

## WHO WILL MIND THE CHILDREN

*Sheila K. Johnson*

Review of *The Politics of Work-Family Policies: Comparing Japan, France, Germany, and the United States* by Patricia Boling. Cambridge University Press, 2015, 268 pp.

Patricia Boling has written an extremely interesting book about the politics of providing adequate childcare for working mothers that grew out of her own experiences as a graduate student and non-tenured professor trying to raise three children. She recounts her initial experience at the University of California, Berkeley, where two of her children attended the excellent childcare centers provided by the university for its graduate students living in student housing. This was followed by several years living in Japan, where she had a third child and all three went to government-sponsored nurseries and schools. And then she was once more thrown back onto her own devices and the ad hoc system of childcare in the United States—part-time nannies, friends and family members, students, and expensive private facilities. As she ruefully comments, “I began thinking about comparing different countries’ approaches to supporting working families when my children were babies, and I completed [this book] a year after the birth of my first grandchild” (p. 1).

Somewhere during this twenty-year period she decided to compare the Japanese system, which she at first thought far superior, to the American non-system. But if Japan’s system is so good, why are Japanese women still so reluctant to have children, resulting in an extremely low birthrate of 1.4—well below replacement levels? A study reported in the *New York Times* of February 27, 2016, claims that the Japanese population has shrunk by one million between 2004 and 2014.

Boling decided to add two more countries to her comparison: Germany and France. Both, like the United States and Japan, are developed nations, but one—France—has a birthrate of 1.99, whereas Germany has a birthrate close to that of Japan—1.38. The question she now began to ask was not only how do these countries provide for children of working women, but how are these solutions constrained by cultural norms and political choices.

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After an introductory chapter and another one setting forth various comparative statistics for a number of developed nations, Boling turns her attention to France. France, she argues, has encouraged large families since the nineteenth century as a way of maintaining its territorial integrity and fending off invasions. "Having children was viewed as both a patriotic duty and a public good that the state should support" (p. 56). The Catholic Church of course also was and is pro-natalist. In 1932, during the worldwide depression, when the United States also passed much of its social welfare legislation, France passed a law requiring all employers to join a fund that is used to provide nurseries for newborns and preschools for children from 3 to 5 years of age. Use of these facilities is not subjected to a means test; it is a 'horizontal redistribution' from those without children to those with children, not a vertical one from those who are well off to those who are poor. As a result, there is broad agreement across the political spectrum for support of families and it is not a partisan football (as it often is in the United States).

However, in recent times financial pressures on France's welfare system as a whole have led to some changes in policy. Instead of building more nurseries and staffing them with well-trained personnel, France has instituted a system of subsidies to parents who can employ a nanny or send their child to a private nursery in someone's else's home. Today only 17 percent of children under the age of two-and-half attend state nurseries and 28 percent are cared for by what are called "maternal assistants." Presumably, the remaining 55 percent are cared for by their own mothers, although an astonishing 100 percent of 3-5-year-olds are enrolled in the state-funded nursery school system.

France also provides women with generous subsidized maternity and childcare leaves: maternity leaves of 4 months at 100 percent of pay, an additional 6 months of parental leave at 575.68 euros a month, and parental leave for a second and subsequent children for three years at the same amount. As Boling points out, these sums are not large enough to keep a highly paid professional woman out of the work force for that long, but they may become a form of unemployment insurance for many lower-class women. I wonder what the future impact will be on French race relations as more African and Middle Eastern families arrive and continue to have large families, making use of these subsidies. Boling notes that total fertility rates in France are not disaggregated or identified by race or nationality due to the French ideal of assimilation, but this does not mean cultural differences don't exist or have political consequences.

Right now France has a mixed system of family policies growing out of a conservative past. The assumption still is that the husband is the chief breadwinner (since 2001 fathers may receive 11 days of paternity leave at full compensation), whereas mothers are the main child caregivers. Boling calls the family support system more the outgrowth of state familialism rather than state feminism.

German family policy has a complex political and cultural history. In the 1880s, most people received benefits "on the basis of employment and status rather than

receiving universal or needs-based benefits” (p. 79), and it was assumed that mothers would stay home with their children while men would be the bread-winners. It is from this period that the phrase “kinder, küche, kirche” dates as a description of women’s place: having children, in the kitchen, and in church. The Nazis also encouraged women to bear as many children as possible for the fatherland but they created Hitlerjugend after-school programs to indoctrinate children politically and, as the war progressed, to enable more women to work in factories. They also created more kindergartens: children between ages 3 and 6 attending kindergarten went from 13 percent in 1930 to 31 percent in 1940 (p. 82). Some of this childcare persisted after the war in West Germany because of the large number of war widows raising children alone, but the main emphasis was on “a retreat into privatism and depoliticization along with respect for the family” (p. 82).

In East Germany, meanwhile, the state developed a network of childcare centers and after-school care centers. In 1988-89, just before the Berlin Wall came down and the country was reunified, only 3 percent of West German children under 3 were in some sort of childcare institution, whereas in East Germany 80 percent were. For pre-school children aged 3 to 6, the West German percentage in nurseries and kindergartens was 79 percent, compared with 94 percent in the East. Not surprisingly, 53 percent of West German women were in the labor force, whereas in East Germany 78 percent of women between the ages of 15 and 64 worked.

As Boling notes, “These contrasting childcare systems reflected very different gender ideologies and expectations about good mothering” (p. 84). Immediately after reunification the birthrate in the East fell dramatically as there was widespread expectation that the family support policies of the East would come to resemble those of the West. But although it has taken some 25 years, policies today actually seem closer to those of East Germany. Much of the credit for this seems to belong to Chancellor Angela Merkel, herself an East German, and Ursula von der Leyen, Minister of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth from 2005 to 2009, and after that Minister of Labor and Social Affairs from 2009 to 2013, all while also being the mother of seven children.

Germany today has a mixed system of support for working families. Parents receive monthly payments of 184 euros for the first two children, 190 euros for the third child and 215 euros for each subsequent child. These payments continue until the children are 18 or 25 if they are in school or training. Maternity leave is 14 weeks at 100 percent pay for working mothers and parental leave for either parent is 12 months at 67 percent of salary, but capped at 1,800 euros a month. As in France, these subsidies are likely to be more attractive to low-income families than to well-paid ones.

The Merkel government has also promised to build more early childhood centers for children under the age of 3, but a startling map on page 89 of Boling’s book reveals that as of March 2013, in former East Germany over 50 percent of children under 3 attend such centers, whereas in the rest of Germany the percentages range from under 15

percent to under 35 percent. Boling explains that this is partly due to the fact that Germany is a federal state and the 16 Lander, or states, have a good deal of power and discretion in spending federally allocated funds. She argues that the variations have to do in part with attitudes prevailing in the Catholic versus secular or Lutheran parts of Germany, but surely Germany's postwar history as a divided state also plays a role. As she comments, "Attitudes about intensive mothering and working mothers are durable, and the announcement of policies... cannot make those attitudes disappear" (p. 103). And they no doubt contribute to the fact that to date the birthrate in Germany remains well below replacement.

Japan has also been struggling with a below-replacement birthrate and has instituted policies to change that—so far with little success. Parents receive 15,000 yen (approximately USD 150) for each child under 3. For two children they receive 10,000 yen (USD 100) per child from the ages of 3 to 12; and parents of all children receive 10,000 yen per month for children age 12 through 15. Presumably these payments are intended to help parents pay for private out-of-the-home childcare, because there are not nearly enough publicly-funded daycare centers. Only 28 percent of children under the age of 3 are in formal care, although 90 percent of children between the ages of 3 and 5 are in some sort of kindergarten or childcare. Working mothers can take a maternity leave of 14 weeks at 67 percent pay and a subsequent childcare leave of one year at 50 percent pay. Fathers can take a paternity leave of two months at 50 percent pay.

Boling argues that both women and men are reluctant to take their child-care leaves because Japan's labor market is organized around firm-specific skills. Businesses typically hire workers straight out of school and then invest considerable money and time training them. Men become "permanent employees" and are expected to remain in their companies until retirement. Such firms are reluctant to hire women as full-time employees because they assume that at some point they will want to have children and take an extended leave to care for them. This means that valuable training is wasted, it is difficult to hire and train replacements not knowing whether women will return to work after taking leave, and if they do so there is likely to be resentment in the workplace from those who have taken up the slack. The result is that men work long hours and do not take paternity leaves, whereas women work for lesser pay until they become pregnant and then "retire." They will probably re-enter the labor market once their children enter kindergarten but only in part-time poorly paid jobs. Such a pattern is also abetted by a tax policy that gives a tax-break to couples in which the wife's earnings remain below about \$10,000 a year.

There are other factors that have impacted Japan's attempts to improve childcare policies. The rapid aging of its population has drawn more funds into elder care, and the Fukushima disaster of 2011 has also diverted government funds. The economic contraction of the last ten or more years has meant that the government has bailed out even non-competitive firms as a form of social welfare, and this becomes a vicious

circle. Firms retain their old employees but do not hire new ones; young people in Japan have trouble finding good permanent jobs, leading them to postpone marriage and having children. Boling ends her chapter on Japan by commenting that “Until these issues are addressed forthrightly, there is good reason to be skeptical about Japan’s ability to back strong work-family policies” (p. 146).

When she turns to the U.S. Boling notes that “in contrast to the other three countries we have examined, U.S. policies are premised on the notion that childrearing and work-family conflicts are... best left to the private real... and market-provided services” (p. 147). State support has chiefly taken the form of Aid to Dependent Children (renamed Aid to Families with Dependent Children in 1962), which is means-tested. During the Great Depression of the 1930s the government did set up nurseries for low-income parents, and during World War II private companies such as Douglas Aircraft and Kaiser shipyards set up nurseries so more women could work there.

The next big push toward federally funded childcare came in 1965 with the development of Head Start—a program for 3-to-5-year-olds to better prepare poor children for kindergarten. In 1995 the program was expanded to provide childcare for children under 3 so more mothers could work. The United States also provides tax credits for families with children, presumably so they can pay for childcare outside the home should they so desire, but this tax credit is non-refundable, meaning that poor parents who pay no taxes do not get the benefit. In 1993 the Family and Medical Leave Act was passed, requiring employers to give employees twelve weeks of unpaid leave for pregnancy or family medical emergencies. But this law only applies to businesses with fifty or more employees. As Boling ruefully notes, “In the United States it is difficult to pass labor laws that require employers to pay workers while they are unable to work or insure their jobs for them while on leave, because business is a well-organized, attentive interest group with plenty of money to contribute to campaigns, and lobbies strongly to oppose regulations it deems too costly or intrusive” (p. 167). Similarly, private childcare companies have lobbied to remain relatively unregulated by the government so they can charge what the traffic will bear. Despite all these obstacles, the U.S. fertility rate remains a healthy 2.14. Some of this is due to immigrants from poorer countries who tend to have a higher birthrate.

In her next-to-last chapter Boling tries to evaluate the various policies she has described in terms of whether they are increasing fertility rates, support working mothers, promote gender and overall social equality, and help children get a good start in life. She also includes Sweden in her discussion because it has often been held up as an ideal model for how states should deal with work-family policies. Some of her tables in this chapter are truly startling. For example, in Sweden 46.7 percent of children under 3 are in formal childcare and 92.9 percent of children between 3 and 5 are in preschool. Almost the same is true in France. Germany and Japan have a much lower percentage of children under 3 in childcare (23.1 percent and 25.9 percent, respectively) but are close to Sweden in terms of the number of children age 3 to 5 in preschool. The United

States matches Sweden in the percentage of children under 3 in childcare (43.2 percent) but ranks lowest of all the countries (66.5 percent) in the number of children age 3 to 5 in preschool. This clearly indicates that both poor and well-to-do parents in the United States find ways to finance some form of early childcare but that free nursery schools simply do not exist for the poor, seriously affecting the nation's social equality and children's early childhood education.

In another chart Boling tracks maternity, parental, and paternity leaves for her four nations plus Sweden. Here France, Sweden, and Germany all come out rather similar on length of maternity leave (14-16 weeks) at full or 80 percent pay. Japan gives women 14 weeks of maternity leave at 67 percent of pay, but as Boling has indicated elsewhere, only 24.2 percent of Japan's working women who become pregnant take advantage of maternity leave. The rest "retire," meaning they leave the work force indefinitely. And then we come to the United States, where most of the columns are zeros! The United States guarantees workers (in firms that employ 50 or more people) 12 weeks of parental leave, period—at no percentage of their pay. This is, indeed, rampant capitalism and individualism at work.

A final chapter is entitled "Why the United States Can't Be Sweden," but it might just as well have been called "Why No Other Country Can Be Sweden." In it, Boling discusses the historical, cultural, and political constraints on the countries she has described in her book with respect to work-family policies. She makes sensible suggestions for how each country might adjust its policies but is realistic as to the unlikelihood of this happening. This might seem a depressing conclusion, except that she has presented such a wealth of useful, unbiased data, one can't help but think that many readers will learn how to think about the problems they face.

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