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CHAPTER 6

Does Anyone Have a "Libre Choix"? Subversive Liberalism and the Politics of French Child Care Policy

Kimberly Morgan

Some students of social policy dismiss claims of welfare-state retrenchment because there have been few clear instances of major cutbacks, and aggregate data reveal considerable continuity in spending on social security (Pierson 1996; Fligstein 1998). Yet, when viewed from a gender perspective, the effects of economic restructuring and budgetary austerity on the welfare state become more apparent. The evolution of French child care policy offers a useful window onto these processes. France has one of the strongest child care systems among the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) member states, yet a closer look reveals that welfare state and economic restructuring have taken their toll. Currently only 9 percent of children under the age of three have a place in one of the famed crèches, while 50 percent are cared for by a parent, usually their mother (see table 6.1). The rest are looked after by nannies or are in family child care (CNAF 1997a). State spending on collective child care has been surpassed by the amount now spent on individualized forms of care, such as nannies or family child care, revealing a weakening commitment to the traditional crèche.[1] After promoting women's insertion in the labor market in the 1970s, both socialist and conservative governments have subsequently favored policies that encourage mothers' exit from the labor force. New forms of service provision reflect the search for greater flexibility in service delivery to match the proliferation of atypical employment, such as part-time work or evening shifts. These trends have had important qualitative and quantitative effects on child care provision that aggregate spending data fail to capture.

TABLE 6.1: PERCENTAGE OF FRENCH CHILDREN UNDER 3 IN CHILD CARE

Crèches	9%
Licensed family child care	13%
Subsidized nannies	2%
Home	50%
Unknown	26%

SOURCE: CNAF (1997a).

Three dimensions of the welfare state crisis have had important implications for child care policy in France, as in other states. First, there has been a very real *financial* crisis, as France has struggled to maintain budget balance in the face of growing social security costs. The time for massive new spending initiatives has passed, as governments now concentrate resources on meeting existing commitments. In fact, it is precisely the political strength of well-established programs that makes it difficult to embark on new, expansive policies (Rieger and Leibfried 1998). This has hurt child care policy in France, where the development of collective child care services was just beginning to get off the ground in the 1970s when economic crisis set in. The real secret of France's position as an international leader in child care provision—its universal system of full-day preschools—was already well in place by the mid-1970s. With their broad-based constituency and place within a powerful, centralized education ministry, these programs have been immune to budget austerity, and have taken up much of the responsibility for child care.

Second, there is an *employment* crisis that has had important ramifications for the course of child care policy over the past two decades. In addition to its budget-busting effects, chronic unemployment has diminished the commitment of the French state to encouraging women's labor force participation. Pragmatic French political elites, who had promoted women's employment in the 1970s with seemingly few qualms, quickly abandoned these goals when unemployment began to climb. The vaunted state goal of ensuring women's *libre choix* (free choice) was reinterpreted from enabling women's workforce participation to promoting their role as caregivers in the home. French governments have also redeployed child care policy as a way to encourage job creation by subsidizing parents who hire their own child care workers. This is part of a larger strategy of promoting new, flexible forms of employment, including part-time work. Women are the ones who disproportionately take up these new forms of employment. This has put strains on the child care system and has encouraged the move away from traditional public services toward individualized modes of care, more adaptable to atypical employment schedules.

Finally, there is a crisis of welfare state *legitimacy*, in which critics on both the left and the right have questioned traditional modes of social service provision. The decentralization of central government functions to the local level was one response to these critics, and it has been accompanied by efforts to shift greater responsibility for child care provision to the voluntary sector. There also has been a diversification of the kinds of services available to families, with the creation of part-time care programs, play centers, and parent-child centers. These new kinds of services address a broader range of family needs. At the same time, the resources available for child care must be divided among more services in order to accommodate a larger range of interests. While such an approach may be more responsive to the demands of many parents, this has come at the price of redistributive fairness.

This chapter will first describe France's child care system in the context of the French welfare state. The remainder will then evaluate how the three forms of welfare state crisis outlined above have influenced child care policy over the past two

decades, and how the economic and political environment have shaped the politics of parental "choice" in matters of child care.

Child Care and the French Welfare Regime

The French welfare state fits imperfectly in the category to which it is most often assigned in typologies of welfare regimes—the conservative-corporatist or Christian Democratic cluster that includes the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Italy, and possibly Spain and Portugal (Esping-Andersen 1990; 1999; Kersbergen 1995; Levy 1999). Various authors describe social policy in these countries as having been "forged in the crucible of conservative clericalism" (Levy 1999, 245), as a product of corporatist guild traditions, and/or as reflecting the machinations of bureaucrats or dictators. In this view, it was nineteenth-century authoritarians and/or Christian democratic parties that crafted social policies in these countries. As both were minimally concerned with either market efficiency or leveling social divisions, continental welfare states offer generous resources to alleviate human suffering, yet they do so in a way that reproduces existing hierarchies and social stratification. This includes gender stratification, as Catholic social thought endorsed the traditional division of labor in workplace and home. Social benefits for workers are generous, but there are few public services that could offer women a source of employment and socialize care work. According to the Catholic principle of subsidiarity, the lowest possible level of society—the family, churches, or the voluntary sector—holds responsibility for tending to human welfare needs.

Many aspects of the French welfare state are consonant with this description. French social spending is quite high and, as in other "conservative" welfare states, this produces only a moderate-level of "decommodification." Social benefits are differentiated by status-reproducing occupational schemes, and France has huge public employee pension programs (Esping-Andersen 1990). In addition, as will be detailed below, the French response to unemployment in recent decades has been to promote "labor shedding" rather than active labor market policies and public employment that could sop up excess labor (Esping-Andersen 1996).

When gender-related measures are taken into consideration, however, France diverges from the conservative model. One important difference lies in women's labor-force participation. Since the nineteenth century, French women have been in the labor force in far higher numbers than women in other European countries.

Historians have linked the high rates of women's labor force participation in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century to late industrialization, the continued importance of the family farm, and low birthrates that shrank the pool of labor and drew women into the workforce (Tilly and Scott 1978). The percentages of women in the labor force dipped in the 1950s and 1960s, a time referred to by some as the "golden age of familialism," in which the traditional male-breadwinner/female caregiver model was upheld in both societal discourse and public policy

(Prost 1984). Even then, 46.6 percent of women were working outside the home, compared to 49.2 percent in Germany, but only 26.2 percent in the Netherlands and 38.7 percent in Italy (OECD 1997).[2] Since the late 1960s, the percentage of women in the labor force steadily increased in France as in nearly all OECD states. It is the very high rate of maternal employment that distinguishes France from other European states. In 1997, 82.4 percent of mothers with two children were in the labor force in France, compared to 61.5 percent in Germany, 59.8 percent in the Netherlands, and 57.6 percent in Italy (Fagnani 2000).[3]

This reflects, in part, the fact that working mothers have access to greater supports and services in France than in the other conservative welfare states. An index of policies that support mothers' employment puts France as one of the high achievers among OECD states, far above the other "conservative" welfare states (Gornick, Meyers, and Ross 1997). In 1997, there were spaces in publicly supported child care for 24 percent of children under the age of three, and places in preschools for at least 35 percent of two-year-olds (see tables 6.1 and 6.2). While only 9 percent of children under three are in an actual public child care center, the commitment of substantial state resources to subsidizing family and in-home child care reveals a willingness on the part of state officials to endorse and support mothers in the labor force. In addition to state payments covering part of the operating costs of child care centers, the French state offers subsidies for parents using family child care, subsidies and a special tax break for parents who employ nannies, and another tax break to reduce child care costs for parents (David 1999).[4] In addition, nearly 100 percent of children aged three to six attend free, full-day preschools. These programs follow the school schedule (8:30 A.M. to 4:30 P.M.), and around 12 percent of children under six have a place in an afterschool program that rounds out the rest of the day (CNAF 1997a). These supports and services have enabled French women to work at high percentages while maintaining one of the higher fertility rates in the European Union (EU). While French fertility rates are lower than they were during the baby boom years, the current rate of 1.75 is well above the EU average of 1.45 (Fagnani 2000).

The historic evolution of the French welfare state departs from the story outlined above, and this helps to account for why French policy toward working mothers differs from that found in much of continental Europe. The welfare state in France arose not in the context of authoritarianism and clericalism, but in a republic

TABLE 6.2: PRESCHOOL ENROLLMENT

AGE	PERCENTAGE ENROLLED
2	35%
3	99%
4	100%
5	100%

SOURCE: Ministère de l'Education Nationale (1997).

shaped by nationalism and anticlericalism. In the late nineteenth century, republicans cemented state control over the education system to wrest the socialization of the nation's children away from the Catholic Church and forge a loyal republican citizenry. This process began with the *école maternelle*, or preschool, which was incorporated into the national education system in the 1880s (Dajez 1994; Luc 1997). After World War II, the number of preschools expanded rapidly. By the 1970s, these schools were universally available, making France one of the leading providers in the world of early childhood education programs.[5] As many students of the welfare state neglect the education system, they miss the important role these programs play in France in providing young children with educational opportunities while offering support to many working parents.

The administration of the écoles maternelles is separate from that of the *crèches* and other forms of child care that are part of social welfare and family policy. Still, the development of the crèches also departs from the conventional "Christian Democratic" or "conservative corporatist" story of welfare state development. In contrast to Germany or the Netherlands, where the principle of subsidiarity in the social services has been paramount, child care in France was incorporated into the realm of state policymaking and regulation in 1945. This was due in part to pronatalist objectives; given the demographic imperative of protecting the health of young babies, government officials believed that the crèches were too important to be left to private charities (Norvez 1990). As a result, the government in 1945 created the *Protection maternelle et infantile* to regulate all establishments involved in the health and care of infants, toddlers, and preschool-age children. It has continued to do so ever since, imposing high standards of hygiene and personnel training on the crèches.

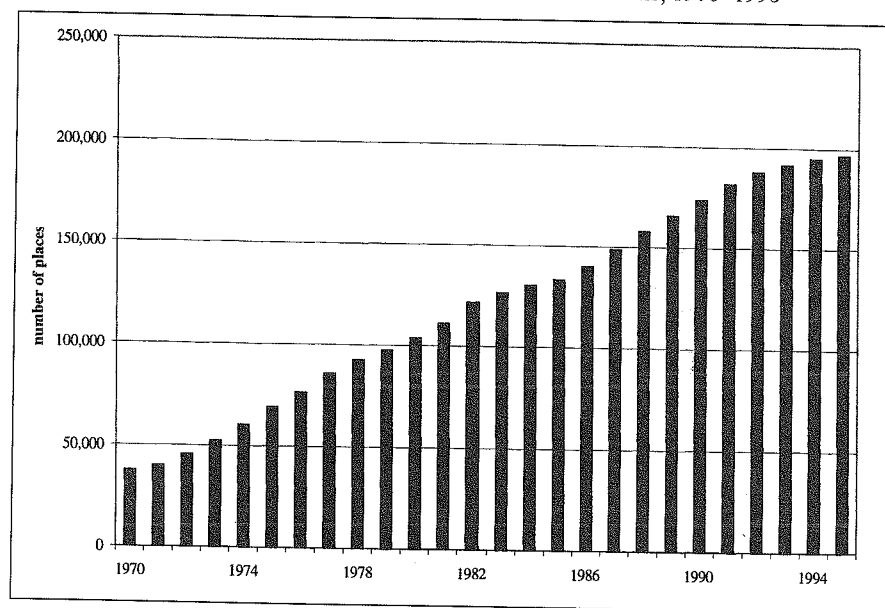
Governmental intervention in the realm of child care also results from the role of a distinctive set of family policy-making institutions.[6] The Caisse Nationale des Allocations Familales (CNAF), or national family-benefits fund, oversees the management of the family benefits funds into which workers and employers pay contributions. The national level fund sets overall priorities, and its 125 local equivalents, the Caisses d'Allocations Familiales (CAFs), are responsible for distributing these benefits to families. This family-benefits system is fairly unique in continental Europe, both for the generosity of the benefits and the structure of its administration. Ironically, the most "familialist" welfare regimes tend to have the most passive family policies, offering low levels of family benefits and other forms of assistance (Esping-Andersen 1999). France was one of the first countries to develop an extensive and generous system of family allowances. Since its inception, a portion of the resources collected in these funds has been diverted to support family-related social services. Starting in the 1970s, these funds became the main source of financial support for child care.

These features of French social provision reflect the ideologies and ambitions of those political forces with power in the postwar period. France differs from other continental European countries in the relative weakness of Christian democratic political movements. The Mouvement républicain populaire (MRP) was a major polit-

ical party during the Fourth Republic (1946–1958), and its traditional views of women's roles and the family marked the more traditionalist elements of the postwar family benefits system. However, with the MRP's declining influence in the 1950s and its eclipse in the Fifth Republic (1958–) came a diminishing commitment to the traditional family model (Prost 1984; Laroque 1985). Gaullist parties have been the dominant force on the right in the Fifth Republic, and they have diverged from many of the tenets of Christian democracy. The period of greatest welfare state expansion in the 1960s and 1970s occurred under secular, Gaullist elites who had as their objective economic development and modernization rather than the preservation of traditional status categories and the defense of the Church (Morgan 2000).

It was also in this period that the issue of child care came on the national agenda, and many Gaullist political elites responded with a pragmatic view of the family and mothers' employment that waved aside anxieties over family breakdown and maternal deprivation. Elite pragmatism in these matters was evident already in the 1950s, when political leaders with modernizing ambitions called for married women to join the labor force as a remedy against labor shortages (Commissariat Général du Plan 1958). An influx of immigrants temporarily solved labor supply problems. The issue of child care did not seriously resurface until the late 1960s and early 1970s, when there was much discussion of the new values and aspirations of many women, who were no longer leaving the labor force after the birth of their children. Women's groups and other May '68 movements called for universal child care. In

FIGURE 6.1: NUMBER OF AVAILABLE PLACES IN CRÈCHES, 1970–1995



SOURCES: SESI (1998, 1985, 1982, 1980); *Annuaire statistique sanitaire et sociale* (1995, 1996).

response, two different center-right governments diverted 100 million francs from the family benefits funds to jump start the creation of public crèches. The administrative council of the CNAF created a new financing system to cover some of the operating costs of social services such as child care (Ancelin 1997). The number of places in public crèches began rapidly increasing (see fig. 6.1).

By the mid-1970s, then, the French state had made a clear commitment to furthering the creation of public child care, and a new financing system was in place using the resources of the family benefit funds. An extensive system of public preschools was universally available to all children at no charge to their parents. How would this system of early childhood care and education hold up with the onset of economic recession in the late 1970s?

Diverging Fates: Education and Social Services Policy in an Era of Economic Crisis

While the fiscal crisis of the welfare state has not prompted large-scale retrenchment in France, it has influenced the evolution of child care policy. Conservative and socialist governments alike did not cut existing child care programs and, by and large, official policy has continued to support the development of child care services. At the same time, however, the rate of growth of public child care services slowed considerably in the 1990s. Places in public crèches remain scarce, and parents joke that they have to register with a crèche within weeks of conception if they hope to get a place for their child. France has maintained its position as an international leader in child care in large measure because its preschool system was already in place by the 1970s and covers many of the needs of working parents.

Starting in the mid-1970s, France began to experience the strains on its social welfare system that affected most OECD countries at that time: demographic change, fiscal imbalance, rising unemployment, and sluggish economic growth. People were having fewer babies and living longer, which was reducing the ratio between contributors and beneficiaries to social programs. This began producing deficits in the social security system, which were exacerbated by rising health care costs (Ross 1988). At the same time, the phenomenal economic growth of the postwar period, known as the *trente glorieuses*, came to an end. Whereas annual economic growth between 1960 and 1973 averaged 5.4 percent, in the 1973–79 period the rate of annual growth slowed to 2.4 percent, dropping to 2.1 percent for 1979–89. Accompanying this economic slowdown was stubborn unemployment. France went from having an unemployment rate of less than 2 percent to a persistent 10 percent in the 1980s. Unemployment hovered around 12 percent for much of the 1990s and has only recently begun to decline (OECD 1997; 1999).

Accompanying these new economic realities was a set of international constraints that came into bold relief in the early 1980s. When the Socialists came to power in 1981, they attempted a program of Keynesian demand stimulus at odds

with the economic tightening being pursued by its neighbors. In a world of growing economic interdependence, these policies provoked capital flight that threatened the domestic economy and France's commitment to the Exchange Rate Mechanism of the European community. The lesson was clear: international economic factors put new constraints on the autonomy of economic policymaking. By 1983, the socialists had converted to budget austerity and tight monetary policy (Loriaux 1991; Hall 1986). In the 1990s, the move toward a European monetary union and its strict fiscal requirements only accentuated these external constraints. With diminished autonomy in budgetary and monetary policy, massive new spending commitments are untenable.

The combined pressures of internationalization and domestic structural change have produced a "subversive liberalism" in which there is less a full-blown retrenchment of the welfare state than a steady erosion of state commitments because of the imperative of cost containment (Rhodes 1995). This is evident in France where, as a whole, the state has continued to grow. Government spending as a percentage of gross domestic product hovers around 55 percent today, compared to 39 percent in 1974 (OECD 1997). At the same time, French governments have made budget balancing one of their main priorities. They have managed to maintain existing commitments to areas such as pensions and health care by raising taxes and selling off national companies (Parker 1998). Governments also have trimmed social policies around the edges through cuts in benefits, higher eligibility criteria, and fees for services (Ross 1988; Falkner and Talos 1994).

The new context of budget austerity has had different consequences for the crèche and the école maternelle. By the time the economic crisis set in, the preschool system already was well-established. While children of the working classes were traditionally the main pupils in the école maternelle, after the Second World War middle-class parents began demanding places for their children in these schools. The phenomenal expansion in public demand in the 1950s and 1960s came as a great surprise to education ministry officials and government planners, and they hastily moved to try and satisfy the demand. Often, they did so by relying on very high teacher-student ratios; it was not uncommon to have one teacher for a class of fifty-five or sixty children. This did not diminish parents' enthusiasm for the programs. By 1975, 80 percent of three-year-olds, 97 percent of four-year-olds, and 100 percent of five-year-old children were attending these noncompulsory schools (Ministère de l'Education Nationale 1997). Particularly after 1968, with the growing interest in early childhood education as a remedy for inequality, the place was secured for the French école maternelle as one of the most popular elements of the education system.

These programs clearly benefit from being linked in the public mind and discourse with educational questions rather than with caregiving and gender roles. The massive increase in preschool attendance in the 1950s and 1960s was unrelated to rates of women's labor-force participation, which generally decreased in this period (Plaisance 1986). Instead, parents sought out the schools for their educational value.

While today many parents rely upon these programs as a form of child care, their official mission is one of education, not child care. This is repeatedly underlined by officials in the Ministry of Education, union leaders, and teachers, all of whom are eager to distance themselves from mere *garderies*, or child care centers (Norvez 1990; Merlen and Baehr 1999; Lamy 1999). The école maternelle has a very broad base of support, as both two-earner families and more traditional households rely on the programs for their educational merits. As the *première éducation* of the nation's children, the schools also benefit from being part of the large and powerful education bureaucracy (Plaisance 1986).

It comes as no surprise then that the école maternelle has been fairly immune to retrenchment pressures. As governments became increasingly reluctant to devote resources to the crèches, much responsibility for child care shifted unofficially to these programs. While the decision to build a school lies with the city government, which covers building and maintenance costs, the national education ministry pays teacher salaries, which is often the most expensive part of public services. Investing in preschools is therefore a cheaper way for city governments to show their responsiveness to parents' demands. The preschools follow the regular school schedule, which means they traditionally have been closed at lunch-time and on Wednesdays. In recent years, many municipalities have created afterschool services that extend the programs to cover a full day. Even where such programs are lacking, the école maternelle has already covered much of the day, at no cost to parents.

The one way in which the development of public preschool places stagnated in the 1980s was in the provision for children under three. By law, the youngest age at which children can attend a preschool is two and a half. During the 1960s and 1970s, the percentages of two-year-olds in the preschool system increased rapidly: from 9.9 percent in 1960, the figure reached 18 percent in 1970, and 36 percent in 1980. Since then, the percentage of two-year-olds has remained at around 35 percent. For many years, teachers' unions opposed admitting such young children, fearing that it was a step toward degrading the école maternelle into a mere caregiving service. With declining school enrollments, however, unions became more favorable to expanding the pool of possible students. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, they called for measures to adapt preschools so that they can accommodate the needs of these younger children. Thus far, governments have made few efforts to meet these demands. Whether or not this is a reflection of budget austerity in the 1980s, it is related to reticence on the part of public officials about the merits of placing children under three in the school system (Conseil Économique et Social 1981; Baudelot 1999). Many teachers also remain uncomfortable about the idea of having these younger children in the classroom (Baudelot 1999).

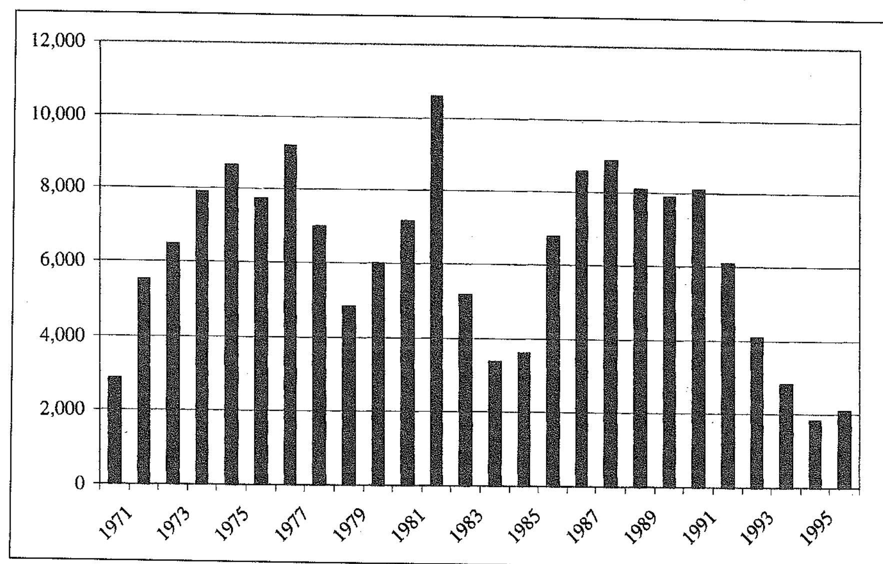
The crèches have fared less well in the context of welfare state crisis and economic restructuring. While by the 1970s, the preschools were available to nearly all children, the crèches never developed into a similarly universal service. After an initially strong commitment to the public child care centers in the 1970s and part of the 1980s, there has been a marked decline in the pace of development. Between

1970 and 1980, the cumulative growth in child care spaces amounted to a 176 percent increase. In the 1980s, overall growth slowed to 68 percent, and between 1987 and 1997, the increase was only 26 percent. In the 1990s, the annual increase in the number of places available amounted often to only 1 or 2 percent growth. This is not due to shrinking demands on the part of parents. Public crèches report long waiting lists for a space and high demand among parents. One estimate in 1990 determined that for children under five, nearly half of those needing child care were not receiving it. A survey at the same time showed that 80 percent of parents believed the supply of child care was inadequate (David 1999).

The Socialists came to power in 1981 promising 300,000 new places in public crèches and a paid parental leave that would be generous enough so that men would also take advantage of it. The new government created a Secrétariat d'Etat à la Famille, which immediately commissioned a report on child care that advocated a major increase in public child care (Bouyala and Roussille 1982). The number of public child care places climbed between 1981 and 1983. After that year, with the implementation of the first of several decentralization measures, the development of new child care places stagnated until the late 1980s, when it began to climb again (see fig. 6.2). In the 1990s, the pace of development slowed dramatically. As will be discussed below, this was the time when governments began devoting more resources to paid care leaves and individualized forms of child care.

In short, the fiscal crisis of the welfare state had the greatest impact on the social services sector. While the sector did not suffer actual cuts, the pace of child care development slowed. The crèches were only beginning to gain acceptability and wider

FIGURE 6.2: ANNUAL INCREASE IN NUMBER OF AVAILABLE CRÈCHE PLACES, 1971–1995



SOURCES: SESI (1998, 1985, 1982, 1980); *Annuaire statistique sanitaire et sociale* (1995, 1996).

use in the 1970s, when new strains on state budgets diminished the enthusiasm of many state leaders for these costly programs. By contrast, the preschools already were institutionalized, benefiting from the legitimacy of their association with public education, the strength of teachers' unions, the widespread popular support they enjoyed, and their mission of promoting educational equality and healthy child development.

Reinventing Child Care Policy As Employment Policy

The second way in which pressures on the welfare state and structural economic changes have affected child care policy in France is through a growing tendency in the 1980s and 1990s to deploy child care policy to combat unemployment. This has taken two forms: (1) encouraging more individualized solutions to child care, such as subsidizing parents who hire child care workers in the home, as a way to create employment; and (2) offering subsidies to parents who leave the labor force to care for their own children. Both have been pursued under the rubric of promoting libre choix, or parental choice—particularly mothers'—in child care matters. Such a policy also has, at times, dovetailed with pronatalist objectives. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the child care policies adopted by different governments have embodied a shifting constellation of pronatalist, employment, and redistributive objectives.

Since the late 1970s, both socialist and conservative governments began looking for less expensive ways to address the demands of working parents for child care. Since the early 1970s, the French government had been experimenting with *crèches familiales*, or child care centers, in private homes. These differ from "family child care" in many other countries because they are publicly financed, substantially more regulated, and are managed by personnel that have the same qualifications as the directors of the traditional crèches. At the same time, these services cost much less than a traditional crèche, and watered down regulations in the 1970s aimed to reduce their costliness even further (Norvez 1990). An even cheaper form of child care for the state is that which resembles American family child care—private individuals called *assistantes maternelles* who care for several children in their own home, often while looking after their own children. This has long been, and continues to be, the most widely used form of child care in France. In 1977, the government awarded these workers official status and some benefits, provided they were licensed by the state. In return for a health exam and inspection of their home, they receive the right to a basic salary (although the exact pay they would receive was left to the negotiations between parents and the caregiver), social security, paid sickness and maternity leave, four weeks of vacation, and the right to sixty hours of training, the details of which were left to the discretion of local administrations (Desigaux and Thévenet 1982).

As it became apparent in the 1980s that the promised 300,000 new places in crèches were not going to materialize any time soon, there were renewed efforts to

encourage the use of assistantes maternelles by offering subsidies to parents. The Prestation Spéciale Assistante Maternelle was created in 1980, covering part of the social charges that parents pay on behalf of their child care worker. In 1990, a socialist government replaced the benefit with the Aide à la Famille pour l'Emploi d'une Assistante Maternelle Agréée (AFEAMA). This benefit, open to all parents regardless of income, pays the social charges for an assistante maternelle employed by parents for a child under the age of six. Since 1989, the government has supported *relais assistantes maternelles* (family child care networks), which are places where parents and child care workers can meet, gain information about child care issues, and assistantes maternelles can sometimes benefit from some training (CNAF 1996b).

While efforts to license and train assistantes maternelles preserved some form of state supervision over the health and safety of children in these private arrangements, the use of public funds to subsidize parents who hire nannies departed entirely from the practice of regulating child services (Math and Renaudat 1997). In 1986, a conservative government created the Allocation de Garde d'Enfant à Domicile (AGED), a payment to cover a portion of the costs of the social charges parents must pay on nannies they hire to care for children under the age of three. The benefit is awarded to parents without requiring licensing of the caregiver. There is also a tax break to help parents with the cost of this form of care. Both policies subsidize the use of private options that alleviate the demand for public crèches places and promote employment in the private market. With these aims in mind, a conservative government in 1995 substantially increased the tax break, doubled AGED's reimbursement ceiling, and extended its use to cover children aged three to six. The number of families benefiting from the AGED increased by 170 percent in two years (Fagnani 1997). A number of measures also were taken in the 1990s to simplify the process of creating family employment and of calculating and paying social charges.

The move toward more individualized forms of child care provision signifies an important qualitative shift in child care services that is particularly evident when juxtaposed with the preschool system. The école maternelle was generalized in the late 1950s and 1960s, a time when there was a strong commitment on the part of the state to developing public services. Currently over 85 percent of French preschoolers are in state-run programs, the remainder being typically in parochial schools (largely Catholic) that receive extensive state support (Ministère de l'Education Nationale 1997). Teachers' unions fought to expand the public preschool system, both out of an interest to protect their jobs and because of their long-standing antipathy to religious education. Many argued that if the state did not act to create more public preschools, a private system would spring up in response to parental demands for these services, and that in the long run this would sap support and resources from the public schools (Morgan 2000).

The failure to develop an equivalent set of public crèches, coupled with active state support for private alternatives, threatens to produce the sort of evolution feared by the teachers' unions. The generous subsidies awarded to parents using these individual alternatives hurt the public crèches in the mid-1990s, as competition from nannies and family child care lured middle and upper class parents away from the traditional crèche (David 1999). Higher-income parents are often essential to the financial well-being of child care centers, as they pay higher fees than the lower-income clientele. Allowing private opt-outs also furthers the growth of a "divided constituency," in which different parents have diverging interests in the kind of child care system they prefer, thereby fragmenting support for a unified child care policy (Michel 1999). The failure to unionize most child care workers prevents them from playing the same role teachers' unions have played as advocates of the public system. With the move toward more individualized services, such as nannies and family child care, the possibilities for such unionization become even more remote as these workers are extremely difficult to organize (Farrache 1998).

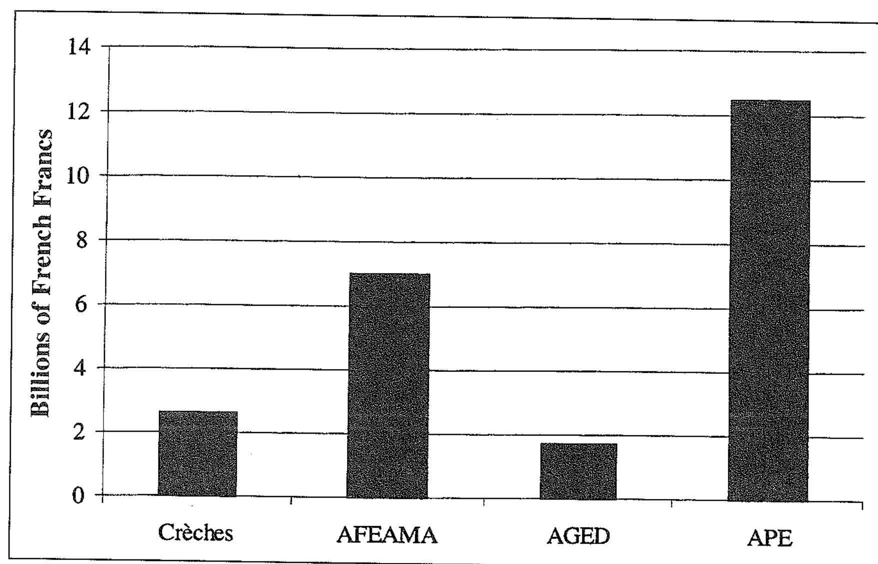
Recourse to individualized services has been furthered by structural economic trends that also have been encouraged by state policy. Since the early 1980s, French governments implemented a number of measures to encourage greater flexibility in employment conditions and work schedules. The percentage of part-time employment doubled from 6 percent in 1981 to 12 percent in 1997 (Audric and Forgeot 1999). While women in France still work part-time at far lower percentages than in most OECD countries, the percentage of women in part-time employment grew from 20 to 30 in this period (Sandoval 1999). Similarly, the prevalence of atypical work schedules has increased as well. Sixty-five percent of workers had a fixed schedule in 1969, compared to less than half today (Bloch-London and Boisard 1999). The recent law reducing weekly work hours to thirty-five has furthered this evolution. In negotiations over the implementation of the new law, many employers have secured more flexible work arrangements in return for the reduced work week. All of this has made it more difficult for parents to arrange child care, particularly as the crèche usually follows traditional working hours. As a result, parents often prefer nannies and family child care workers as more accommodating for their own difficult work schedules (Fagnani 2000). The latter, nonunionized and in an individual employment relationship that is often a black-market one, are not always in a position to protest parents' demands for these atypical work schedules.

The second way in which child care policy has blurred into employment policy is in efforts to encourage women to leave the labor force and care for their young children themselves. Since the onset of economic crisis, this approach has combined fiscal, demographic, and labor market objectives in various permutations. Already in the late 1970s, with the onset of economic crisis, the government began turning toward a strategy of encouraging women's exit from labor markets. After a spate of progressive family and gender-related policy measures under President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, the government began adopting a more traditional approach. In 1977, the government created the Congé Parental d'Éducation (CPE), which allowed a working parent of a child under three to suspend work for two years without pay (Jenson and Sineau 1998). In the two decades that followed, the CPE was progressively reformed to make it compatible with part-time work, and expanded to make it available to more parents.

In 1985, a socialist government made a renewed effort to lure women out of the labor force by creating the Allocation Parentale d'Éducation (APE), a form of paid parental leave for those parents with three or more children. The leave was available for two years, but the parent needed to have worked for two years in the thirty months prior to taking the leave. The strict work requirement is revealing of the APE's underlying motive as an antiunemployment mechanism. As the benefit was only for families with three or more children, it also had clear pronatalist aims. When few parents took advantage of the new law, the conservative government that came to power in 1986 passed a new law that diminished the work requirement to two years out of the last ten, and offered the paid leave for three years (Jenson and Sineau 1998).

An even greater liberalization of the APE occurred in 1994 under another conservative government. The 1994 *loi de famille* (family law) made the APE open to families with only two children, and required that the parent taking the leave had been in the workforce for two years during the last five. The value of the benefit also was increased substantially, and parents could now combine it with part-time work. The expansion of the benefit had immediate effects on the number of mothers of young children in the labor force. Between March 1994 and 1997, the percentage of mothers of two children (the youngest being under age three) in the labor force dropped from 69 to 53 as the number of beneficiaries of the APE tripled. One estimate holds that 60 percent of women having their second child and withdrawing from the labor force would not have done so had the APE not existed (Afsa 1998). APE's effects fall mostly almost entirely upon women; even though the benefit is technically open to men, 99 percent of beneficiaries are women. The same is true for the CPE.

FIGURE 6.3: PUBLIC SPENDING ON CHILD CARE



SOURCE: CNAF (1997a).

AFEAMA = subsidy for licensed family child care workers
AGED = subsidy for in-home care
APE = paid parental leave, up to three years

In sum, French child care policy over the past two decades shows how economic forces have shaped state policy toward women's employment. Persistent unemployment in the last two decades redirected state efforts from prioritizing the traditional crèche toward supporting parental or individual modes of care (see fig. 6.3). However, the move toward more flexible social service provision in recent decades also reflects a third, wider trend in the welfare state.

The Welfare State's Crisis of Legitimacy

The third dimension of welfare-state restructuring that has affected French child care policy is a shift in the delivery of social services. Since the early 1980s, devolution of government functions from the central to the regional or local level decentralized responsibility for social services planning. At the same time, voluntary associations have begun to play a significant role in providing these services, an important departure from the previous state monopoly over social service delivery. While these trends have been facilitated by the desire of state officials to shed responsibility for public services to other levels of government and society, they are not simply the product of neoliberal ideas and financial pressures. There is a larger crisis in the legitimacy of the welfare state, spurred by New Left critiques of bureaucracy and by social movements favoring increased citizen participation in the management of local services. The result for child care policy has been an enhanced role of local governments and associations in policymaking, which has favored a diversification of the kinds of child care services available.

As noted earlier, the most rapid growth in public crèches came in the 1970s when the central government made several direct investments in public child care. The slowdown in the rate of increase in these services corresponds with the Decentralization Law of 1982, which fundamentally restructured center-periphery relations in France. The law gave full responsibility to local governments for deciding whether or not to build child care centers. At the same time, the government also decentralized financing for these projects, as the national family benefits fund transferred many of its resources down to its local equivalent, the CAF. There is no national requirement that localities support child care, nor is there an effort at the national level to develop a unified, coordinated plan for the development of these services across the country. The most that the CNAF can do to promote child care programs is to try to incite local CAFs to prioritize certain services over others and to offer incentives to local governments.

Had it not been for the CNAF and its subsidiaries, it is doubtful that child care services would have advanced much at all after the decentralization law. The CNAF has been the motor behind the continued development of new child care centers. In

a 1981 *circulaire* laying out its social services objectives for the next five years, the CNAF affirmed that its first priority would be to support crèches, kindergartens, play centers, and other services for families with children (CNAF 1981). In 1983, the CNAF created a system of contracts to be negotiated between local funds and local governments, in which the local government agreed to develop a plan for creating public child care. In 1988, the CNAF developed a new form of contract that applied to a much broader range of social services for children. CNAF spending on child care in this period increased by 33 percent (in constant francs) over five years (Ancelin 1997). Throughout the 1990s, the CNAF has continued to make child care for children under six one of the highest priorities of its spending on family services (CNAF 1997b).

Without the ability to impose upon local governments the requirement that they build and support public child care, the CNAF can only have so much influence. There is no requirement that any level of government build child care centers, and for many local governments the costs remain prohibitive. A local government also may decide to solicit funds to support other forms of family-related services instead of investing in crèches geared to working parents. As a result, even though the CNAF continually holds up collective child care as the main priority among family services, the actual development of these programs usually falls short of the hopes of national officials.

Economic slowdown and budget pressures certainly encouraged the move to decentralize government functions. Political sentiment favoring decentralization had been building since the 1960s, however, and the reforms were in many ways a response to declining public confidence in the welfare state (Tymen and Nogues 1988; Jallade 1992). In a number of OECD countries, movements to promote citizen participation in local government and in the management of social services began sprouting up in the late 1960s. New social movements were a reaction against bureaucracy, neo-corporatist bargaining, and the welfare state, and they came not only from a neoliberal or New Right perspective, but were leftist movements to improve the responsiveness of political elites to people's needs (Alber 1988). Their demands came at a time of growing complexity in the tasks of the state, with the appearance of new forms of poverty, increasingly heterogeneous populations, and changes in the nature of risk owing to family breakdown and irregular forms of employment.

Similar movements arose in France out of the May '68 revolts. One was the movement for *autogestion,* or self-management of the workplace, a concept that came to encompass calls for a wider devolution of power in French society. Of particular importance was the idea of increasing citizen participation in local government, particularly in their position as clients of government programs. Some advocated the creation of *groupements d'action municipale*—community action groups that would be active on local issues such as housing, schools, and transportation (Schmidt 1990; Ullman 1998). A number of state officials held similar views, believing that decentralization of government functions would restore effectiveness to a bloated, overly-centralized, and inefficient state apparatus (Ullman 1998). Gradually, these ideas influenced socialist party and, to a lesser degree, communist party doctrine. By 1980, the socialist platform promised a substantial decentralization program, many of the features of which were implemented through the 1980s.

The decentralization of state power was matched by a flowering of associational life and an increasing role for these nonprofit organizations in the management of public services (Mizrahi-Tchernonog 1992; Ullman 1998). The effects are evident in the child care sector where, initially, most centers were run by the state. In 1979, 11 percent of all child care centers were run by voluntary associations; by 1993 that figure had risen to 30 percent (SESI 1982; CNAF 1996a). These associations have benefited from a partnership with the local family benefits funds (CAFs), which devote considerable resources to financing association-based services (Ancelin 1985). This includes nearly all of a more recently developed form of child care—the *crèche parentale*. These crèches originated in the ambitions of some May '68 activists to transform the practices of child socialization through collective forms of care. This was a reaction against the sterile, hospital-like crèches run by the state, as well as a plea for child care to liberate mothers from the burdens of child rearing (Mozère 1992). Initially, these *crèches sauvages* were run independently of the state, to the great irritation of many government health officials who were anxious to maintain their control over these services. Today, these child care centers receive state funding, but are entirely managed by parents. Parents are responsible for staffing the centers as well, which means that the crèche parentale requires a greater degree of parental involvement than other forms of child care. One recent study showed that parents using a crèche parentale spend on average nearly fourteen hours a month either at the center or involved in work for the association (Feretti, Jade, and Passaris 1994).

These new forms of child care add diversity to a system that has grown increasingly complex in recent years. In addition to the traditional crèche, crèche familiale, crèche parentale, and assistante maternelle, other forms of support to families include part-time child care centers (*halte-garderies*), play centers (*ludothèques*), after-school programs, and parent-child centers. The CNAF and CAFs promoted the diversification of child care services in the late 1980s when they replaced an earlier form of child care financing that targeted entirely the crèches with a system of financial supports for a much broader range of services. One area of particular growth has been in part-time child care centers, the need for which has grown alongside the increasing prevalence of atypical or part-time employment. Between 1985 and 1995, the overall increase in the number of part-time center places was 67 percent, compared to a 47 percent increase in the number of full-time crèches places (SESI 1982; CNAF 1996a). How have these trends affected the qualitative and quantitative development of child care services? Many advocates of the nonprofit sector argue that associational involvement in service provision has improved the responsiveness of the state to parents' needs and preferences. Diversity may come at the cost of the overall level of services available, however, as the pie must now be divided among a greater range of programs than in the past. Even if it wanted to, the French state could no longer embark upon a massive program of

public construction today as it did with the development of the education system. The incorporation of associations in the policy-making process, with their demands for a diversified set of public services, precludes one-size-fits-all kinds of approaches to child care. In addition, government decentralization has produced great regional variations in availability. As the next section will reveal, the decentralization and diversification of social services policy caters to a wider set of interests, but at the cost of distributional fairness (Jallade 1992).

The Politics of Parental "Choice"

Since the 1970s, then, and particularly with the advent of welfare state crisis and economic restructuring, French child care policy has evolved from support for the traditional crèche toward a diverse array of services and subsidies. This trend has been accompanied by rhetoric about the importance of offering "choice" to parents in matters of child care. In the 1970s, the promotion of free choice was about promoting the full labor force participation of mothers. By the 1980s, however, the term was used to justify policies for both mothers working outside and in the home and full-time caregivers. Support for individualized forms of care also comes under the rubric of improving parental choice. Instead of moving toward a Scandinavian-style system of extensive public child care services, French public policy settled into a compromise position that supports full-time work and full-time caregiving, as well as a range of services outside of the traditional child care center.

This is a reflection of the policymaking process in the family policy sector. Family benefits and services are largely a product of decision-making in the para-public CNAF and CAFs. Representatives of business, labor, and family associations sit on the administrative council of the CNAF, as well as the equivalent councils running the CAFs, and hammer out compromises over the kinds of services deserving of public support. The more conservative family associations generally do not oppose the public crèches, but they prefer individualized forms of care, as well as services that address the needs of housewives with young children at home. The communist union, the Confédération Générale de Travail, lies on the opposite end of the spectrum in its unyielding advocacy of a vast system of public services. Other groups on the councils hold views somewhere in between these two perspectives (Ancelin 1998). While there has been no overt ideological backlash against women's employment, there has also been no consensus large enough to support engaging state resources in a major public child care initiative. Instead, the position that emerges in the CNAF, the local CAFs, and government ministries is one of subsidizing women who care for their own children as well as those who use child care in one or several of its myriad forms. Stretching resources to try to satisfy all camps tends to satisfy no one completely, although the recent increase in the home care allowance (APE) appears to have improved the option for women to stay home.

While governments on both the left and the right have maintained this compromise position in family policy, there are differences of emphasis. Conservative governments generally have tried to offer greater subsidies to individualized forms of child care, particularly for nannies. These forms of child care usually benefit middle- and upper-class families, who gain the most from tax breaks and who have the resources to pay for child care in the home (Fagnani 1997). The right also was behind the greatest expansion in paid care leaves in the 1990s, which spurred a substantial drop in maternal employment. On the left, there continues to be more support for the traditional crèche. The current socialist government has been sympathetic to claims that individualized forms of child care compete with and will ultimately undermine the public services. In response to these fears, the government of Lionel Jospin in 1997 reduced the tax break and the value of the AGED by half. Recently, the socialist government promised substantially to increase spending on crèches in order to create up to 40,000 new child care vacancies in the next few years. Notably, this comes at a time when the economy is growing again, the fiscal situation has improved, and unemployment has begun to decline. Still, this government has maintained the paid care leave (APE), although its most recent proposal would offer incentives to help draw women back into the labor force toward the end of this care leave.

How well do these policies accord with parental preferences? Public opinion studies show that many parents would rather reduce their work time than use a child care service, and many still believe that child care is the mothers' responsibility (Commaille, Strobel, and Villac 1994). In one recent study of parental preferences, 43 percent of women said they would like to quit work or reduce their work time after having children (Fagnani 2000). In addition, parental preferences for child care are quite diverse. Parents who are actually using crèches report the greatest satisfaction with their child care services of any group of parents using nonmaternal care. Still, only 22 percent of all parents say the crèche would be their preferred mode of care, with family child care as the most preferred form (32 percent), followed by grandparents (23 percent) (David 1999). Current policymaking seems to be consonant with the stated preferences of many French parents.

The price of greater responsiveness to parental preferences is distributional fairness. Those who have most benefited from the move toward individualized modes of care have been middle- and upper-income families. These forms of child care charge all parents the same, regardless of income, and families who have higher incomes benefit the most from tax credits to subsidize these services. Only the public crèches gradate the fees parents pay according to income and thus offer the most help to low-income families. Yet, this is the form of child care in shortest supply and to which poor parents often lack access. The shortages have been exacerbated in France by the decentralization law, which has produced great regional disparities in the availability of child care services. As a result, many parents lack a real choice in the matter of child care, and use whatever form of care is available to them. Lower-income parents usually end up relying upon black-market child care, which is the first choice of only 4 percent of parents, and receives the lowest satisfaction rating by parents of any form of child care (David 1999).

These policies also have implications for the gender division of labor and women's long-term well-being. Extensive care leaves hurt the long-term position of women in the labor market, and this is most detrimental for low-income women (Fagnani 1998; Math and Renaudat 1997). The APE tends to be taken by less skilled, lower-income mothers who are already earning fairly low salaries and thus have less to lose by leaving the labor force. Recent studies have shown that these marginalized female workers often have a difficult time being reinserted in the labor force, should they attempt to do so after the benefit expires (Fagnani 1996). Currently 27 percent of recipients of the APE are without employment at the end of the paid leave, contributing to the higher rates of unemployment among women than men—11.9 percent for women versus 8.4 percent for men as of March 2000 (Ministère de l'Emploi et de la Solidarité 2000). In the context of women's higher unemployment rates and greater risk of poverty, a policy that promotes women's exit from the labor market may only increase their potential for marginalization.

Conclusion

Economic crisis and welfare state reform have not produced massive cutbacks that would roll back fifty years of French social spending, yet they have had substantial effects on child care policy. Budget austerity, stubbornly high rates of unemployment, and a crisis in the legitimacy of the welfare state have changed the face of French child care policy. An extensive system of early childhood education already was well in place before the onset of the economic crisis, and it has been the secret to France's success in providing child care services to working parents. Yet growth in the nascent system of public crèches in the 1970s slowed with the strain on fiscal resources. Efforts to redress chronic unemployment led to a redefinition of the notion of facilitating women's free choice. By the 1980s, state efforts were dedicated less to promoting women's insertion into labor markets, as had been the case in the 1970s, than to encouraging women's exit from work when there were young children in the home. The imperative to bolster job growth also led to a diversification of the existing modes of child care, as state policy began subsidizing individual forms of care such as nannies or independent caregivers.

The growing complexity of the French child care system reflects a policymaking process that attempts to satisfy a wide range of groups with often diverging preferences. Yet, the resulting policy of libre choix has not produced a situation of real choice for most parents. In emphasizing individualized solutions and "choice" for parents, distributional fairness has been subordinated to employment and budgetary objectives. It remains to be seen if economic growth and declining unemployment will spark a renewed commitment to the crèche, or if the diversification of the existing system has created a constituency of parents calling for more individualized solutions to their child care needs.

Notes

1. In the French terminology, "collective" child care refers to crèches, or child care centers, nearly all of which receive substantial public subsidies or are run by local governments. "Individual" modes of child care include family child care (*assistantes maternelles*) and nannies.

2. Data are from 1960, calculated as a percentage of the female population aged fifteen to sixty-four.

3. These figures are for women with two children, the youngest being under the age of six. Note that the figure for Germany is only for the West German lander (states).

4. In 1999, the general tax break was for 25 percent of spending on child care, up to a FF15,000 ceiling per child; in addition, for parents employing a nanny in the home, there is a tax break worth 50 percent of spending, up to a limit of FF45,000 per child (David 1999).

5. A comparable evolution occurred only in Belgium and, to a lesser degree, Italy.

6. Belgium is one exception to this generalization.

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