Four essays on dual career families and the domestic division of labour.

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Summary

The growing demand for domestic services in Sweden during the 1980s and onwards is a central issue in this thesis. Especially dual career families seem to experience problems when they try to combine career work with domestic work and family life. Some actors have argued that domestic services subsidized by tax deductions is a strategy for families to improve their daily welfare at a low cost. But this idea was met by strong ideological resistance and a formal law was not possible to introduce until July 2007. The ideological debate concerning domestic services is of particular interest in the thesis. The issue of domestic services was on the political agenda during the first decades of the Twentieth Century. Why did it return in the 1990s? In order to study the balance between career work and domestic work in different periods of time, the author takes a closer look at the demand for and supply of domestic workers and how these have been regulated. The context of the problem is paid and unpaid work, women’s career work, and family organisation during different epochs. The primary focus though in the thesis is on the current situation.

The possibilities and obstacles to combine career work with domestic work and family life is commonly considered to be “private troubles” since it concerns people’s domestic arrangements. Some private troubles though can during certain periods of time turn into “public problems”, creating a demand for public, political decisions which can subsequently become the source of new private troubles. This discussion is inspired by C Wright Mills (1959) in his book *The Sociological Imagination*.

Three periods during the Twentieth Century are of special interest to the author:

1. The labour market’s need for well educated women during the 1930s and women’s discontent with the traditional gender system eventually resulted in a growing acceptance of
women working outside their homes. The demand for domestic services increased especially from economically well-off households in the cities. The women working as maids were mainly from rural areas and were considered suitable as maids because of their subordinate manner. They normally worked full-time under poor conditions and lived in their employers’ homes. Because of a growing number of other employment alternatives, a lack of domestic workers was soon a fact. The situation for the middle classes became problematic. A serious decrease in the birth rate was interpreted as discontent among middle class women and because of this the issue of domestic services became an important public issue. A number of public solutions were discussed.

In the book *Women's two roles*, Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein (1957) discuss the problems many women experience when they want both a professional career and a family. In another book, which Alva Myrdal wrote together with her husband Gunnar Myrdal (1934) about the population crisis in Sweden (i.e. declining birth rates and productive labour capacity), it was argued that both women and men should take part in productive work. They argued that professionally trained staff in large collective houses should take care of the children, the cleaning and other domestic work. This rational system would, according to the Myrdals, create better conditions both for married couples and for children. As a result equality between women and men and between social classes would increase.

2. After World War II the phenomenon of middle class women working full-time was generally accepted. Families with two breadwinners still had a need for domestic workers. Because of a great lack of domestic workers the state made it possible for a few years to recruit workers from other countries. This recruitment of foreign domestic workers became less important as homes became more modernized and domestic appliances reduced the amount of human effort in domestic work. From the mid-1950s a new category of domestic workers was introduced – home assistants – who worked part-time in other people’s homes but had their own families and their own homes.

During the 1960-1970s young women working in private homes as part of their education became another solution for families with two breadwinners. When that system was abolished the new solution was a large expansion of public childcare. This was also considered to solve children’s need for professional care. Public care of the elderly was also introduced at that
time. The professionalisation of women’s traditional work was now comprehensive. Comparatively high taxes made these reforms possible and had numerous consequences, such as making the purchase of many domestic and home-related services quite costly, resulting in a large increase in the tasks people perform themselves as unpaid work.

3. From the mid-1980s women’s full-time work increased, but at the same time the gender division of labour in households remained unchanged. From 1990–2000 the birth rate decreased again but this time it was a matter of economic resources. In the words of Lewis Coser (1979), the family is a greedy institution especially for women. For career workers, contemporary work life is also a greedy institution. These two institutions compete for people’s time, energy and commitment. The claims from work life are normally given priority to the domestic work and needs from family members.

These social and economic changes have in many cases resulted in conflicts within the family, especially for dual career families. In contrast to the family in pre-capitalist society, the bond that keeps the family members together today is much weaker. If the ambition is to preserve the family it is important to find fast solutions to problems and conflicts. One of these solutions seems to be domestic services. The numbers are very uncertain but approximately 6–7 per cent of the Swedish households buy domestic services today. The employees are often born in other countries and sometimes lack both residence and work permits.

Domestic services are price sensitive but a tax deduction is looked upon as a strategy to lower the cost. This public solution to personal troubles was introduced in a number of European countries as early as 10–15 years ago, but it was not possible in Sweden until recently because of the ideological debate mentioned above.

**Conclusion**

The right for married women in the middle classes to work outside their homes, better conditions for children, professionalisation of women’s traditional work and collective solutions during the first phase – the 1930s – were changes originally caused by personal troubles becoming public problems. These questions were eventually institutionalised and have had great influence on future negotiations and decision-making. This conclusion is confirmed by the two following phases – the 1970s and 1990s. Private troubles were solved
collectively and examples of public involvement have been public childcare, parental leave and free care and education.

During the third phase the growing demands from work life has resulted in an increased burden on the dual career families. These personal troubles have now become a political problem and a new strategy to solve the problem is tax deductions for domestic services – a private complement to the public solutions. Such a system is now possible to realise because of high unemployment rates and therefore a large supply of workers. Legal and illegal immigration is also of great importance in this context. The extent of formal rules, public services, economic transactions and official ideologies have had great importance for maintaining balance between career work and domestic work.

**Four essays**

The thesis consists of four articles. Three are already published and the fourth is submitted for publication and under review.¹

The starting point in the first article: "In search for a non-existing law. The example of domestic services in Sweden”, is the absence of tax deductions for domestic services and the ideological debate surrounding this issue. In several other European countries the state provides dual career families with domestic services at a low cost. Why was Sweden distinct in this aspect? A comparison between the political processes in the period 1993–2003 around the issue of tax deductions for domestic services in Sweden and Denmark, show large differences. It was no problem in Denmark for the lawmakers to decide in favour of tax deductions. In Sweden on the other hand, actors, arguments and the construction of proposals in the political process were institutionally “wrong”. It became impossible to introduce a tax deduction because the necessary conditions for introducing a formal law were missing.

¹ The thesis consists of the following articles:


III. Who is going to take care of the domestic work? The function of domestic services in maintaining life style and gender division of labour of the middle classes [Vem ska sköta hemarbetet? Hushållstjänsternas betydelse för upprätthållandet av mellanskiktens livsmönster och genusrabetsdelning], under review 2007.

debate on this issue was highly morally and ideologically charged. This can be explained by the fact that associations were made to the period when domestic services were common and efforts to promote equality, which was institutionalised in the 1970s, were still strong in the beginning of the 1990s.

The aim of the second article: “From Private Solutions to Public Responsibility and Back Again. The new domestic services in Sweden”, is to find out how certain socio-economic changes in Sweden have influenced urban households’ demand for domestic services. During the 1930s the supply of domestic workers decreased. New household technology and a large public sector were supposed to solve the problem but never really did. In the mid-1980s a demand for domestic workers arose again and because of high unemployment and immigration the demand could now be met by a large labour supply. Many dual career families employ migrant domestic workers on the informal market. The public sector in Sweden still provides households with care for elderly and children. The lifestyle of particularly dual career families presupposes more help than is offered by the state. A number of private solutions have therefore been introduced.

The title of the third article is “Who is going to take care of the domestic work? The function of domestic services in maintaining the lifestyle and gender division of labour of the middle classes.” The aim is to discern the patterns of Swedish families’ consumption of domestic services. Two forms of domestic services are of interest – cleaning help a few hours a week and having a nanny as a live-in. Despite high ideals concerning equality between women and men, women perform more unpaid work and the result is sometimes conflicts between spouses. To solve this problem, to maximize the importance of the family to its members, to be able to spend more time on one’s own paid labour and to make it easier to maintain lifestyle and status – domestic services are looked upon as a solution. The employer’s need for flexible, grateful, hard-working and cheap labour is often met by women from poor countries working outside the regular labour market.

During the mid-1980s an au pair system has established itself in Sweden. This is the theme of the fourth and last article: “Cultural exchange or cheap labour? Au pair in Sweden.” Many au pairs are recruited from Eastern Europe. This form of domestic service is hidden behind formal rules, stating that the purpose of the au pair system is to let young people get to know Sweden and learn the Swedish language. Instead, the au pairs are being used as cheap labour
without labour or civil rights. In this example of commodification though the workers are not totally disembodied. They are embodied in the sense that some social categories are looked upon as more suitable than others for performing paid household work.