working schedules familializes the family but de-conjugalizes it at the same time¹. This situation is interpreted by the author as a weakening of the familial tie.

The issue of familial cohesion

There are different interpretations for this. The issue of familial cohesion brought up by the author is certainly relevant, and it arises in a familial universe where the importance of the individual is increasing. Even though the author appreciates that the function of the contemporary family is the management of well-being and the construction of individuals' identities, he does not draw from this a theoretical conclusion: to what extent do the well-being of individuals and the construction of their identities depend on family cohesion, on time spent together or in collective rites (television, leisure activities, meals)? To what extent must individuals feel they are family members? For Lesnard, the longer the time spent together, and the stronger the family is, the better will individuals feel. The author adopts a holistic view of the family, consistent with the idea of "mechanical solidarity". In this model, the healthy functioning of the family, identified with its cohesion, is assessed on the basis of moments shared by the group as a whole. Everything that reduces this collective time can only be seen as impairing or undermining family functioning. But the alternation of family moments, solitary moments and moments alone with one's child or children, could also be interpreted more positively, as a context allowing individuals within families more successfully to connect things individual and collective. If we take the example of families with adolescent children we see that the ideal family for these young family members resides not in fusion but in an alternation between time alone (in a private space, their bedroom) and

¹ Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim, who also examines the constraints that the labour market brings to bear on family life, both because of desynchronized time and especially because of the bi-localization of jobs, suggests the term "post-familial family": "On the way to a post-familial family", *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 15, 3-4, pp. 53-70).

time together (for meals or the weekend).² Their well-being cannot be attained only by periods spent with everyone together. Today, familial time, lived positively, is less a continuous period (the longer it lasts the better one feels) than a rhythmic period, with some strongly cohesive time such as at the weekend, and some weakly cohesive time during the week. Moreover, for the young person as for the parent, it is not at all certain that a moment that joins one parent with his or her child or children is less valued, less a source of well-being, or less productive of family connection, than a moment that brings everyone together. The connection will probably be more private and personal, and perhaps less like a confrontation between two generational blocs. It is, to say the least, surprising that Laurent Lesnard should impugn the quality of attachment generated by the more important moments spent together by some single fathers and their children. Therefore, in addition to indicators of duration, the thesis of the undermining of the family should take into account indicators relative to rhythms and to alternations between moments with everyone together, moments alone with the children, and solitary moments, especially the weekend when the pressure of work is weaker (assuming that Sunday working does not become general).

In short, if society requires that individuals be more autonomous, a new balance must be found between this autonomy and familial cohesion, a new balance that is difficult to capture with nothing but the indicator of average time spent with the whole family together. If in this way individuals are again going to be given a place in the family, the interpretation of the findings supplied by the author needs to be strongly qualified, to the extent that these temporal differences create room for negotiation with respect to the family group.

This negotiating room is especially perceptible between men and women: following resource-based theory, the contribution to household activities by women with paid work is lower than by those without, and the contribution of men married to a woman in paid work is (moderately) higher. Women's paid work is a resource in the negotiation of the division of tasks. Here, Lesnard shows that the temporal differences in work arrangements also supply arguments that can lead to a higher contribution by men (if they and not their wives are the ones with free time in the evening). A wife who is working in the evening cannot look after the children, so it is the husband who is called upon. This is especially perceptible in middle- and working-class circles, where the demands of work are such that individuals cannot choose

² See for example Elsa Ramos, *Rester enfant, devenir adulte. La cohabitation des étudiants chez leurs parents*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2003; or François de Singly, *Les Adonaissants*, Paris, Hachette, 2007.

their hours of work, and where couples cannot economically afford to turn over to someone else the work of looking after and caring for the children. Thus, in certain social contexts, desynchronized work times can constitute a resource favouring the negotiation of a less inegalitarian division of tasks and more time to oneself. A couple's arrangements here become a major subject for understanding the effects of desynchronization, including negotiations of work times and the character of women's activities. The field of research opened up by Laurent Lesnard is in every respect compelling.

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