

Work-life balance in Europe: a response to the baby bust or reward for the baby boomers?

1 Introduction

Rarely distinguishing themselves by their capacity to identify the mote in their own eye first, sociologists often pay less attention than they might to the origins of the concepts they work with, especially at the 'applied' end of the discipline, where ideas attractive to 'customers' or 'users' in the state, social partners or funding bodies often enjoy a remarkably short shelf life. 'Work-life balance' (hereafter WLB) is a good example of a term plucked from everyday popular use to serve as an analytical concept in social scientific analysis. The problem is that this has been done with insufficient reflection about its suitability for such a task, and especially about the ambiguities of meaning and definition that come with the term.

Only a decade ago the term WLB was hardly used. For example it does not appear in the 1981 International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention 156 on 'Workers with Family Responsibilities'. However The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (EFILWC), a tripartite body sponsored by the European Union (EU), can now affirm that 'work-life balance is high on the policy agenda of the EU and its Member States' (EFILWC 2004: 2). The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has published several studies (2001; 2002; 2003; 2004a; 2005), and, in reassessing its *Jobs Strategy* recently admitted 'underplaying' the importance of reconciling work and family life (2004b). EU Employment Guidelines issued in 2002, required 'Member States and the social partners to design, implement and promote a wide range of family-friendly working arrangements.' (Hardy and Adnett 2002 158). In Britain, for example, WLB has been the subject of a special Department of Trade and Industry campaign, a Green Paper, a 'Taskforce' and a Treasury 'strategy document' (HMG Department of Trade and Industry 2000; HMG Treasury and HMG Department of Trade and Industry 2003). WLB initiatives have occurred in many other European countries too. The Irish government's *Programme for Prosperity and Fairness* resembles developments in the UK in promoting the 'business case' for work-life balance initiatives. Since 1999, Belgium, Finland, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain have all introduced legislation which either improves existing parental or sabbatical leave, or gives employees new rights to limit or reduce their working hours. The social partners too have been prominent in support, with both employers and workers' organisations endorsing WLB. Thus European Trades Union Confederation (ETUC) General Secretary

John Monks, commenting on Commission proposals to amend the Working Time Directive, recently argued that the ‘health and safety and work-life balance of male and female workers in an enlarged Europe’ was vital (ETUC 2004).

Where policy leads, so, it appears, does academia follow. Taylor (2003: 6) notes that ‘the flow of research monographs, seminars and conferences over this issue seems to have grown endless in a remarkably brief period of time’. A search of social science and management journal databases confirms this. Only a handful of articles using the term or its analogues were published before 1995, just over twenty followed in the next five years while over a hundred have appeared since 2000. However the term may be nearing the end of its shelf life, as competitor concepts are already surfacing. The Orwellian neologism ‘flexicurity’ or ‘right balance between flexibility and security’ (Kok 2004 33) may soon replace it.

All this poses three questions which this article addresses. What do policy makers and the social partners mean by WLB, what objectives might it serve? Why has the concept of WLB surfaced *now*? Is it a useful concept for social scientists? I shall suggest that the popular accounts of both the origins of the WLB debate and meanings attributed to it, are empirically and logically weak. Public policy interest in the debate has its true origins in an unexpected source: old-established (and demonstrably mistaken) European states’ worries about population trends. On the other hand, the popular resonance of the debate has a quite different source: shortage of time caused more by general affluence than by the particular social relations of work and care in different European states.

2 Defining work-life balance

At first sight WLB may seem obvious. A typical definition, used in the UK Department of Trade and Industry’s web page, suggests that it is simply about coordinating the demands of employment with life’s other obligations:

Work-life balance is about adjusting working patterns. Regardless of age, race or gender, everyone can find a rhythm to help them combine work with their other responsibilities or aspirations.

While this 'definition' suggests that 'life' is no longer dominated by 'work' in quite the way it may once have been, it says little about the continued central importance of work for the income of the vast majority of people (either immediately or in the form of future pension or benefit rights) and is so general as to be vacuous, as well as downplaying any objective constraints on working arrangements and foregrounding 'choice'. Single parents, couples on low incomes, families with young children faced with a shortage of suitable childcare or workers obliged to put in long hours might see this issue as more complex than finding the right 'rhythm'. However this quote captures one important element of WLB discourse. The emphasis is often on *individual* solutions. The implication is that with adequate communication and consultation, employers and workers can voluntarily adjust the volume and scheduling of working hours to their mutual benefit, with minimum state intervention. Advocates of the 'business case' for WLB favour such arguments.

WLB discourse is sometimes aimed at all 'life' beyond work. Thus the ETUC general secretary has suggested that unions and employers might negotiate 'time bargains' to allow workers more time to pursue a range of activities, such as education or professional training, as well as family commitments. However WLB is more often defined much more narrowly as facilitating employment and *parenting*. The OECD has highlighted how most working hours 'flexibility' makes family life more difficult and frustrate parenting. It has also emphasised the contribution of publicly funded nursery and childcare provision. The language of WLB is often used to recognise that the 'male breadwinner system' of employment has gone in Europe, and that some new way both of thinking about and of regulating the relationship between the labour market and the family is therefore necessary. Thus the UK government has argued:

In the 1950s, the predominant, though not exclusive, pattern of work within two-parent families was one with the father as the sole breadwinner and the mother in unpaid work at home or in stop-start employment. The policies of employers and government assumed this model. Today there is much more diversity in family structures and in the pattern of work. Most two-parent families are also two-earner families. There are more lone parents, more than half of whom are in work. Most women are employed. Throughout the workforce, working hours are more diverse. (HMG Treasury 2003: 5)

Similarly, in Spain, discussion of the 'conciliation of work and family life' has focused on how better rights for parents at work, or changes to work or school hours that made combining work and childcare easier, might help the recovery of the low fertility rate there.

If what WLB actually means is less than clear, so too are the policy objectives associated with it. Work and life can be 'balanced' in many different ways. Thus the male breadwinner system itself 'balanced' work and life, by prioritising employment or unpaid caring work for men and women on the basis of their sex, via both direct and formal institutional discrimination (such as marriage bars, educational and job segregation, social security and pension entitlements) and norms and ideologies that associated men with aggression, ambition independence and the public sphere, and women with empathy, caring, dependency and the private sphere¹. However six goals frequently appear. One is the reduction in working time, and opposition to 'long hours' argued to be incompatible with proper family life. However such reductions may take a wide variety of forms, and be aimed at quite different groups of workers. They may be permanent, or tailored to temporary parental or other care obligations. They may have different implications for pay, conditions and seniority, and have their origin in state regulated employee rights or locally bargained agreements. A second goal is the ability to withdraw temporarily from work, with the right to return. Again this might be for diverse reasons: parental or caring obligations, training, or 'sabbaticals' for other reasons.

While these two goals imply a reduction in the labour supply (at least in the short term) a third WLB goal is, on the contrary, to increase the labour supply. A labour market offering a greater variety of weekly hours and schedules, frequently summarised by the rather vague term 'flexibility', is argued to make employment easier for those with care obligations. This applies not only to women workers with such obligations, but to men who now take them on, when under the male breadwinner system, they could be assumed to have wives who would undertake them for them. Similarly a fourth goal is simply the provision of childcare to (potential) employees, and of other public services (especially education) in a way that facilitates parental employment. Given that one legacy of patriarchy in general and the male breadwinner system in particular has been an unequal division of labour in parenting well beyond anything that sex differences might imply, a fifth goal has frequently been to make the sexual division of domestic and caring labour more equal. WLB is thus often presented as an equal opportunities policy.

Finally, a sixth goal has been to secure the labour supply over the long term, and ward off the pernicious fiscal and economic effects of ‘population ageing’ by boosting specifically *fertility sustaining* family life, and thus, it is hoped, reverse the trend fall in fertility in Europe. These twin demographic developments – population ageing and falling fertility – have come to fill states, as well as the EU and OECD, with alarm about the future of the labour supply and of their fiscal solvency. The ‘total period fertility rate’ can be thought of as measuring the average number of children a woman would have were she to survive to the end of her reproductive years (usually taken to be age 45). This rate has almost halved in Europe over the last forty years (Figure 1). The number of families having three or more children has plummeted, and more men and women now ‘voluntarily’ decide to remain childless compared to the 1950s or 1960s. States cross their fingers and hope that WLB might deliver both *more* working mothers now, and by supporting fertility, *more* workers for the future. Thus the OECD argues that ‘The work/family balance is also important for longer-term trends in population ... it is plausible that improvements in the work/family balance could help to increase both current employment rates and fertility rates’ (2001, 130).

[Fig. 1 about here]

3 Why has WLB surfaced now?

All this begs the question of why such an amorphous group of policy concerns should have crystallised so rapidly into the WLB debate. There are three popular answers to this question that are either false, or seriously incomplete. The first is that the collapse of the male breadwinner system has ushered in the WLB debate because it forces employers to recognise the family responsibilities of employees. If there are record proportions of workers who are active parents, then employers can no longer assume that the stereotypical ideal employee is one with undivided loyalty to the firm. The second is that work intensification and extensification – long hours and stress - has forced governments to intervene to protect workers from the further degradation of their conditions. The third is that family life has become more difficult, so that it encroaches on employment in new ways. Let us look at each of these in turn.

The decline of the male breadwinner system

The male breadwinner system has been eroded by four interrelated developments that all have their origins in the way liberalism undermines patriarchy (Mann 1994). First, there has

been the consolidation of increasingly equal opportunities ('credentialism' and gender meritocracy in both education and training *for* and recruitment *to* employment). The rise of the service sector in general and public services in particular ('de-industrialisation') has 'feminised' employment' (Mason and Jenson 1995). Technological and structural change has favoured skills stereotypically associated with women rather than men. In the 1990s women were twice as likely as men (48% compared to 22%) to be employed in economic sectors experiencing employment growth (European Commission 1997). The shift to the '24 hour' economy and associated rise of 'flexible' hours and schedules of employment has favoured the recruitment of those willing to, or having no choice but to, accept non-standard working hours (as women have been). These developments have all transformed female activity rates across the life course into a distribution similar to that of men (Solsona and Treviño 1995). If we compare the employment rate of women aged 15 to 64 to that of men, in 2000 it ranged from around 90% or more in Sweden, Finland and Denmark to less than 60% in Spain, Italy, and Greece.

Second, governments' commitment to gender equality as represented in equal opportunities legislation and subscription to international conventions has as often taken them from rhetoric to implementing practical measures that have led to real progress. For example article 11(2)b of the 1981 UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women committed governments:

'To encourage the provision of the necessary supporting social services to enable parents to combine family obligations with work responsibilities and participation in public life, in particular through promoting the establishment and development of a network of child-care facilities.'

The European Union's Equality Strategy, includes in its objectives the 'modification of sex roles and stereotypes' and measures to 'improve the reconciliation of work and family life so that men as well as women find it easier to re-enter the labour market after an absence'. The existence of these kinds of promises makes it easier to persuade states to take action on gender inequality, as well as reinforcing the general legitimacy of gender equality. As Connell (1995) has noted, patriarchy faces a legitimisation crisis.

Third, states have developed increased direct and indirect state support for childcare through the provision of income transfers, maternity and parental leave, childcare, health and education services. This benefits mothers insofar as they have historically undertaken most of this work. As well as socialising part of the cost of rearing children, such transfers (in combination with greater labour market gender equality) permit a greater flexibility of family form and in particular facilitate single parent families, and free mothers from automatic dependence on an earner patriarch. Castles (2004) shows that, contrary to expectations, neo-liberalism and globalisation have not decreased such state expenditure. However it varies widely across different states. If we look only at social expenditure which excludes education, the percentage of this destined to support for families with children varies from a high of 17% in Sweden to a mere 2% in Spain. In absolute terms, in 2001, Denmark spent over sixteen times as much per capita as Spain².

While these changes are certainly still current, they are none of them very new. The male breadwinner system has been in decline for half a century, as women's employment in Europe has relentlessly increased, so that between 1960 and 2003 women's activity rates as a proportion of men's activity rates increased from 44% to 79% in the then fifteen member countries of the European Union (EU15), as Table 1 shows. Therefore the withering of this system can hardly explain the flowering of the WLB debate.

[Tab. 1 about here]

There are perhaps only two dimensions of the collapse of male-breadwinner system that have gained force more recently: dramatic changes in *attitudes* about gender roles and shifts in the domestic division of labour. Table 2 shows attitudes towards a key component of male breadwinner ideology – the idea that men should do paid work and women should concentrate on the home for – for the years 1994 and 2002. Not only do successive cohorts hold more egalitarian attitudes, analysis of the data shows that attitudes have also changed across the life course (not shown). While we might pride ourselves on our contemporary ability to see the historical specificity and function of such norms, such that today few would seek to defend the idea that men possess some special aptitude for paid work, the change in ideology has been fairly recent and rapid. As late as the early 1980s there was still public debate over whether jobs should be prioritised for men in a period of high unemployment. Eurobarometer 19, in 1983, found a majority in every Community member state except Denmark agreeing

completely or ‘to some extent’ that ‘in this period of high unemployment a man has more right to a job than a woman has’. By 1996 when the question was repeated, there were majorities against, mostly substantial, in every country. As recently as 1988 a majority of adults in Spain agreed with the central tenet of male breadwinner ideology that ‘A man’s job is to earn money; a woman’s job is to look after the house and family’. By 2002 less than one in six agreed with this idea, and 71% described their ideal family as one where ‘both the man and woman are employed and share household chores and childcare’ (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas 2002). This is a good description of the ‘dual earner dual carer’ model of production and reproduction suggested by both Fraser (1994) and Folbre (1994) and described by the former only a decade ago as ‘Utopian’! The idea persists that women have that kind of special aptitude for caring, particularly of neo-natal infants, that men were once thought to have for paid work. Crucially, less than one in ten adults (9.4%) in Europe now translate this conviction into the conclusion that childcare should *not* be organised as equally as possible (see Table 3). We know, of course, that attitudes and behaviour are not the same thing and that behaviour lags some way behind attitudes (Valiente 1997).

[Tab. 2 about here]

[Tab. 3 about here]

Work intensity, long hours and globalisation

If the collapse of male breadwinnerism cannot explain the fluorescence of the WLB debate, neither can the popular radical argument that increasing pressure in employment, both in terms of the volume of hours worked, and the intensity of that work, makes finding the time and energy for life outside it more difficult. At first sight such an analysis looks persuasive. Globalisation, the increasing mobility of capital, and competition from both white and blue collar workforces in Eastern Europe, North Africa and Asia may undermine the viability of the European ‘social model’ and force employers to demand longer or more intense work from their European workforces. For example in November 2004, *Volkswagen AG* won not only a pay freeze but greater flexibility on working hours from its workforce while *Seimens* persuaded workers to increase hours for no extra pay to prevent 2,000 jobs relocating to Hungary. *British Airways*, and other major British, American and Australian companies now employ an estimated 100,000 call centre workers in India (*Observer* 7 December 2003). In Spain, *Telefonica* has relocated such work to Morocco. However, such examples should be

compared with counter examples, and with the aggregate evidence. Thus *Seat* recently decided to revert production of its Ibiza model to Barcelona from Bratislava because of disappointing performance at its Slovakian site. The *Volkswagen* 'pay freeze' came with a 1.000 € 'bonus' in 2005, a seven year no-redundancy guarantee and a time-bank system under which short hours worked in slack periods would not bring reductions in pay!

Contrary to popular belief, working hours in Europe have been falling rather fast for the whole post war period, as the most recent *Employment Outlook* demonstrates (OECD 2004). Since 1970 average hours per worker have declined 17% in the EU15, by 25% in Germany, and by 9% in the OECD as a whole. This trend has been offset by the rise in women's employment and associated increases in part time and other forms of working. Table 4 therefore shows the change in working hours for men only over the last decade (the period when working time is often argued to have increased). Only in Finland have working hours for men increased. Even here the evidence is not conclusive. Robinson and Godbey (1999) suggest that the way official statistics measure working hours may tend to inflate them over time, so that small recorded increases may represent real decreases.

[Tab. 4 about here]

However the *scheduling* of work may have become more complex for both men and women. A fifth or more of men work shifts in Austria, the Czech Republic, Finland, Greece, Hungary Iceland, Italy and the UK, one third do so in the Slovak Republic and no less than 41% in Poland. One fifth or more of men work in the evenings in Denmark, Finland and the UK; and more than one in ten work nights in Austria, Finland, Hungary, Portugal, the Slovak Republic and the UK. More than a fifth work on Saturdays in Greece, Iceland, Italy, the Netherlands, the Slovak Republic, Spain and the UK. One fifth or more of women do evening work in Denmark, Finland, Sweden and the UK; a fifth or more do Saturday work in Austria, Denmark Finland, France Germany Greece, Italy the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK and the same proportion do shift work in the Czech Republic, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Poland, the Slovak Republic (OECD 2004). As the editorial in the latest issue of the OECD's *Employment outlook* notes 'expanding options to work part-time can make it easier for parents with young children to combine working and parenting ... however other working arrangements tend to make it more, rather than less, difficult for workers to reconcile their work and family life.' (OECD 2004: 13)

It might be contested that any fall in men's hours has been insufficient to compensate the rise in women's hours, leaving dual earner households with a heavier and more complex work burden, but this argument also lacks empirical substance. However we cut the cake, the aggregate amount of paid work which people have to 'balance' has been and is *falling*. Who is doing it and at what point in their life course, *has* changed. Throughout Europe it is both the employment rate and working hours of *mothers* which are increasing; the participation of very young workers is falling as they spend longer in education and training, or in unemployment, while that of older workers fell rapidly in the 1980s and 1990s as governments and enterprises used early retirement plans or the re-definition of the long-term unemployed as the long-term sick in order to drive down unemployment levels.

Intensity of work is more difficult to measure, but here too evidence of systematic increase is scarce. Eurobarometer surveys in both 1996 and 2001 asked employees whether there had been 'significant changes' compared to five years ago, either in the same job, or in the job they held then. In both surveys around one half of adult workers thought that their levels of skill, effort, stress, flexibility and responsibility had increased. Very few thought that changes had been in the other direction, while the balance reported little or no change³.

Such findings have three main weaknesses however. The first is that, being cross sectional, they confuse general social change with life course change. We cannot easily tell, for example, how far employees accumulate new responsibilities and tasks along a career that itself has remained unchanged (life course change which can occur without any overall change in *average* work intensity, as older, experienced workers retire, and young, inexperienced workers enter the labour force) and how far change represents an average shift across all jobs (social change). The second is that respondents' views are what psychologists would call 'accountable': they may well be aware of a normatively condoned or expected answer and tailor their replies accordingly. In a world where competitiveness and achievement are frequently stressed, where 'hard' work carries moral overtones and much discussion in both the private world of the family and public world of the market and state revolves around arguments about the fairness of the distribution of workloads, effort and reward, it is perhaps easier for respondents to see themselves as hard working, and be articulate about the associated pressures and responsibility, than to report (or as it might appear to them 'admit') that they have a job that is undemanding and, moreover, getting

easier. The third is what we might call the ‘Norman Yoke’ effect⁴ (Hill 1958). Respondents are often more readily aware of negative rather than positive social change in making comparisons with times past. In societies dominated by a discourse of ‘progress’ there is a paradoxically increased awareness of any perceived *lack* of progress. The road to a better tomorrow is constructed, paradoxically, via the assertion that things have never been worse.

We can test all this out by comparing the results for the two surveys. Any trend towards work intensification should reveal itself as a worsening in respondents’ evaluations of their current work characteristics and conditions (however small – five years is not a long period). Table 5 shows precisely the opposite. The only area where there is a small decline is in satisfaction with hours of work, although actual hours of work for men declined in this period (confirming the trend registered by OECD statistics reported above). Men and women aged 25 to 44, the age group more likely to be (potential) parents, reported slightly more onerous jobs on average, but shared in the general improvement.

[Tab. 5 about here]

Life: new and old

If there is little evidence of longer hours or work intensification, what about the ‘life’ side of the equation? Is there more ‘family’ work to be done? We could summarise the latter as comprising: (1) the routine daily ‘reproduction’ of family members (eating, personal care, cleanliness and dress, training or education, resting, entertainment or ‘leisure’); (2) the care of family members rendered temporarily dependent by illness; and (3) the care of routinely dependent family members: children (especially infants) and the infirm elderly. Let us examine each component in turn.

Routine reproduction probably requires continually increasing resources as standards of personal hygiene and presentation ratchet upwards. However this has been outstripped by productivity gains from technological innovation. The common idea that higher standards of consumption or compulsive domesticity have absorbed the effects of technological change is engaging but simply wrong (Silva 2002). Heating, cleaning, laundry, storage, and cooking technology have slashed domestic labour requirements while the commodification of consumption, what Braverman (1974) termed the ‘Universal Market’, has exported large amounts of domestic labour to the market (e.g. prepared foods, eating out, ‘easycare’ clothes,

cleaning products etc.). Family members temporarily ill enough to require intensive care are more likely than in the past to have access to medical facilities via state provision or private medical insurance. Should they stay at home, telephony makes remote supervision of their progress easier. While 'population ageing' may mean that there are more elderly family members, since their greater longevity is related to their better health, there is rather less change in the proportion of the infirm elderly than is often assumed, while a steadily increasing proportion of them have access to public shelter or assistance. In 1998 Eurostat estimated the proportion of adult women who regularly cared for ill, handicapped or infirm people (whether or not family members) at around 6% compared to 27% who cared for dependent children⁵. Alongside a high life expectancy, and therefore substantial population of older people, Spain has one of the lowest levels of state support for the elderly and infirm. Most elder care is done within the family. Yet, as table 6 shows, more older men and women were providing elder and childcare to other households than working age men and women were providing elder care.

[Table 6 about here]

In fact, 'population ageing' has a quite different effect: an increase in the number of older family members not only available to care for children or other dependents, but to provide *economic support* to families. Indeed, if we take the age of retirement as our cut off point it appears that this group *provides* more care than it *receives* within the family. For example, the *Millennium Cohort Study* in the UK asked mothers of around 20,000 babies born in 2000 about their own parents: 93% had a mother still alive, and 83% a father. Six out of ten millennium babies had all four grandparents still alive. Eight out of ten mothers said their parents had helped them financially, and seven out of ten relied upon them for childcare. No less than 45% of mothers at work said their parents were the main source of childcare when they were working. Surveys for other countries confirm the importance of transfers of both caring work and money from parents to their mature children. (e.g. Langsether and Hellevik 2005). They dwarf transfers in the opposite direction.

Children have always been 'cumbersome' (Myrdal 1968 [1939]) and this has probably increased in modern mobile, market-based societies. Children may be more time consuming than in the past ((Budig and Folbre 2002; Craig 2003; Craig and Bittman 2004; Fisher, McCulloch and Gershuny 1999; Gauthier, Smeeding and Jr. 2001; Hallberg and Klevmarken

2001) but spend a far greater amount of time than previously in nurseries, schools, crèches and so on, either publicly provided or paid for. The age at which they leave home may be increasing (it varies substantially across countries in Europe) as establishing a career takes longer, or the price of housing makes establishing independence more difficult, but this is hardly likely to impact on WLB (18 year olds might be psychologically demanding for their parents, but they hardly require feeding, cleaning or changing). Finally, and most important of all, the frequently forgotten obverse side of ‘population ageing’ and falling fertility is that children now make up an unprecedentedly low proportion of Europe’s population.

This is not the place to critique the concept of ‘population ageing’, but a few brief comments can illuminate its relevance to the analysis of WLB. The language of population ageing frequently summons up a greying world where those still young enough to be physically active devote an ever increasing proportion of their time and energy to caring for a growing army of the very old who in earlier times would have died before becoming a drain on resources. I use such blunt language as it best reveals the discursive deceit behind the concept of population ageing. Populations do not ‘age’; people do. Population ageing is about the transformation of life expectancy and ‘democratisation’ of longevity: what had hitherto been the good fortune of a few has become the routine expectation of all (Perez Diéz 2004).

There are three key reasons why population ageing does not worsen the collective or individual ‘balance’ between work and life in the way that is routinely supposed. First, most population ageing has *already* occurred. Over the twentieth century the proportion of those over retirement age trebled. Over the next fifty years it might double (Coleman 2002; Kok 2004). Second, using calendar age to calculate dependency ratios, the measure most widely adopted in political debate, bears an increasingly tenuous relationship to the actual ratios of workers and taxpayers to their ‘dependents’: as we saw above, women’s activity rates compared to men have almost doubled. Most people now enter the labour market well after age 16, and many leave it long before ‘retirement’ age. What is far more important than its size is the productivity of this labour force. Third, ‘old’ or ‘not in the labour force’, does *not* necessarily mean either ‘dependent’ or ‘inactive’. Older family members who, thanks to ‘population ageing’ now enjoy healthier and longer lives, do a substantial and increasing proportion of reproductive work, especially childcare, which is essential to ‘balancing’ work and family. Moreover they are a decisive source of economic resources for families. It also

means that, on average, people generate and accumulate more resources across these lives - resources which they pass on to their children.

4 WLB, the labour supply and state natalism: a response to the baby bust

If what are usually imagined to be its roots cannot account for the rise of the WLB debate we need to look for other reasons. In the above discussion I have already suggested that an obvious candidate is states' concern about their immediate and future labour supply, as illustrated, for example by the EU Lisbon summit's decision to set employment targets. Supra state bodies such as the OECD and EU, free from the vagaries of immediate political pressure, have more capacity to adopt longer timescales in their thinking. The labour supply in Europe has been growing throughout the post war period, as we saw above, but Europe's jobs performance has been seen as inferior to North America which virtually doubled its labour force in between 1960 and 2000. WLB has been seen as a key way of increasing the labour supply by driving up mothers' employment rates in order to reach the Lisbon targets for female employment, since young, childless and (owing to the relative success of equality initiatives in education) increasingly well qualified women workers already have participation rates close to those of men. But here states find themselves in a catch-22. Increasing the female labour supply in the short term, by increasing mothers' employment, might *depress* the labour supply in the longer term by accelerating the fall in birth rates. This, amongst other reasons, is why after a half century of slumbering neglect made possible by the baby boom, the corridors of European universities have been rudely disturbed by the boots of a veritable army of social scientists marching off in search of the determinants of fertility, and in particular its hypothetical links to employment and WLB provision (Ahn and Mira 1998; Castles 2003; Del Boca, Pasqua and Pronzato 2004).

In analysing fertility and population trends it is important to distinguish states' perceptions (which will determine the development of the policy debate and related sociological analysis) and more calm and considered analyses. States are obsessed with size. In international relations size certainly matters. The USA (population 293 million), packs a bigger punch than San Marino (population 28 thousand). The spectre of population decline alarms states, and, in the past, the demographers they largely employed (directly or indirectly) often fed such fears (Teitelbaum & Winter 1986). Thus, in the inter-war period, when birth rates in Europe dipped below replacement level in some countries, many demographers forecast declining populations, warned against dire consequences for national security and frequently inveighed

against either the moral decay (i.e. use of contraception) imagined to lie behind this trend or the degradation of the quality of racial stock it might imply (Soloway 1990). Unfortunately sociologists, joining in the fray, were not averse to alarmist propositions of their own. In a seminal 1929 *American Journal of Sociology* article that started the demographic transition debate, Warren Thompson argued that the population of Europe had almost certainly reached its limit and was destined to fall. It trebled over the next eighty years. In 1937, writing in *Sociological Review* Kingsley Davis predicted not only the collapse of the family, but of childbearing itself. In the future fertility might best be sustained by the industrialisation of motherhood, with the state adopting the father's role.⁶

The 'spectre' of contemporary population decline is not fantasy. By 1990 Bulgaria, Germany Hungary and Scotland had more deaths than births and by 2001 these had been joined by Italy, Sweden and several of the 'transitional' states from the former Soviet Union: Latvia, Estonia, Belarus, Lithuania, Moldova, Armenia and Poland. Hence the interest of the EU and OECD. However, any critical sociological analysis must ask just what social change might flow from either population decline or 'ageing'. This is not the place to undertake such an analysis, but we might note, in passing, that the history of state natalism is largely one of failure (Caldwell et al 2002). In the context of WLB, we might expect measures designed to 'take parenting out of competition' to have some effect. That is to say, were parents of infant children and others able to compete on completely equal terms on the labour market, then the former need not take into account the indirect costs of earnings foregone when contemplating starting a family. However, it is not hard to see that such measures would require far reaching effort by both the state and employers in terms of the availability of parental and emergency leave, childcare provision and expectations of employee flexibility, loyalty and mobility. The currently existing range of WLB measures contemplated by most governments falls far short of this, with the partial exception of Denmark and Sweden.

[Table 7 about here]

There is a final factor militating against WLB as a natalist measure. This is the simple demographic fact that, contrary to the impression given by rising employment rates for mothers, the proportion of the workforce who are parents has been falling in Europe, because delayed family formation and decreasing fertility means that there are many fewer parents of currently dependent children around! Table 7, calculated from the 2002 European Social

Survey, shows that there are far fewer parents of pre-school age children at work in every European country than there are workers who have *never* experienced living with a dependent child. Thus the weight of parents in any industry or enterprise based WLB consultations or bargaining is unlikely to be strong. WLB is popular because it offers something for everyone. But this ‘something’ need have little to do with facilitating parenting or boosting fertility.

5 WLB, time and consumption: baby boomers reward

While impending demographic problems might be the rationale for states’ interest in WLB, that cannot account for the popular resonance of the concept. This is all the more the case if the demographic weight of parents in the workforce is falling. Its resonance comes from a quite different source: popular conceptions of time pressure. As Gershuny and Fisher (2000) note, less than a century ago Keynes could realistically assume that few people had much leisure time, save that ‘leisure’ enforced by bouts of unemployment. However shorter working hours, greater affluence and longer, healthier lives has confronted people with a mass of new lifestyle and consumer opportunities. As Table 8, shows, taken from the Harmonised European Time Use Survey, adults have much more ‘free’ time than they devote to work. Indeed, across their life course as a whole (as opposed to those few years when it may be a very intensive activity) they devote an average of a few minutes a day specifically to childcare. But more ‘free’ time does not, paradoxically, mean less shortage of time. On the contrary, because technological progress and time shortages combine in contradictory and perverse ways in a market economy, *leisure* is a major source, perhaps *the* major source of work-life ‘imbalance’, because consuming the increasing resources generated by work takes *time*.

[Table 8 about here]

Because it cannot be commodified, time is priceless. Just as they cannot pass through the eye of a needle, the rich cannot purchase immortality (though better access to healthcare, good diets, relaxing holidays, comfortable housing etc. does allow them to ‘purchase’ longer average life expectancy). However the ‘time’, or labour-power, of *others* does have a price, called wages. As economic progress raises the rate of wages so too does it increase the price of this ‘time’; or to put it another way, time comes to be in shorter supply. We can arrive at this result, or something very close to it, following theoretical approaches as diverse as the

new home economics of Becker (1965) or Marx's general 'law' of capitalist accumulation (1976). Linder (1970), using the simple idea that any form of *consumption* as well as production, takes time, has explored the manifold consequences of the inverse relationship between the availability of time and economic progress. Amongst his insights was that some activities (either of consumption or production) are physically unalienable from the producer or consumer. I cannot listen to a piece of music in less time than it takes to play it. Nor could I sensibly save time by paying someone to listen to it for me. We can therefore conclude that these physically inalienable activities become more costly in proportion to economic progress, because they require personal investment in time .

Similarly, different activities will be more or less subject to productivity increases which are the fruit of technological innovation. Baumol (1967) showed that as long as labour markets are fluid enough to keep wage rates similar for similar jobs in different sectors of production, then the cost of the products or services which benefit least from technological innovation (what he called 'technologically non-progressive activities') must rise. He cited live music as an example of his argument, and a useful contrast to make is that between live (largely technologically non-progressive) and recorded (technologically very progressive) opera. Economic progress has rendered the former very expensive, while the latter is not only possible in the first place, but also extremely cheap. Baumol's aim was to show that in a market society technological progress had the contradictory result of making technologically non-progressive activities *appear* to become absolutely more costly, when in fact it was only their cost *relative* to other rapidly cheapening commodities that was increasing. Live opera is not in fact more expensive than it was, it just competes with an expanding range of progressively cheaper alternatives. Witness the cost of a season ticket to London's Royal Opera House in the mid nineteenth century: around £250,000 at current prices⁷. Linder and Baumol's observations are central to understanding both the demographic and time pressure aspects of the WLB debate. Let us discuss the latter first, and return to demography in the next section.

While there are many aspects of consumption that have been subject to technical innovation, most consumption is physically unalienable and therefore time consuming. An opera CD may be cheap, finding the time to listen to it (except by combining this with some other activity) is expensive. It follows that many people in contemporary Europe are likely to feel that time is in short supply, that if they work they could take advantage of reduced or rescheduled hours

were these available, and that greater personal control over the distribution of their time between paid and unpaid work and personal leisure would be a good thing. This is just what table 9 shows. Most respondents want to spend more time with family, with friends and in leisure activities. Paid jobs and household work, are the only activities anyone 'ideally' wants to spend less time on, and even here majorities would prefer to spend as much time as now. Two thirds of men and women wanted to spend more time on at least two of them, however less than half wanted to reduce time spent on any of these activities. When we ask people more concrete questions about these activities the number wanting to spend less time drops still further. The survey also asked those in work if they would prefer to work longer hours with more pay, or fewer hours with less pay, or keep the hours and pay they currently had. Only 8% of male workers and 9% of their female colleagues said they would prefer fewer hours. People would like more time, but no WLB policy can deliver a day with more than twenty four hours!

[Table 9 and 10 about here]

Table 10 and Figure 2 explore the nature of these time preferences further. Working time has little effect on demand for family time. Thus over two thirds of the men and women who said they would prefer to work longer hours also said they would like to spend more time with their family! Further analysis showed that demand for family time varied little with employment situation, life course stage, sex or family circumstance. confirming the substantial gulf between respondents 'ideals' and any related adjustment to working hours and pay they say they would prefer to make in practice. It appears that the usual way for individuals or families to find more time is to withdraw from employment altogether rather than change hours. As figure 2 suggests, the number of men wanting different hours from those they currently work declines as they get older, probably because those wanting fewer hours choose to exit the labour market.

[figure 2 about here]

Families in Europe with young children already reduce their paid working time, chiefly via the mother working less than full-time hours. Families with young children need money as well as time. Given that few employers are likely to voluntarily offer parents of infants shorter hours with no reduction in earnings, hours flexibility is less likely to appeal to them than to

older workers - the greying baby boom generation - who having accumulated resources across the life course, such as a house owned outright or other assets, may choose to reduce their paid work commitments in order to free up time to enjoy leisure pursuits they can easily afford in money terms, but have hitherto found insufficient time to pursue. Unlike Weber's souls driven forward by the Protestant Ethic, they choose to enjoy some of the fruits of their labour before Heaven finally beckons. Hence the rapidly falling activity rates for older workers across Europe.

In 2002 ISSP's Family and Gender Roles III survey asked eight questions relating to respondent's work life balance, with the results shown in Table 11. They confirm that large numbers of workers report work life 'imbalance' and that it is life rather than 'work' which takes the strain. Very few report having difficulty fulfilling their work obligations owing to family commitments. We can use these to construct a score running from zero to a hundred, where zero represents answers reflecting the absence of any conflict between family and work and 100 represents respondents reporting the maximum incompatibility possible. In order to keep comparisons simple we can look at respondents under 60 living with other family members and having paid work (i.e. those whom we might expect to have some work and family to balance). The resulting variable has a reassuringly normal distribution.

[Table 11 about here]

Were WLB about facilitating parenting we might expect the mean scores on such a variable to change substantially according to such circumstances as state support for parenting through parental employment rights and childcare provision, presence of pre-school age children in the household, gender and so on. As Table 12 shows, there is some variation, but it very small. There is no mean difference between women and men, nor much change across household type or country. In the UK the survey also asked respondents if they would prefer to work fewer hours. In common with a recent EFILWC study (Bielenski et al 2002), there was no tendency for parents of young children to prefer a substantial reduction in working hours.

[Table 12 about here]

6 WLB and the future course of the 'baby bust'

The second reason why Baumol and Linder's arguments are central to the WLB debate is that rearing children is also a thoroughly technologically non-progressive and physically unalienable activity: something that must *appear* to parents as ever more costly. This explains the paradox of why respondents to surveys routinely cite 'economic' reasons for the dearth of children at a time when the average family enjoys standards of living far above those of the baby boom years. Using diary study time budget evidence from the UK, Gershuny and Fisher suggest that over the last four decades, the time devoted to childcare may have trebled, despite falling family size. I cited several other studies above (p. xxx) that suggest that, despite domestic technological innovation, time devoted to childcare has not decreased. What we might think of as the value of children, or the time necessary to 'producing' them has increased. They not only need to be literate and numerate for example, but computer literate. In many countries more than half now proceed to post-school education. Although it is methodologically extremely difficult to unearth parents' reasons for having children at all, for having a specific number of them or for having them when they do, there is very little evidence of much rational economic calculation at work. Children might become commodities in the labour market as adults, but it makes little sense to theorise their *production* in such terms (*pace* Becker 1991). Thus a mere 2.6% of respondents across Europe in 2002 begged to differ with the proposition that 'Watching children grow up is life's greatest joy' (ISSP 2005). Children are regarded by most people as an end in themselves, rather than as values comparable to other choices (Weber 1978). It may well be that parents simply devote more time to children because *they can*. Paradoxically, that same economic progress which has afforded them this time, also makes it appear ever more costly.

Time spent on childcare takes us back to the other aspect of demographic change: longer life expectancy. The institution of god-parenthood existed because until the last century or so most children born in Europe would be fortunate to reach adulthood with both their biological parents alive and a good number of them would be orphans. Today, as we have seen, most children are born with all four *grandparents* alive. Childcare can now be spread over a longer life course: undertaken not just as a parent but as a grandparent, many of whom find the time for it precisely because the labour market participation of older people is low and falling.

WLB, at least in its current range of forms, is not going to significantly alter fertility rates in the short term. The hunt is on for the determinants of fertility in contemporary societies, and in particular whether there are particular policy measures that might attenuate its downward

fall or even drive it upwards. It will be a long and possibly fruitless quest. The history of natalist policies is one of (usually expensive) failure in all but the shortest terms. In a generally affluent and liberal Europe of increasingly open choices, people do not decide whether or not to have children according to the state of their bank balance or the range of government assistance available.

7 Conclusions

The concept of WLB is far too vague for an adequate sociological analysis. Leaving aside the problem of reducing 'work' to employment, it trades on the conflation of two contrasting meanings of 'life': general life choices on the one hand and the specific issue of raising young children on the other. The first explains the attractiveness of the term to ageing baby boomers and others with resources to loosen their commitment to the labour market. The second explains its relevance to states concerned with the baby bust. To return to our opening comments, insufficient reflection over the conceptual meaning of WLB undermines not only sociological analysis, but also the policy relevant conclusions it might reach.

While WLB rhetoric has a widespread appeal, a proper sociological analysis in fact suggests that its practical application may often work against precisely those labour supply goals governments hope it might address! This is because it is older workers, rather than infants' parents, who appear interested in trading working hours for leisure and they may do this more often by retiring early rather than changing hours. Facilitating this will tend to reduce rather than increase the labour supply.

'Business case' WLB policies aimed at workers with higher bargaining power in tight labour markets who are difficult to recruit or retain will hardly affect the labour supply but may decrease social cohesion by further polarising employment conditions between those workers and more dispensable ones left to fend for themselves. 'Business case' WLB policies may in any case not proceed very far in an era of globalising competition. They are no substitute for public arrangements that tackle WLB issues in ways that go beyond what market forces deliver. As ETUC general secretary John Monks put it, responding to the Kok reports lack of attention to WLB: 'Lisbon is about strengthening social cohesion and sustainability, and about social dialogue and social partnerships ... Lisbon is definitely not about scaring European workers and citizens with a narrow agenda of pure deregulation and cutbacks in their living and social standards being decided over their heads.' (ETUC 2004).

Conversely, providing public resources for parents who need them – chiefly poorer dual earner families where fathers work long hours to maintain income levels – may well increase social solidarity and inclusion, even though such policies are unlikely to address the baby bust that states imagine to be a ‘problem’. As Folbre (1997) has pointed out, this may be a policy area where misplaced intentions pave the road, if not to heaven, at least to a better place. Natalist policies focus more resources on women and children and thus address both child poverty and gender inequality. However this positive result follows the more they *fail* in their main objective of raising the birth rate. The latter would simply squander these resources on larger numbers of children.

The role of the state is central for a further reason. Discussion of population ageing often suggests that the current dimensions of the welfare state may not be ‘sustainable’ in the future. However the argument presented here not only suggests that such arguments are based on a mistaken analysis of demographic trends, but that, on the contrary, these trends make the further development of the welfare state even more important for three reasons. First, the socialisation of both the practice and costs of child rearing must continue as the ‘value’ of children increases inexorably in the knowledge economy. Few families could bear such costs privately. Second, only the state has the capacity to support parents in the labour market, as it is the only institution capable of taking a long term and collective view. Employers may well have an interest in *some* support to *some* parents, but such support simply risks increasing labour market polarisation. Third, as we saw above, demographic change both increases the strength of the family and makes the inter generational transfer of wealth more important. The vast majority of workers not only enjoy substantial leisure now, they also accumulate substantial assets which they pass on to their children. Only two institutions can undertake this transfer: the family and the state. Unless the latter can secure a legitimate role in this process it will become yet another social mechanism driving up inequality and social exclusion.

Finally, the baby bust that has aroused states’ interest in WLB is much less threatening than it is portrayed. Most recent attempts to demonstrate that population decline must have negative economic or social consequences have failed (Coleman 2002). Population ‘ageing’ does not

in itself undermine the fiscal stability of the state: irresponsible promises about the size of the tax take necessary to run an 'efficient' welfare state certainly do. Even if fertility and population in Europe underwent a long run collapse, there is anything but a global shortage of population. Here Catalonia provides an interesting example. It has long been characterised by very low fertility, but expanded its population threefold over the twentieth century, owing to constant and substantial immigration (Cabr  I Pla 1999). Its history may hold more lessons for the future of Europe as a whole than ingenious work-life balance schema.

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¹ Norms that contemporary sociology was unfortunately content to codify in, e.g. Parsons' sociology of the family (Parsons 1956)

² Author's calculations from Eurostat SEEPROS data.

³ All figures from author's calculations of data weighted by employed population of EU15 countries.

⁴ In England all manner of social ills and annoyances were attributed to the Norman Invasion of the eleventh century, life prior to this event being portrayed as Utopian and idyllic.

⁵ Data excludes Sweden.

⁶ Davis's article is central to the intellectual history of sociology, not least because it appears to have provoked Parsons to elaborate his own theory of the family in industrial society, which came to dominate the sociology of the family for at least the next generation.

⁷ I am grateful to Ms Julia Creed at ROH, Covent Garden for supplying details on historical ticket prices.