Book Review: Ruby CM Chau and Sam WK Yu (eds), Women, Welfare and Productivism in East Asia and Europe, Bristol University Press: 2022; 256 pp.: ISBN 978-1447357711.

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Ruby CM Chau and Sam WK Yu's co-authored book, 'Women, Welfare and Productivism in East Asia and Europe', contains original conceptual thinking and multiple comparative empirical studies of policies relating to care and work in a variety of East Asian and European countries (France, Germany, Hong Kong, Hungary, South Korea, Sweden and the UK). Based on a critique of the productivist welfare policy discourse as subordinating informal care to formal employment, the authors argue for an expanded understanding of productivism, to include both pro-work and pro-care visions. Ultimately, Chau and Yu envision a model of welfare policy in which work and care are valued equally and where people's autonomy to freely organise and move between different combinations of work and care over their life course is actively protected and supported by the state. Chau and Yu theorise and empirically apply their 'life-mix framework' to a range of policy case studies while also considering the uniqueness of East Asian welfare regimes across a total of ten chapters.

I very much appreciate and share the authors' recognition of reproductive activities as essential to production, as well as the understanding that people's preferences for combining work and care are not only heterogenous but may also shift over time. The authors' conceptual separation of the supported adult carer and the supported adult worker models helped to make explicit the work-bias present in key policies examined, such as childcare leave measures and ECEC (chapter 4), pension measures (chapter 5) and active labour market policies and alternatives (chapter 6). The choice of countries as well as policy areas of focus offered a diverse and broad view, utilising rich and up-to-date comparative data from selected East Asian and European countries. Based on their cross-country analysis, the authors argue that East Asian countries such as Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore and South Korea lack both the external heterogeneity and internal homogeneity needed to be classified as a distinct type of welfare state. Instead, they propose that it is more useful to focus on how the supported adult carer model and the supported adult worker models are coordinated across East Asia and Europe respectively in specific policy domains. For instance, based on an assessment of paid childcare leave and ECEC provisions, the authors suggest that Germany, South Korea, and Sweden could be grouped together for their relatively generous and strong coordination between policy measures impacting the two supported models.

Although such elements of Chau and Yu's argument and analysis have originality and merit, I have reservations about the authors' decision to advocate for individual 'autonomy' and 'preferences' over gender equality. The authors' position on gender equality is perhaps best represented by their following sentence: 'We do not reject the idea of eliminating the division of labour between men and women but disagree that this is the ultimate goal of the welfare policies concerned.' (p. 32) In other words, Chau and Yu advocate the removal of the current hierarchy between work and care so that individuals are enabled to freely choose and move between the two, even if people's patterns of work and care may continue to be gendered. While the authors acknowledge the relative strength of Nancy Fraser's universal caregiver model (1994) for addressing gender inequality, they understand Fraser's proposition – that we should make women's life patterns the norm for everyone by inducing men to engage more in caregiving while redesigning structural barriers to caregiving – as compromising people's autonomy (p. 32, p. 181).

I find Chau and Yu's indifference towards gender equality vis-a-vis autonomy regrettable, especially given some of their bold policy recommendations calling for a much greater role to be played by the state in supporting people's working and caring lives. While the book revolves around the idea of enabling individuals to realise their preferences, the authors pay limited attention to how individuals arrive at their preferences between work and care, and the inequalities that have historically shaped this gendered process. Where they do, Chau and Yu do acknowledge, albeit briefly, that fathers' take-up rate of childcare leave remains very low in Japan and Korea, even in the presence of individual entitlements, generous benefits and policy incentives (p. 75, p. 196). They recognise that this is due to the inertia generated by existing gendered arrangements and cultures, such as the unequal gender distribution of domestic tasks, gender pay gap, and masculine workplace cultures (p.75). If the authors accept that individual preferences and decisions are already shaped and constrained by gendered cultures, how can they propose that people's autonomy be genuinely met without more active efforts to degender participation

in work and care? Without a more serious and comprehensive consideration of this question, Chau and Yu's proposals at best serve practical but not strategic gender needs (Molyneux, 1985; Moser, 1989). At worst, their position comes across as reminiscent of a Hakim-esque approach to gender and preferences, wherein the choices that modern women make between family and career are understood to be genuine, independent, and stable across affluent societies (Hakim, 1998, 2000; for critiques, see Crompton and Harris, 1998; Crompton and Lyonette, 2005; McRae, 2003). This overall lack of attention to the role of culture in shaping preferences is puzzling, given that the capabilities approach on which Chau and Yu build their framework stresses the significance of social and cultural norms for women's preferences and rights (Nussbaum, 2000, 2011).

All in all, Chau and Yu's book raises some interesting questions and thoughts for researchers of social and welfare policies about the role of the state and policies in relation to women's welfare. I invite feminist scholars to further engage critically with the ideas developed in this book. Equally, I encourage Chau and Yu to consider, in future works, how their framework could be reconciled with visions of greater gender equality. Perhaps the authors will be able to develop a more generative and gender-sensitive framework if they revise their conceptualisation of autonomy and gender equality as mutually enabling, rather than involving trade-offs.

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