

Guest Editorial Article / *Artículo Invitación Editorial*

***Parental leave and beyond: some reflections on 30 years of international networking* / EL Futuro de los Permisos Parentales: Reflexiones a Partir de 30 Años de Coordinación de Una Red Internacional de Expertos**

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ABSTRACT

The article starts by introducing the international network on leave policies and research. Based on the author's experience of coordinating and working with this network, including the production of an annual review that now includes 40 countries, the remainder of the article considers some current issues in leave policy and some future possible directions for policy and research. The issues include the place of leave in wider 'reconciliation' and 'equality' policies; the design of leave policies; the inadequate state of statistics on leave policies; and the voice of the child in formulating leave policies. While there are many possible directions for future development, this article discusses moving from the current narrow focus on early parenthood to a broader lifecourse model.

Keywords: *Parental leave; work-life relations; gender equality; lifecourse.*

RESUMEN

Este artículo comienza presentando la red internacional de políticas e investigación en permisos parentales. A partir de la experiencia del autor como coordinador de la red y editor del informe anual que revisa las políticas e investigaciones de hasta 40 países, el artículo aborda distintas cuestiones relativas a la política de permisos y posibles líneas de evolución e investigación. Entre éstas se pueden citar el lugar que ocupa dicha política en la política de conciliación de vida laboral y privada y en la política de igualdad; el diseño de la propia política de permisos; la insuficiencia de datos estadísticos para su análisis y la voz de los niños a la hora de rediseñar esta política. Entre las posibles líneas de desarrollo futuro se discute la ampliación de los permisos a otras situaciones vitales que no sean la parentalidad.

Palabras clave: Permisos parentales, relaciones vida laboral y privada, igualdad de género, ciclo vital.

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INTRODUCTION

Today, the provision of statutory leave is a major item in social and family policy in Europe but also increasingly across the world. Starting with Maternity leave, dating back to the 19th century, statutory leave has now extended to include Parental and Paternity leave, leave to care for sick family members and various other entitlements, including working shorter or flexible hours. In this paper, I want to consider some of the issues that have arisen as statutory leave entitlements have spread and developed, as well as reflect on the future for this area of policy. But first, I want to start by introducing the international network on leave policies and research, one response to the increasing prominence of statutory leave and a rather unique example of international collaboration and exchange.

THE INTERNATIONAL NETWORK ON LEAVE POLICIES AND RESEARCH

My own country, the United Kingdom, took up statutory leave very late in the day, implementing Maternity leave only in 1976, nearly a century after Germany had been the first country to introduce Maternity leave rights in 1883. Indeed by 1976, another form of statutory leave, Parental leave, had appeared on the scene, introduced in Sweden in 1974; and by 1983 the European Commission was proposing a European directive to set minimum standards for this form of leave across all member states, as part of its 1982-85 action programme on the promotion of equal opportunities for women. This proposal was my introduction to leave policy, as I found myself acting as an 'expert adviser' to a UK parliamentary committee scrutinizing the proposed European directive, rather a case of the blind leading the blind! In any case, the Thatcher government of the day vetoed this European proposal and continued to oppose any attempt to resurrect it: "Euro-sceptical and resistant to any attempts to re-regulate the UK labour market, the UK refused to allow legal competence in this area to be consigned to Europe" (Fusulier, 2009, p. 249). This impasse was only resolved years after the original

veto, when the European Union adopted a Directive on Parental leave in 1996, enabled by the Social Policy protocol to the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, which permitted measures in the social policy field to be taken by qualified majority and from which the UK was given an opt out.

While the UK was out in the cold on social policy, I was brought in to the European fold with an invitation to coordinate a new expert group established in 1986 by the European Commission as part of its second equal opportunities programme (1986-1990). The European Commission Network on Childcare and Other Measures to Reconcile Employment and Family Responsibilities (usually known as the 'EC Childcare Network' – ECCN) consisted of an expert from each of the then 12 member states of the European Economic Community, plus myself as Coordinator. Over 10 years, the ECCN produced a wide range of reports on early childhood education and care, school-age childcare, parental employment, men as carers for children (both as fathers and workers in services) – and leave policies, including several reviews of leave policy across member states.

One of the off-shoots of the ECCN was another network, the international network on leave policies and research (referred to below as the 'international network'). Two members of the ECCN, myself and the member for Belgian Flanders, Fred Deven, retained a strong interest in leave policies and convened a European seminar on the subject in Brussels in 1998, which resulted in an edited book (Moss and Deven, 1999), whose title suggested one of the key issues raised by leave policies: 'Parental leave: Progress or Pitfall?'. Then in 2004 we convened a second meeting in Brussels, at which the decision was made to establish a network focused specifically on leave policies and research, coordinated by the two of us until handing over this responsibility in 2015.

That international network continues to this day. Indeed, it has not just continued, but has grown and thrived, despite having neither funding nor formal organisation, operating as a self-regulating community of scholars and learners and a forum for the exchange of knowledge. Today the network numbers some 60 members from 40 countries, mostly in Europe (including representatives from all EU member states except Bulgaria, Cyprus and Latvia, as

well as from Iceland, Norway and Switzerland – I refer to these countries below as the Europe28; but also with a number from further afield (including Australia, Brazil, Canada, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, Russia, South Africa, and Uruguay). The network has an annual international seminar (the most recent held in Prague in September 2017, with more than 40 participants) and produces an annual online review of leave policies and research in the countries represented in the network, a publication that over time has established itself as an important source of information for those studying leave policies. The network also provides an environment supportive of collaborative work, including two special journal issues and three books. Nearly all the authors in this special issue of *Revista Española de Sociología* are network members. (For more information on the network, and access to the annual review and seminar presentations, go to www.leavenetwork.org).

So, having been involved with statutory leave for 30 years, and with the resource of the international network to draw on, what seem to me to be the main issues in the field today?

SOME ISSUES IN LEAVE POLICY AND RESEARCH

Most statutory leave policies are focused on one important, though relatively short, period of the lifecycle: early parenthood. The first type to be introduced, Maternity leave, is limited to the period immediately before and after childbirth, whilst Parental leave has subsequently extended entitlements into the early years of childhood (with some policies enabling parents to take part of their leave up to or just after a child starts compulsory school). Among the Europe28, these two types of leave are universal, with the exception of Switzerland that has no Parental leave. Less common, though widespread, are Paternity leave (for fathers only, usually to be taken soon after the birth of a child) and leave to care for sick or disabled children; while fewer countries provide leave to care for older relatives.

I will return in the next section to the big issue of what periods and purposes statutory leave

should cover. For now I will confine myself to statutory leave related to the care and upbringing of younger children, in particular below compulsory school age. This is where statutory leave policy is currently centred, so it is here that I will identify a range of current issues. In particular, I will consider issues around four areas: the place of leave in wider ‘reconciliation’ and ‘equality’ policies; the design of leave policies; the inadequate state of statistics on leave policies; and the voice of the child in formulating leave policies.

The place of leave in wider ‘reconciliation’ and ‘equality’ policies

In 1992, the European Council of Ministers adopted a ‘Recommendation on Child Care’ (92/241/EEC). This political statement proposed that member states ‘take and/or progressively encourage initiatives to enable women and men to reconcile their occupational, family and upbringing responsibilities arising from the care of children’. The Recommendation proposed that such initiatives be taken in four specific areas: ‘special leave for employed parents’, but also ‘child care services’, the ‘environment, structure and organization of work’, and ‘sharing of responsibilities’ through promoting “increased participation by men [in the care and upbringing of children], in order to achieve a more equal sharing of parental responsibilities”. In short, leave policies should be part of a larger package of measures to provide comprehensive and coherent support for the reconciliation of employment and family life and, more specifically, to further gender equality.

What is clear is that this comprehensive and coherent approach is far from being achieved. There has been a great increase in ‘child care services’ for children, since 1992, encouraged by the EU itself (for example, through the Council of Ministers setting targets for provision in 2002, the so-called ‘Barcelona Targets’). But the ultimate test here is whether or not a gap remains between the end of well-paid statutory leave and the start of an entitlement to affordable early childhood (‘child care’) services. In 2016, only 7 of the Europe28 countries (Denmark, Finland,

Germany, Malta, Norway, Slovenia, Sweden) passed this test. Elsewhere parents face a gap, often substantial, between leave and early childhood services, a fundamental failure of policy coordination.

The relationship between statutory leave and the workplace is another area where coherence and consistency is patchy. Some employers are supportive, even encouraging, of employees who take statutory leave; indeed, some employers (either on their own or as part of collective agreements) supplement the provisions of statutory leave, for example extending the duration of or enhancing payment for leave. But other employers are less supportive. For example, as part of research to investigate the prevalence and nature of pregnancy discrimination and disadvantage in the workplace, a survey of over 3,000 mothers conducted in the UK for the Equality and Human Rights Commission (a government body) found that one in nine had been dismissed, made compulsorily redundant or treated so poorly they had to quit their job; applying these figures to the general population would suggest that as many as 54,000 new mothers lost their jobs every year. Moreover, the number of women losing their jobs in this way had nearly doubled over ten years (Adams et al., 2016).

But problems experienced by parents taking leave may well extend beyond being forced out of a job, to include a workplace culture that is unsympathetic or plain hostile. The same UK survey reported that one in five new mothers – as many as 100,000 mothers a year – experienced harassment or negative comments from colleagues, employer or manager when pregnant or returning from Maternity leave. Or the culture may create problems because of the excessive demands it makes on workers, demands that take no account of care responsibilities. So, a country may have wonderful statutory leave policies and employers may support employees taking leave – but on return to employment, these same employees are expected to work as if nothing has changed in their circumstances (see, for example, Kvande (2012), with its insight into the extreme demands on post-leave Norwegian fathers working in ‘knowledge-intensive’ workplaces).

The issue is this: however fine statutory leave may be, it is of limited use if no fundamental change occurs in workplace practices and norms, returning

parents back into an environment where the norm continues to be the full-time, continuously employed (male) worker. It seems increasingly apparent that well-designed leave policies need to be articulated with workplaces that have adopted the ‘universal caregiver model’ as norm. We need to get beyond Parental leave, to “imagine a social world in which citizens’ lives integrate wage earning, caregiving, community activism, political participation, and involvement in the associational life of civil society – while also leaving time for some fun...[I]t is the only imaginable postindustrial world that promises true gender equity” (Fraser, 1997, p. 62).

Getting the design right

In the introduction to the international network’s annual review, Parental leave is defined as “generally understood to be a care measure, intended to give parents the opportunity to spend time caring for a young child; it usually can only be taken after the end of Maternity leave”. A defining feature of this leave is that it should be equally available to mothers and fathers, and it is often assumed to play an important role in furthering gender equality, being one of those measures advocated in the 1992 Recommendation on Child Care to promote “increased participation by men [in the care and upbringing of children], in order to achieve a more equal sharing of parental responsibilities”.

If Parental leave is to work in this way, then it is important that it is not only equally available to fathers but also used by them. Over the years of the annual review, which includes a section for each country on the take-up of leave, it has become increasingly apparent that in order for this to happen, Parental leave must be designed to provide a period of father-only and well-paid leave¹. In other words,

¹ Following the European Commission, the annual review defines ‘well paid’ as at least two-thirds of normal earnings. However, in assessing national policies, it is important to also ask if a ceiling is placed on payments made to parents taking leave and, if so, at what level the ceiling is placed. A high replacement rate with a low ceiling may not, in effect, be particularly well paid for many parents.

fathers should have an individual entitlement to a period of leave that provides a high level of compensation for foregone earnings, and which if unused is forfeit - the 'use it or lose it' principle.

This design principle can be seen working in the case of Iceland, which implemented a radical reform of leave policies between 2001 and 2003, replacing a "poorly functioning patchwork of measures...with rather limited rights" (Einarsdóttir and Pétursdóttir, 2009, p. 162) with a totally new and simple structure: nine months of well paid leave (today paid at 80 % of earnings), three months for the mother, three months for the father, and three months for the family to be shared between parents as they choose. The results have been striking: in 2000 fathers accounted for just 3 % of all leave days taken, while by 2009 this had risen to 34 %, with fathers averaging 100 days of leave (Eydal et al., 2015, Table 3). Since then, the amount of leave taken by fathers has fallen back, possibly due to the impact of the financial crisis that so badly affected Iceland; but even so, in 2012, 92.7 per cent of fathers took some period of leave, averaging 87 days leave compared to 176 for mothers. In other words, nearly all Icelandic men took their leave entitlement, though only 14 % took any part of the three months family entitlement (Eydal and Gislaason, 2016). This confirms a wider conclusion: that where leave is a 'family' entitlement, rather than a non-transferable 'individual' entitlement, it will be overwhelmingly used by mothers.

A few countries have developed an alternative strategy to promote use of leave by fathers. Instead of a 'use it or lose it' individual entitlement, leave is a family entitlement, but there is a bonus of additional leave if some of the family entitlement is shared, i.e. used by fathers (the constant is that the leave, whether individual or family, has to be well paid if fathers are to take some portion). Germany provides an example. When Parental leave was first introduced into then West Germany in 1986, "the primary aim of policy makers was to enable and actively encourage mothers to stay at home and care for their children during the first years of their life" (Erlar, 2009, p. 119). This was achieved by a combination of a long (3 year) and low paid Parental leave

and low levels of 'childcare' services. But in 2007 this policy was overhauled with a new intention of encouraging and supporting maternal employment and increasing fertility (subsequently taken further by the introduction in 2013 of an entitlement to a childcare service for all children from 12 months of age, in effect bringing the former West Germany in line with policies standard in East Germany before unification).

The 2007 reform basically re-configured Parental leave from a long, low paid period, to a shorter period of well-paid leave, a 12 month family entitlement recompensed at around two-thirds of earnings. But there is also an incentive for fathers to use part of this family entitlement: if both parents use at least two months of the basic 12 months, a bonus two months of well paid leave can be taken. As with Iceland, this reform has led to significant change in take-up by fathers: the proportion of fathers taking Parental leave has risen significantly from 3,5 % of fathers in 2006 to 32 % of fathers in 2013. As in Iceland, too, complete gender equality is some way off, with leave-taking fathers in Germany averaging 3.1 months of leave compared to 11.6 months for leave-taking mothers (Blum, Erlar and Reimer, 2016). Nevertheless, here is more evidence that good design can affect outcomes.

Judged against the goal of encouraging gender equality, most Parental leave in the Europe28 is not well designed. Nine countries have no well-paid, father-only entitlement (whether of Parental or Paternity leave), and only one of these countries, Germany, has a bonus scheme involving well-paid leave. Of the remaining 19 countries, the average length of well-paid father-only leave is just two weeks, and such a short period of leave is usually Paternity leave rather than Parental leave.

Overall, therefore, it seems that most Parental leave in Europe is not well designed, if the aim is to encourage take-up by fathers and to promote gender equality. In some cases, of course, this may not be the national intent; in others, it is more a case of equality rhetoric not matched by policy practice. In either case, Parental leave is more a case of pitfall than progress, viewed from a gender equality perspective, with leave taking left to women and men untouched by the policy.

Of course, there are many other design issues. Let me highlight just two areas. First, how comprehensive or inclusive is leave policy designed to be: for example, do eligibility criteria exclude workers in various forms of non-standard employment, such as short-term or zero-hours contracts or agency work? Do they exclude various types of family, such as same sex parents? Second, what forms of flexibility are offered by leave policy design: for example, can leave be taken on a full-time or part-time basis; divided into several blocks; or used over a prolonged period, for example until a child starts school?

Making leave count

Over the years of producing the annual review, and in particular attempting to assess and compare take-up of various forms of leave in different countries, it has become apparent that good, detailed, comparable statistical information is in short supply. The problem is particularly acute for Parental leave, making the production of comparative tables of take-up practically impossible.

Where countries do not pay Parental leave, there are generally no administrative statistics on use; the best to be hoped for are the results of occasional surveys. Where payment is made, there are further complexities, in particular how should the take-up rate be expressed. Should take-up be calculated as a percentage of all births – or as a percentage of all births where parents are eligible for leave? In the latter case, countries with restrictive eligibility conditions may show a better take-up rate than those countries that are more inclusive. For example, Canada (excluding Quebec) has rather restrictive eligibility criteria, meaning that more than a third of mothers (36 %) are excluded from leave provision, with the proportion particularly high among low income families (61 %); in 2013, less than half of mothers in low income households received Maternity or Parental leave benefits, compared with 74 % in high income households (McKay, Mathieu and Doucet, 2016).

But there are further problems. For example, how to cope with countries that allow parents to take

their leave in blocks of time spread over a longer period, such as Sweden where leave may be taken until a child is 8 years old? Here the final take-up rate can only be judged once children have reached the cut-off point; the proportion of parents taking leave in a year will not be the same as the proportion who take leave at some point. It is also difficult to know how leave, which is open to both parents, is actually divided between mothers and fathers. As we have seen, nearly all fathers take Parental leave in Iceland, but mothers take substantially more once reckoned in terms of days used.

Then there is the next level down of analysis, finer grained data that would show in more detail who does and does not take leave. How, for example, does leave taking vary according to socio-economic status, ethnicity, age, numbers of children and other such variables? Or, again, how do parents make use of flexibility options designed into leave policies, such as taking leave part time or in shorter blocks of time? Such information might appear occasionally for a particular country in a survey, but is not routinely published through reliable administrative statistics.

Overall, therefore, due to this lack of reliable, comprehensive and comparative statistics, it is impossible to make a thorough assessment of how leave policies work and to take further the work of relating design to effect. For such a high-profile policy area, it is strange that we know so little.

The voice of the child

If we consider research and publications on leave policies (many of which are listed in the international network's annual review), then today we see three main areas of interest: labour markets and employment; gender equality; and demography. Yet from its inception, leave policy has had a concern with children and their well-being. Statutory maternity leave was first introduced in the 19th century, in countries such as Germany, France and Belgium, on the assumption that these measures "would protect and promote their [mothers'] own and their babies' physical well-being" (Kammerman and Moss, 2009, p. 262). While the EU's Directive on

Maternity leave, adopted in 1992, was justified as a 'health and welfare measure', again encompassing the welfare of both mother and child. There is, indeed, some evidence of the positive relationship between leave and children's health, for instance that

[m]ore generous paid leave reduce[s] deaths of infants and young children. The magnitudes of the estimated effects are substantial, especially where a causal effect of leave is most plausible. In particular, there is a much stronger negative relationship between leave durations and post-neonatal or child fatalities than for perinatal mortality, neonatal deaths, or low birth weight. The evidence further suggests that parental leave may be a cost-effective method of bettering child health (Ruhm, 2000, p. 931)

A further argument that leave policies can favour children is made in Sweden. Swedish researcher Philip Hwang notes that "parental leave legislation in Sweden has been designed to meet three major goals of social policy". One goal is to promote gender equality, by promoting women's economic independence; the second, also related to gender equality, is to enable men to be more involved in child care and family life. But the first goal is about children's well-being:

Parental leave is seen as guaranteeing that people can have children and return to their jobs without adverse consequences, thus ensuring children's economic well-being. Children are also seen as benefitting psychologically from mothers and fathers being home with them during their first months of life, without parents feeling economic stress from unemployment. Swedish children have a legal right to have a relationship with both parents, and fathers' ability to take parental leave is one way men can develop their relationship with their children (Hwang, 1999, p. 49).

The issue here is not whether or not leave policies are relevant to children's well-being; they clearly are. The issue is how the interests of children might be represented in policy making and implementation. For it is my impression, after wor-

king in this field for nearly 30 years, that children are marginal if not totally invisible in policy making and implementation. Ministries of employment and social welfare, employers' groups, women's groups, family groups, even trade unions may have their say, but I have not come across any groups that represent children participating. Similarly, researchers in early childhood or childhood studies show little or no interest.

We need, I conclude, to have the voice of the child heard in this policy area, and to find ways to factor in consideration of the best interests of the child and children's rights. Doubtless easier said than done. But not impossible either, at least once the present-day silence is acknowledged and found unacceptable.

THE FUTURE FOR LEAVE POLICIES

Leave policies have taken off in recent years, becoming a big ticket item in social policy. Yet policy interest has remained remarkably limited and static, with policy debates and changes largely focused on 'parental' leaves, measures focused on a few years of the lifecourse – early childhood and early parenthood. This is, in my view, insufficient; we need to raise our sights and take a far wider perspective. We are, in Europe, ageing societies. The share of those aged 80 years or above in the EU-28's population is projected to more than double between 2015 and 2080, from 5,4 % to 12,7 % (Eurostat, 2016); while today's 20-year-olds can expect to live to 105! Increased longevity means we have to work longer as retirement is pushed ever further back, but also that we are more likely to be caring for adult relatives while still in employment. At the same time there are, arguably, many other important social activities calling for our participation, in civil society, in lifelong learning, and caring for our own health.

All these developments, already upon us, seem to call for a radical rethinking of leave policies, moving from their current narrow focus, to a broader lifecourse model, in which we all, as citizens, have a substantial quota of leave that we can draw down for a wide variety of reasons and at any time during

our working lives. Backed, too, by a matching source of replacement income, perhaps some form of universal basic income which, it has been argued, “gives everyone some real freedom – as opposed to a sheer right – to withdraw from paid employment in order to perform autonomous activities, such as grass-roots militancy or unpaid care work” (Parijs, 2004, p. 20; for a fuller discussion, see Ackerman, Alstott and van Parijs, 2005).

In this respect, Belgium provides an important, if too little known, example. The Belgian career break/time credit system gives each worker the right to one year’s full-time leave (or longer if taken part-time) over the course of their working lifetime, with collective agreements extending this period in some cases. Leave can be taken for any reason, with a flat-rate payment previously paid for all users; more recently, government has confined the flat-rate payment to those taking leave to provide care, although care here is broadly defined to include adults as well as children (Merla and Deven, 2016).

Such a model could readily be enhanced, with a larger time credit and/or more generous payments. But important as it might be as part of a statutory framework of support for working carers and citizens, it will not be sufficient by itself. We are drawn back to the importance of changes in employment and the workplace that normalise the idea of all workers routinely having important responsibilities and roles beyond employment, and therefore shifting employment and the workplace to Nancy Fraser’s ‘universal caregiver model’, defining care in its broadest sense to include care of self, others, society and environment.

All this may seem visionary, utopian even, something for the distant future. But arguably it is realistic and feasible, and the need for such radical rethinking and wholesale reform is upon us now. Moreover, it is by no means the end of the matter. For looming up in the future, the not too distant future, is the very real possibility of far larger changes and what these changes mean for the future relationship between care and employment.

I am speaking here of the possibility of the mass eradication of jobs and human employment as the full impact of technological change is felt across

our world. In a 2013 publication – ‘The Future of Employment: How susceptible are jobs to computerisation?’ – Frey and Osborne conclude that nearly half of all US jobs are at high risk of going within 20 years. While a recent report on the UK in 2030 concludes that

15 million jobs – two-thirds of the total – are at medium to high risk of being automated in the coming decades. Both routine and non-routine work will be displaced... Over time there will be fewer and fewer tasks – and in time, jobs – where humans can outperform machines. Given this, it is likely we are at ‘peak human’ in terms of human labour being the most important factor of production (IPPR, 2016, p. 28).

To which it can be countered that past production revolutions have destroyed jobs, but also created new ones in at least equal measure. The question begged by this scenario is: what sort of jobs? Rather than a bonanza of new good quality employment, a more daunting prospect is likely, marked by increasing insecurity and inequality. In its report on the UK in 2030, the IPPR think tank envisage that

[f]luidity will become normal and insecurity near-universalised... Labour market insecurity, already prevalent for many, will be the experience of work for the majority of people by 2030. Technological change, including the advance of algorithmic management and mobile technologies, will mean digital Taylorism for some, and increased autonomy for others. The growth of digital platforms will facilitate the rise of the gig economy, with work more piecemeal and task-based. Without effective regulation it will worsen working conditions for many while reducing wages. Work will be polarised between those with greater control and flexibility, and those whose time is ever more controlled. There will be more high-tech, high touch roles involving greater skills and more creative, non-repetitive forms of work (where humans will retain comparative advantages over robots for the foreseeable future). At the same time, a long tail of low-skilled work is likely to remain in place, with a growing divide in terms of autonomy, agency and reward at work (IPPR, 2016, p. 26).

But in another scenario for the future, this time round such job replacement may not happen; in the latest technological revolution new work will not fill the gap left by the destruction of current jobs. As Yuval Harari observes:

[this job replacement] is not a law of nature, and nothing guarantees it will continue to be like that in the future...As long as machines competed with us merely in physical abilities, you could always find cognitive tasks that humans do better. So machines took over purely manual jobs, while humans focused on jobs requiring at least some cognitive skills. Yet what will happen once algorithms outperform us in remembering, analysing and recognising patterns...(so) the crucial problem isn't creating new jobs. The crucial problem is creating new jobs that humans perform better than algorithms (Harari, 2016, p. 326).

This, Harari suggests, may create a wholly new and disturbing situation:

The technological bonanza will probably make it feasible to feed and support the useless masses even without any effort on their side. But what will keep them occupied and content? People must do something, or they will go crazy. What will they do all day? (ibid., p. 326).

Of course, such scenarios may turn out to be far too pessimistic. Former patterns of job generation may repeat themselves, a sufficiency of good new jobs may emerge. Humankind may continue to be as busy as ever, with work of some kind continuing to play a central role in life. Harari, for all his insights, has little to say about care and caring (although presumably he would envisage this going the same way as employment, increasingly taken over by robots, computers and algorithms). Or alternatively those predictions I recall from the 1970s, of a life mainly filled by leisure time, will come real. Perhaps the debates in 50 years' time will be about giving citizens an entitlement to employment for a few hours a week or for a few years in a lifetime otherwise consisting of endless leave.

Positive outcomes shared by everyone might result from the evolution of unbridled capitalism, unexpected but welcome. More likely though they will require the exercise of collective will through societies coming together to contest technological determinism, reminding themselves that "[t]echnology is not neutral; politics and culture shape its use and who benefits" (IPPR, 2016, p. 18). Democracy may be renewed and democratic societies may assume control over the direction and manner of development, to ensure that all benefit from technology and changes in employment, rather than weakly accepting the entrenching of "a new form of economic feudalism: those who own the robots will reap the rewards, the rest will struggle as human labour becomes less and less important in the production process" (ibid.). Democratic societies could, in short, re-assert the dominance of the social over the economic, the political over the technical.

As part of such 'future building' (Facer, 2011), fighting to create better futures for all rather than succumb to what futurist Riel Miller calls "the totalitarianism of inevitable futures", much could be done to improve the lives of employed women and men in the more immediate future, not only by better designing Parental leave but by going beyond Parental leave: rethinking and reconfiguring the relationships between care (broadly defined), employment and gender, in which a mix of leave and service entitlements combines with reforms to the labour market and cultural changes in the workplace – not to mention other redistributive measures intended to increase equality and so improve the lives of citizens and the functioning of the societies in which they live. At the same time, we need to be thinking now even further ahead, to the more distant future, not least so we can, perhaps, begin to exert some democratic control over that future and the direction we want to take to reach it.

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