**Introduction**

Comparative research on the relationship between work and family life has received increasing attention in recent years. The topic has gained importance due to a shift from breadwinner to dual-earner families (Jacobs and Gerson 2001), which may be income rich but are relatively poor in terms of time (Esping-Andersen 1999). Interest has come from both European policy makers (European Commission 2005) and the international scientific literature. This literature has to a large extent focused on the concept of ‘work-life balance’. Several angles have been addressed, such as: the negative spill-over from work to family life (Scherer 2009; Scherer and Steiber 2007); the potential mediation of flexible or part-time schedules (Booth and Van Ours 2009; Hyman, Scholarios and Baldry 2005); the consequences of family obligations for women’s employment (Vlasblom and Schippers 2006; Uunk, Kalmijn and Muffels 2005); and the work-and home-related factors that affect individuals’ time pressure (Van der Lippe 2007; Van der Lippe, Jager and Kops 2006).

There are at least two important shortcomings that can be identified within this literature. First, scholars have mainly analysed the individual consequences for (female) employees of the competing demands of work and family life. Likewise, the impact of the growing tensions between work and family can only be grasped at the individual but not at the societal level. Furthermore, the literature gives a rather static account of work-family conflicts, mainly addressing the factors that affect these from a cross-sectional perspective. This has the drawback of not being able to take the historical context into account within which work-family tensions arise. The literature focusing on changing gender roles, such as Crompton (1999) and more recently Esping-Andersen (2009), makes an important contribution in providing a dynamic perspective to cross-national comparison. However, trends in gender arrangements are rarely systematically linked to broader socio-economic developments. In this article we address these shortcomings by investigating the societal-level tensions between work and family within the dynamic contexts of the political economies of western European countries.

We comparatively analyse trends in female labour market participation, working hours and childbearing. The main argument outlined in the article is that in order to explain current work-family conflicts and their inter-country differences, we need to draw attention to the development of capitalism, understood as a process of increasing commodification, and its interrelations with gender roles. The process of increasing commodification is crucial for understanding the rise in women’s labour market participation and working hours, and for analysing its consequences for society. The analyses illustrate that women in their childbearing and -rearing years have increased their labour market participation throughout western Europe up to very similar high levels. Moreover, their working hours have increased in those countries already having attained near-to-full participation. At the same time, fertility rates have dropped markedly in all countries. But while broad convergence is observed in employment trends, childbearing figures indicate a divergence between two groups of countries. We argue that these contrasting trends of convergence and diversity can be
explained by the interplay between similar market pressures and different societal norms. This has important theoretical, as well as methodological and policy-related implications.

BACKGROUND

The comparison of work-family conflict

Analysing the work-life balance of individuals and the factors affecting this balance in a comparative perspective has not proven to be an easy task. While both work-related and family-related variables have been found to influence individuals’ work-life balance in different countries, cross-country differences appear harder to explain. Two aspects of work-family tensions do not fit theoretical expectations when assessed empirically. The first is that women do not unambiguously portray the most severe work-family tensions (Gallie and Russell 2009), while this would be expected from the double burden that comes with their involvement in paid work and household tasks (Hochschild and Machung 1989). More importantly even, the cross-country variation in work-life balance scores cannot easily be grasped by welfare state regimes or other typologies. In countries with supposedly family-friendly institutional arrangements women and men do not necessarily experience the least work-family tensions (Gallie and Russell 2009; Cousins and Tang 2004).

The concept of work-life balance has recently been criticised from conceptual as well as empirical angles (Pichler 2009; Warhurst, Eikhof and Haunschild 2008). It is not our intention to discuss the merits of the concept, but we aim to enrich the comparative literature on work-family relations with an explicitly macro-level analysis. This may help overcoming some of the aforementioned obstacles in explaining cross-country differences. We choose to focus on empirical indicators of two phenomena that are at the heart of the work-family interface: female employment and childbearing. Falling fertility rates pose challenges to European labour markets, confronting them with unfavourable dependency ratios (Vos 2009). To counter such consequences, increasing labour market participation and employment are deemed necessary, particularly for women (European Commission 2003). But due to work-family combination problems this might in turn increase pressure on family life, further depressing childbearing. The nexus between female employment patterns and childbearing can thus be expected to reflect crucial tensions between work and family at the societal level.

Demographers have remarked that the macro-level correlation between female labour market participation and fertility rates has inversed from negative to positive over the past decades (Brewster and Rindfuss 2000; Ahn and Mira 2002). Countries with high levels of female employment currently also have the highest number of children per couple. This ‘great paradox of our times’, in Esping-Andersen’s (1999) words, indicates that countries with strong family traditions now face the biggest population ageing problems. The social-democratic regimes of his welfare state typology perform particularly well in both domains. These countries have the highest degrees of ‘de-commodification’ – sheltering people from market pressures – as well as the highest degrees of ‘de-familiazation’ – unburdening families with regard to household tasks (Esping-Andersen 1990; 1999). A range of other, more or less similar typologies may be used for analysing work-family relations comparatively (Haas 2005). But whether focusing on institutional or cultural factors, these theories emphasise cross-national variety and diversity in work-family arrangements. In the remainder of this article we argue that attention needs to be paid to the dynamic forces of the market and their impact in different institutional and cultural settings. Whether these lead to growing convergence between countries or continuing diversity is an empirical question.

Market pressures

Recently some authors have urged for a redirection of scholarly preoccupation with national variety to more appreciation for the underlying process of capitalist development (Streeck
The lack of evidence for arguments that predicted cross-national convergence has lead researchers to turn to the identification of robust, historically path-dependent national models, such as welfare state regimes or ‘varieties of capitalism’ (Hall and Soskice 2001). To present such models as internally coherent ideal types, made up of complementary institutional building blocks, implies difficulties in conceptualising change (Streeck and Thelen 2005). Nevertheless, radical changes in the socio-economic foundations of European societies since the modern ‘post-war settlement’ have been prominent in sociological debates. This has included theories of the increasing individual dependence on labour markets and exposure to market-related risks (Beck 1992), and analyses of market-mediated employment relationships replacing internal labour market structures (Cappelli 1995). According to Streeck (2009) these and other changes have to be studied in the light of the development of capitalism, as it gradually frees itself from the institutional constraints posed on it by the Keynesian welfare state of the post-war period.

The Fordist compromise imposed strict limits on the commodification of labour. The ‘family wage’, although infamous for its gender-inequality connotation, presented a buffer for family life against the continuous pressures of the market. The disappearance of the family wage, an important factor in the rapid expansion of labour markets, implied a trend break from de-commodification to re-commodation (Streeck 2008). A spectacular rise in women’s labour market participation took place. But as labour markets and employment became more volatile and flexible, so did family life. Dual-earner couples have increasingly busy and flexible jobs and careers, which parallel their also increasingly busy and flexible family lives. This is reflected by figures of declining stable relationships and a sharp drop in the number of children (Streeck 2008a). These coinciding trends suggest that the shift away from protection against market pressures and towards re-commodification of labour has potentially important consequences for society at large. Specifically, the declining number of children, which confronts societies with important ageing problems, may reflect social tensions generated by the labour market expansion that replaced ‘rigid’ protections from markets with ‘flexible’ involvement in markets.

Streeck’s arguments implicitly refer to the work of Polanyi (1957), in who’s writings the process of commodification figures prominently. Polanyi’s central theme is the relation of economy to society and, in particular, the subordination of social life to the rationale of the self-regulating market, with its consequences for society. According to Polanyi, the economy cannot be separated from the rest of society as a distinct domain with its proper ‘rational-choice’ logic. The market is necessarily embedded in society, which makes the pure unregulated market a theoretical impossibility (Krippner and Alvarez 2007). This is because in a ‘market society’ all inputs for production must be purchasable as commodities on a market. The problem with labour is that is has not been ‘made’ for sale on a market, and it is therefore merely a ‘fictitious commodity’. Labour cannot be separated from the person who provides it and hence from the human conditions under which it is performed. To treat labour as a commodity is to assume that workers’ lives are left to the interplay of supply and demand forces on the labour market. Such a situation is not viable, and the market can therefore only function by the sake of social protections that refrain it from destroying its social foundations. As will be demonstrated in the empirical analyses, this provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding the relations between increasing market pressures and their (diverse) social consequences.

Gender roles

Gender roles have occupied a prominent place in research on work and family. The Fordist compromise was itself a highly gendered arrangement, relying on a strict specialisation of tasks between husbands and wives. Economic accounts have analysed this in functionalistic terms, emphasising the comparative advantages of men specialising in paid work and women specialising in housework (Becker 1991). However, comparative research has
illustrated that such gendered divisions of labour within households vary considerably in nature and degree between countries (Anxo et al. 2007; Haas et al. 2006). This has drawn upon different typologies of country-clusters and ideal types (O'Reilly 2006), indicating differences in gender-arrangements and gender roles between countries. An influential example is Lewis' (1992) continuum of male breadwinner models, which places countries on a scale of strong to weak dependency of women on a male breadwinner. At the individual level, differences in gender role attitudes have been found to influence women's labour market participation and working hours (Cunningham 2008), as well as the timing of relationship building and childbearing (Davis and Greenstein 2009).

But gender roles are not static, and gender role attitudes have been found to become less traditional over time in different countries (Crompton, Brockmann and Lyonette 2005). Blossfeld and Drobnic (2002) have identified a shift from a breadwinner to a dual-earner model throughout European countries. This turn away from the traditional 'nuclear family' that was the norm under Fordist production has been described as a continuum of gendered arrangements (Crompton 1999). Likewise, an evolution from breadwinner to dual-earner-dual-career households has been envisioned, implying a shift from low to high gender equality. However, this 'revolution of women's roles', as Esping-Andersen (2009) has recently outlined, is yet incomplete. His thesis is that gender roles have changed dramatically over the past decades, and welfare states have to adapt in order to accommodate these changes. The consequence is that some countries find themselves in a sub-optimal situation from an efficiency perspective and hence face social and demographic problems. Here the static and dynamic approaches to gender roles meet, emphasising both the evolution in gender roles that has taken place throughout Europe and the persisting inter-country differences in gender-arrangements and the ways in which women's changing roles have been accommodated.

However, gender roles and market pressures are rarely addressed in interrelation instead of separately. Nevertheless, we will argue that they are two sides of the same story. As Streeck (2008a; 2009a) points out, the dissolution of the family wage can be explained by either emphasising the attractions or the pressures of the market. In the former explanation the entrance of women into employment in more flexible labour markets is seen as a liberation from traditional family structures and gender inequality. The latter argues that stagnant real wages, rising unemployment and eroding social protections forced families to supply more labour power to the market. But these accounts are not mutually exclusive when one looks at the interplay between cultural and structural elements. Increasing market pressures that required households to increase their labour supply have coincided with changing attitudes that made this acceptable and indeed even desirable. But, as Esping-Andersen (2009) demonstrates, cross-country differences remain important. Our empirical analysis will illustrate that comparative studies can shed light on work-family tensions by integrating analysis of labour market trends with analysis of gender role attitudes. Specifically, it shows that the different extents to which gender role attitudes 'match' market pressures lead to diverging social consequences.

**DATA AND METHODS**

For exploring and analysing longitudinal and comparative trends in women's and men's labour market participation, we use the most recent Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) employment statistics. These data include labour force participation rates and average working time in hour bands, for men and women and for different age categories. Annual figures are available for the period 1961-2008 (participation) or 1983-2008 (working hours), and 22 European countries are covered. We restrict our analyses to western European countries, since for central and eastern European countries no figures on long-term trends are available. The countries included are: Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway,
Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom. The age groups that are used are 15-24, 25-54 and 55-64 years. The hour bands, representing average hours worked in a person’s main job, are delimited as follows: 1-19, 20-29, 30-34, 35-39 and 40+ hours. Longitudinal and comparative data on childbearing are available from Eurostat. The most recent figures include annual total fertility rates per country, ranging from 1960 to 2006. These data cover all countries that were included in the analysis of OECD data plus Austria. Additionally, Eurostat statistics on trends in social expenditure, and public spending on family policy and childcare provision in particular, were consulted to include differential institutional factors.

Unfortunately, for analysing gender roles comparatively no reliable longitudinal data are available. The highest quality comparative-European data set containing gender role variables is the second round of the European Social Survey (2004-2005). These are individual-level data, covering 26 European countries, for which we merged country data sets of the aforementioned western European countries plus Iceland. By performing factor analysis on three survey items, we constructed an indicator for gender role attitudes. High scores on this indicator represent ‘modern’ or ‘progressive’ gender role attitudes, as compared to ‘traditional’ or ‘conservative’ attitudes. The three items are statements on which respondents could agree or disagree to varying degrees on a 5-point scale. The statements are: 1) A women should be prepared to cut down on her paid work for the sake of her family; 2) When jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women; 3) When there are children in the home, parents should stay together even if they don’t get along. The scores were aggregated per country so that they could be analysed at the macro-level, representing a societal average.

Descriptive statistics are analysed comparatively and longitudinally, focusing on trends over time as well as inter-country differences in these trends. The possibilities of convergence and divergence are assessed. The comparison also includes different age groups and men and women, but for reasons of space limits not all these analyses are reported in figures and tables. Curve estimations are used to assess the correlations between labour market involvement, working hours, gender roles and childbearing. The scope for more refined statistical techniques is limited due to the small number of cases that are available when working on the country level.

**FINDINGS**

**Labour market participation and working hours**

In order to analyse the changing amounts of labour that households provide to the market, labour force participation rates as well as average working hours for both men and women need to be assessed. The data show that men’s labour market participation has been very stable throughout the nearly half century we are able to study, and levels have been high. Overall participation rates do portray a slight decline and a certain degree of inter-country variety, but this blurs the reality of different age groups. The age category that is most interesting with regard to work-family tensions\(^1\), between 25 an 54 years old, does hardly depict any change over time or comparative differences. In all countries the participation rate of this age group has been above 90 % nearly throughout the whole period. This is very different for the younger and older age groups. Both for 15-24 and for 55-64 year old men participation rates are highly heterogeneous across countries, in 1961 and still in 2008, and trends have been just as diverse. But the age group for which we may assume work-family tensions, nearly full participation has been the norm in all countries, without substantial changes over time.

\(^1\) We define work-family conflict essentially as tensions between couples’ activity in paid work and the care for children. Therefore the focus is on the 25-54 year age group. We acknowledge that the concept may be defined otherwise, for instance to include the care for elderly relatives.
We further track possible changes in labour supply of the almost fully participating 25-54 age group, looking at average working hour trends. Very short working hours, 1-19 per week, are extremely rare among men in this age group throughout the period. Longer part-time jobs, 20-29 hours per week, were rather rare as well in the 1980s. Countries with very low figures have somewhat increased their share of these arrangements, so that by 2008 all countries range between 1.5 and 4 %. The same holds true for 30-34 hour jobs. Only in the Netherlands there has been a more substantial increase, from 1.3 % in 1983 to 7 % in 2008. The largest inter-country differences exist between 35-39 hours and 40+ hours, as well as the most important changes. Together these two categories make up the lion’s share of men’s participation. Some countries witness a shift towards longer working hours and some a shift in the opposite direction. On the whole, however, inter-country differences are remarkably persistent.

Labour force participation trends for women offer a contrasting picture. Looking at the overall participation rates, the gradual increase of women on the labour market is obvious but cross-country differences also appear substantial and persistent. As depicted in figure 1, country-trends are fairly linear. However, when breaking down these figures for different age groups, it becomes clear that for our group of interest – 25-54 year old women – trends have been much more convergent. For younger and older age categories large inter-country differences exist throughout the period. But, as figure 1 demonstrates, in the 25-54 year category countries have not increased their labour participation in a linear fashion. All countries have seen a substantial increase between the 1960s and 2008, but a clear trend of convergence between countries can be observed. The countries that had relatively low participation rates in the 1960s have had the most spectacular increases, while Nordic countries with long periods of high rates seem to have reached a plateau. Cross-country differences do still exist in 2008 but while in the 1960s and 70s they ranged from less than 30 to more than 70 %, by 2008 nearly all countries have reached the 70 % threshold. Southern European countries still fall slightly behind but not as much as the overall participation rates could give the impression.

Figure 1: Labour market participation of women aged 15-64 in 15 European countries, 1961-2008 (source: OECD)
Within the 25-54 year age group we again zoom in on trends in average working hours. For small part-time jobs, 1-19 hours per week, inter-country differences are large. Most countries have no substantial percentage of such arrangements, but some countries such as the Netherlands and the United Kingdom have relatively high rates of over 20%. However, exactly these countries have seen a rather sharp decline over the past decades, while only Germany has had a substantial increase. Larger part-time jobs, of 20-29 hours, have very heterogeneous rates across Europe. Remarkable is the fact that in Nordic countries these have decreased over the period – especially in Denmark, from over 25% to under 10% –, while in the Netherlands there has been an increase to over 30%. Jobs of 30-34 hours are not very common, only in Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands they have increased to over 15%. For jobs of 35 hours or more inter-country heterogeneity is large, but trends are very stable. Some countries like Germany and Ireland, and to a lesser extent Italy, have made a substantial shift towards shorter working hours: from 40+ to 35-39. Figure 3 summarises these trends by depicting the changing percentages of full-time employees, using a cut-off point of 30 hours per week\(^2\). This graph illustrates that Nordic countries have seen a trend towards increasing full-time jobs, while Italy and Ireland have increased their part-time share.

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\(^2\) The 30-hour norm is the standardised operationalisation of full-time versus part-time employment used by the OECD. While this is to a certain extent arbitrary, it allows for international comparison.
Childbearing and gender role attitudes

There has been a general decline in childbearing in Europe, as is well-documented in the literature on the second demographic transition (Lesthaeghe and Willems 1999). This has lead to numbers of children that are not sufficient for replacing the current generation and that will, without considering migration, lead to population ageing and decline. This trend can be clearly observed in the total fertility rates depicted in figure 4. But more interestingly even, from the 1990s onwards a clear bifurcation between two groups of countries emerges. In the former group the decline in fertility rates has continued, leading to rates of under 1.5 children per women. Such low figures have been termed ‘low fertility’ in demographic literature (Kohler et al. 2002), and they are mainly found in southern European and German-speaking countries. Also central and eastern European countries, for which no long-term trends are available, have very low rates. This contrasts with the countries that have recovered somewhat from their lowest rates and show figures between 1.6 and 2.0 by 2006. There now exists a clear and substantial difference between countries with ‘low’ and countries with ‘relatively high’ childbearing figures.3

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3This can only be called high in relative terms, since most rates are still below the replacement level.
Although women’s roles have changed dramatically throughout Europe, reflected in the converging high participation rates for 25-54 year old women, gender role attitudes are still fairly diverse between countries. Country means on the factor scores for gender role attitudes vary significantly between the different countries, as illustrated by an analysis of variance (ANOVA) which results in an F-value of 376.5, significant at the 0.01 level. As figure 5 illustrates, Nordic countries have the most progressive scores and southern European countries the most conservative. Women have significantly more progressive attitudes than men, but these differences are very similar between countries. Therefore, we use aggregate mean scores for countries, not distinguishing between women and men. Neither labour market participation rates for 25-54 year old women nor their average working hours – measured in binary terms of full-time versus part-time – correlate significantly with total fertility rates at the country level. However, as figure 6 shows, gender role attitudes are strongly and significantly related to childbearing figures. The curve estimation draws a linear regression line which fits the country positions within the property space rather neatly. The ANOVA test reveals significance at the 0.01 level and a standardised regression coefficient of 0.71. The squared coefficient can be interpreted as the proportion of variance explained by the model, which is 50.8%. Thus, countries with more progressive gender role attitudes have significantly and substantially higher numbers of children. Moreover, the two groups of ‘low’ and ‘relatively high’ childbearing identified above are well reflected in figure 6, along the lines of countries’ gender role attitude scores.
The findings presented in the previous sections give rise to a number of considerations. We will discuss seven major points, of which the first four give interrelated substantial interpretations of the empirical data and the remaining three outline the main theoretical, methodological and policy-related implications.

1) The data illustrate with much clarity that families in western Europe have supplied increasingly more labour power to the market over the past four to five decades. On the one hand, men’s participation as well as their working hours have generally remained very stable over the period. In virtually none of the countries have they been any substantial changes to 25-54 year old men’s labour market behaviour. On the other hand, women in this age group have increased their labour supply markedly in all countries.
most countries where female labour market participation was low in the 1960s, there
have been very steep increases in participation rates. Some of these countries that have
provided increasing opportunities for part-time work, of which the Netherlands are the
prime example (Visser 2002), have been able to increase participation even more rapidly
than others. By contrast, countries where female participation was traditionally high – i.e.
the Scandinavian countries – have seen more moderate increases in female labour
market participation, apparently reaching a plateau in the 1990s. These countries have,
however, witnessed an increase in women’s working hours, reflected by a decline in part-
time employment. Having already reached participation levels that nearly equal those of
men, increasing labour supply has continued through the rise of average weekly working
hours and the spread of full-time jobs among women.

2) There is no sign in the data that any of the studied countries is evolving in the direction of
a dual-earner-dual-carer model (Crompton 1999). While virtually all countries now have
dual-earner models – with more than 70 % of 25-54 year old women participating in the
labour market – men do not seem to have decreased their labour supply, neither through
lower participation nor through shorter working hours. This certainly leads to a different
division of tasks within the household but only because of an increase in women’s labour
market involvement. More importantly, this implies a total increase in labour supply and a
corresponding decline of ‘family time’. The trends in female labour market participation
suggest that too much emphasis on diversity – as is often the case in cross-national
studies, relying on country clusters or typologies – may hide potentially more significant
similarities. Long-term trends of labour market participation indicate that countries are
increasingly converging on a development towards higher commodification. This gradual
expansion of markets has to be seen as the main driver of work-family tensions,
changing women’s roles in different ways in different countries. In some countries it has
triggered a true revolution of women’s roles, as their labour market involvement has
increased dramatically, while in other countries women’s roles changed only moderately
and gradually, since female participation was already relatively high.

3) While countries seem to be generally converging on a trend towards higher
commodification, implying ever greater labour supply, the social consequences in terms
of family life have been markedly diverse. Focusing on childbearing figures, the
convergence in labour market trends has been paralleled by a growing divergence in
trends of fertility rates. Specifically, a bifurcation between two groups of countries has
emerged during the 1990s, while labour market participation has continued to increase.
The former group, including Nordic and West-European countries, has recovered
moderate total fertility rates of 1.6 to 2.0 by 2006. By contrast, the latter group, made up
of Mediterranean and German-speaking countries, has continuing low fertility rates of
below 1.5. This clear separation of two country clusters can be fairly accurately grasped
by the differences in average gender role attitudes prevailing in the different societies.
While the data illustrate that women’s roles – as reflected in their labour market
behaviour – have very much converged on a distinct ‘progressive’ or ‘modern’ trajectory,
attitudes about gender roles have certainly not (yet). If the factor scores for gender role
attitudes that we use are a valid instrument for capturing societal norms, there seem to
be important and persistent inter-country differences in the norms about women’s and
men’s roles in society. These norms correlate strongly and significantly with childbearing
figures. The analysis shows that the more traditional the values, the lower the number of
children. This means that, we argue, in countries where attitudes have not adapted
‘adequately’\(^4\) to the new roles of women and the market pressures triggering these, family life has become under strain, resulting in the low numbers of children we observe\(^5\).

4) However, the less severe work-family tensions – indicated by childbearing figures – that can be observed in ‘progressive’ countries come at the price of certain institutional provisions. It would not be accurate to conclude that the increasing market pressures for commodification have had no impact on society in these countries. Rather, where the market has progressed the state has had to step in to compensate for the potential work-family conflicts that this might have created. This is reflected in the high and rising public expenditure on family policy, and childcare provision in particular, which is depicted in tables 1 and 2. Here we compare public expenditure in four European countries belonging to different welfare state clusters, from 1991 to 2007. This suggests that, as Streeck (2009a) has argued, increasing marketisation does not simply push back the state but rather places demands on it to take up new roles to compensate for the ‘intrusion’ of the market into ever more domains of life, in particular family life. If families supply increasingly more labour to the market, in terms of higher participation and longer working hours, responsibilities that were formerly in the domain of the family have to be at least partly taken over by public means. The societal costs of expanding labour markets may therefore be high, as the large budgets spent on family policies and childcare provision in Denmark illustrate. The alternative, so it seems, may be to incur a societal cost of work-family tensions possibly leading to low childbearing, with its population ageing consequences. In this sense, social-democratic welfare states are not so much de-commodifying labour but rather supporting further commodification by cushioning its negative social consequences at public expense.

Table 1: Public expenditure on family policies in percentage of gross domestic product in 4 European countries, 1991-2007 (source: Eurostat)

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<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>3.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>1.5</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Public expenditure on child day care in euro’s per inhabitant (2000 prices) in 4 European countries, 1991-2007 (source: Eurostat)

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<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>338.7</td>
<td>432.7</td>
<td>522.7</td>
<td>539.5</td>
<td>557.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>75.4</td>
<td>95.7</td>
<td>98.5</td>
<td>110.1</td>
<td>117.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>33.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>48.9</td>
<td>56.5</td>
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5) The theoretical implication of the analysis is, we argue, that the tensions between work and family life can be better understood from a historical perspective, and in particular within a Polanyian framework of analysis. In order to grasp the societal-level tensions between work and family that exist in current European societies, we need to pay attention to the centrality of the development of capitalism, and its driving force of market expansion, in these societies. This development should not be hidden behind an

\(^4\) By adequately we mean ‘according to the exigencies of the market’. We do not presume that this would be necessarily adequate from a societal perspective, since we refute a functionalistic approach.

\(^5\) Without longitudinal data we cannot judge whether differences in gender role attitudes are due to changes in ‘progressive’ countries, or whether these differences have always existed. In the latter case, it would be more appropriate to speak of attitudes having ‘accommodated’ the increasing market pressures in these countries.
overstatement of the diversity of country clusters within Europe, referring to static typologies. The continuous pressures of market expansion, as we have shown, lead to increasing labour supply in all countries and to growing convergence in labour market participation and working hours between countries. The ‘double movement’ of market expansion and market protection, the core of Polanyi’s analysis of capitalism, is visible in the simultaneous trends of increasing market expansion and increasing state intervention in Nordic countries. But the difference with Polanyi’s notion of social protection is that state intervention in the family sphere is not so much directed at pushing back market pressures but rather at accommodating them and compensating for their negative social effects. Whether ways of life are far more flexible than Polanyi thought, and hence the limits of market expansion far less rigid and strict than he suspected, cannot be assessed without longitudinal data on –amongst others – gender role attitudes. Therefore, it remains an open question whether attitudes in other countries will evolve in the direction of those in the ‘progressive’ countries.

6) On a methodological level, the implication of the analyses in this paper would be that studies of work-family conflict should employ more systematically an historical, longitudinal perspective. This should allow for identifying the trends of commodification and its impacts on family life, and it should be able to avoid the static conception of different groups of countries that can only be described in terms of their diversity. We claim that it is the interplay between converging market pressures and diverse cultural and institutional settings that defines the nature and amplitude of current work-family tensions. Therefore, it is to this interplay that scholarly attention should be directed.

7) Finally, some tentative remarks can be made about the possible implications of the study from a social policy perspective. On the basis of our argument and analyses, it could be questioned whether further increasing women’s labour supply is a sensible policy objective, given that it is by no means compensated for by a reduction in men’s labour supply, for instance through shorter working hours. It is far from sure whether ‘conservative’ countries, which now face serious demographic challenges, could evolve in a normatively more progressive direction, towards the moderately progressive West-European countries that have higher numbers of children on average. And if they can, the sustainability of a system of high marketisation cushioned by high public expenditure could be questioned, as well as its political feasibility. The former concern obviously also applies to the Nordic countries currently having such arrangements. Therefore, labour market participation of other groups, for instance the over 55s, may well take centre stage. But arguably this will lead to more resistance, since the pressures and attractions of the market may not intertwine so nicely as they did with the rise of 25-54 year old women’s labour market involvement.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have analysed the societal-level tensions between work and family life by studying trends in labour market participation, working hours and childbearing in western European countries. We argue that this has contributed to the work-family literature in two important ways. First, the longitudinal study of trends in labour market and family behaviour has allowed for a dynamic instead of a static explanation of work-family tensions. Likewise, increasing commodification was identified as the main historical driver affecting the work-family interface, leading to growing cross-country convergence in labour market participation. A theoretical framework based on the work of Polanyi has been proposed to account for these developments and their social consequences6. Secondly, the macro-level approach to labour market and family behaviour has enabled us to capture inter-country differences in work-family tensions. Whereas a subjective ‘work-life balance’ gives an individual’s

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6 In this respect we have drawn upon the ideas of Streeck (2008a; 2009a).
appreciation of a given situation, trends in labour market and family behaviour reflect how societies adapt to changing tensions between work and family. We found that crucial differences with regard to countries’ adaptation to market pressures can be grasped by differential social norms, and prevailing gender role attitudes within society in particular.

Our main conclusion is that growing cross-country convergence in market pressures has coincided with a broad divergence in the social consequences of these pressures. Western European countries appear to be gradually converging towards near-to-full participation of 25-54 year old women on the labour market, with men’s labour market behaviour remaining stable. This, however, leads to cross-country divergence in family behaviour, in particular the average number of children, essentially between two groups of countries. Countries where more ‘traditional’ gender role attitudes prevail seem to have coped with increasing market pressure on family life by a continuous decline in childbearing. We understand these intertwining trends of convergence and divergence to be the key to studying work-family conflict comparatively. Further research should investigate more deeply how gender role attitudes influence the diverse ways in which growing market pressures affect family life. Furthermore, trends in gender role attitudes in different countries should themselves be subject to investigation, since cross-sectional data cannot address possible change and are therefore inherently static. The forthcoming fifth round of the European Social Survey, repeating the 2004-2005 module on work and family, may be a first data source to consider. Finally, more research is also needed with regard to the changing institutional adaptations different countries make to work-family tensions.

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