Gender Equality as Biopolitical Governmentality in a Neoliberal European Union

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This article argues that European Union (EU) gender equality policy operates as a technology of biopolitical and neoliberal governmentality. Through a genealogical examination of EU policy documents and relevant demographic research, I examine how EU gender equality policy emerged as a means to reorganize women’s work and personal lives in order to optimize biological reproduction and capitalist productivity by simultaneously increasing women’s fertility and their labor market participation. Gender is argued to be an extension of the apparatus of sexuality as analyzed by Foucault, enabling a more complex, expansive, and effective form of biopolitical regulation by promising to simultaneously reproduce life and economy. Moreover, gender is inseparable from the neoliberal context in which it is deployed as an “invisible hand” targeted at empowering sexed subjects to self-manage and self-govern by making reproductive choices based on cost–benefit analyses of their personal and working lives.

Introduction

Prophesies of the disastrous economic consequences of declining fertility and aging have acted as catalysts for pushing gender equality policy forward in the European Union (EU) since the early 1990s (Lewis 2006, 421; Stratigaki 2004, 36). Over the last twenty years, the European Commission has introduced policies for the “reconciliation of work and family life” by developing childcare and parental leave and the flexibilization of work as solutions to the apparently imminent threat of disaster brought on by the “demographic time bomb” (Daly 2004; Stratigaki 2004). By the 2000s, gender mainstreaming was being promoted as a set of “measures to help achieve a better work/life balance [that] play a vital role in raising the employment rate“ (European Commission 2005, 13). Although feminist research has been good
at critiquing the economic framing of gender equality initiatives (Teghtsoonian 2004; Woehl 2008), less attention has been given to the actual rationale underpinning the EU’s deployment of gender equality policy as an amenable demographic-economic policy instrument. What this article seeks to do, therefore, is to examine how gender equality has been transformed in EU policymaking into a “technology of power” (Foucault 1991, 23) tailored to optimize the life and productivity of European populations.

On the one hand, the entry of gender equality onto the EU’s agenda can be seen as a success story of the feminist movement (e.g. Walby 2011). On the other hand, the measures introduced thus far have yet to produce the gender equal world the movement envisioned. Feminist scholars have attributed the unfinished state of gender equality to factors such as the lack of political will, the unrelenting forces of capitalist appropriation, and institutional constraints (Lombardo and Meier 2008; Mazur 2007; Walby 2011). While there is no doubt truth in these analyses, this article suggests that gender equality mechanisms are already invested with political rationalities that undermine their efficacy for emancipatory ends. It analyzes gender equality as a mode of biopolitical and neoliberal governmentality, that is, modes of governance preoccupied with “conducting the conduct of men” (Foucault 2008, 186) by “produc[ing] subjects, forms of citizenship and behavior” (Brown 2005, 37) to regulate and optimize the reproduction of labor and life. In such an analysis, gender is not taken as self-evident, but rather studied as a “technology of power” that invests bodies with power, not solely for purposes of control, but to render them forces of production (Foucault 1991, 23). Gender equality policy, I argue, is deeply biopolitical and gender is deployed therein as an apparatus of power for modifying human behavior in accordance with neoliberal governmentality.

Biopolitics, understood as a mode of politics characteristic to liberal modernity that takes biological life as the subject/object of governance, is a concept that has been analytically marginalized in both gender equality scholarship and Foucauldian gender theory (Repo 2014) despite its centrality to Foucault’s history of sexuality in *Will to Knowledge* (1981). For Foucault, sexuality was the hinge that connected the discipline of the body to the regulation of population. As a response in part to the identification of population as a biological entity that was the source of economic productivity and competitiveness, it facilitated the concerted governance of biological reproduction and economic production through the “controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the readjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes” (Foucault 1981, 141). To control the potential of biological existence required the rationalization of phenomena specific to population, such as the monitoring of birth and death rates, emigration and immigration, disease, and other health problems. The close-knit family became a prioritized social institution through which couples were educated to internalize the fiscal value of fertility to economic processes and were socialized to discipline their sexuality by either invigorating it or limiting it through birth control (1981, 104–5).
Just as Foucault studied sexuality as an object of inquiry rather than a pre-existing artefact, this article asks how and through what rationalities of power the idea of gender has been deployed as a technology of biopolitics. In other words, rather than studying gender as the social construction of sex (Rubin 2011) or the performative repetitions of acts (Butler 1990), it scrutinizes the idea of gender in itself and its strategic deployment. For Foucault, sexuality and sex were not cultural constructions, but “historical formations, positivities or empiricities” (Deleuze 2006, 41), or, eventualizations of thought that organize and discipline by “impos[ing] a particular mode of conduct on a particular human multiplicity” (Deleuze 2006, 29). Rendering gender an object of analysis by theorizing it in this manner does not entail making assumptions of what it “is”, but rather involves examining the rationalities of power through which it emerges in the first place as a discourse amenable for deployment in governmental processes to govern the life and labor of human populations.

In contrast to the Victorian era in which Foucault’s study of sexuality was situated, his work on neoliberalism provides a more germane context for the examination of gender, an idea that did not emerge until the 1950s (Germon 2009; Repo 2013). Neoliberal governmentality denotes the rationalities and practices of governance that seek to subject all social, political, and economic phenomena to economic calculus by the extension of market values into everyday values and practices (Brown 2005, 40). Families become tasked with the responsibility to govern themselves in ways that will maximize the human capital of their members by cultivating them as active, calculating, consuming, and enterprising subjects (Rose 1998, 163). Indeed, the theory of human capital developed by US economists such as Gary Becker, Israel Kirzner and Theodore W. Schultz renders economic behavior the grid of intelligibility through which social relationships and individual conduct become scrutinized and thus, governmentalized (Foucault 2008, 243, 252; Lemke 2011, 109). In this article I suggest that neoliberal governmentality is also central to the biopolitical deployment of gender. Human capital theory purports that all human decision-making can be understood in terms of “investment, capital costs, and profit—both economic and psychological” (Foucault 2008, 244). Market rationality becomes the “principle of decipherment of social relationships and individual behaviour” (Foucault 2008, 243). For example, it assumes that women and men marry, divorce, go to work or have children according to an economic calculus, “investing” their time and/or money based on the expected financial and/or psychological costs. Direct interference is assumed to prevent individuals from exercising the capacity for rational decision-making by limiting the number of choices available to them. The “‘invisible hand’ of spontaneous market regulation” (Lemke 2011, 109) ensures that individuals maximize their ability to weigh options in the marketplace, and in turn their decisions are assumed to be automatically beneficial for the broader society. Human capital theory is therefore an arm of neoliberal rationality that redefines the problem of human reproduction and the
intelligibility of the intimate by taking an economic interest in the conduct of family relationships and reproductive behavior.

I argue that during the course of the 1990s and 2000s, the EU took up gender as a biopolitical technology of power for the control of human reproductive and economic behavior in line with the new neoliberal political and economic consensus that emphasized individual freedom, personal enterprise, freedom of choice, and self-realization (Binkley 2011; Rose 2004, 137–66). Reconciliation is a key aspect of gender policy as it encapsulates a wide range of issues, such as work–life balance, child care, parental leave, working arrangements, and financial benefits for working parents, thus branching out to a number of policy areas (see Kantola 2010, 104). Although approximately half the policy documents analyzed in this article concern demographic policy, their content frequently intersects with gender equality policy, which serves as further evidence of the close links between gender equality and population in EU policy. I argue that EU gender equality policy infused the idea of socially constructed sex (as “gender”) with the precepts of human capital theory to rationalize the re-optimization of population and productivity, especially in the context of the reconciliation of work and family life.

The research material consists of key gender equality and demographic policy documents since the 1993 enforcement of the Maastricht Treaty, especially Green and White papers of the European Commission, the institutional branch that manages and monitors EU gender equality policy. White Papers are documents containing proposals for Community action in a specific area, sometimes following a Green Paper, published to stimulate discussion on a given issue. The favorable reception of a White Paper by the European Council can lead to an action programme for the EU in the area in question. Both Green and White Papers are therefore preparatory and informative instruments that aim to lay down future strategies for action, but they are neither legally binding nor soft law instruments, although they are often used as alternatives to legislation (Senden 2004, 118–28). While the formation of the discourse of gender in these papers, in turn, can be seen as the result of a causal process of consultation between the Commission, experts, and civil society, the Foucauldian archaeological and genealogical methodology used here treats them as a part of the “heterogeneous ensemble” that forms the apparatus (in this case, gender equality). The components that constitute it are in varying combinations, “discourses, institutions, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions” (Foucault 1980, 194), elements that in the documents examined condition the possibility of the appearance of subjects, objects, and knowledge of gender, equality, and population. From this perspective, the importance of Green and White Papers derives not from the process that formed them, but from the kinds of knowledge that converge in them to condition the knowledge and practices of gender and gender equality as discursive formations. I examine how rationalities of power embedded in these documents
mould gender equality into a biopolitical mechanism for optimizing below-replacement level fertility rates while simultaneously promoting the industriousness of the adult population by modifying women’s reproductive and productive behavior. This study does not aim to discredit the struggle of the feminist movement but rather to grasp how gender equality policy in EU institutions has become so entwined with the neoliberal rationalities of contemporary biopolitical governmentality. I argue that the biopolitical deployment of gender through neoliberal theories of human behavior provides biopower, the form of power targeted at the level of life (Foucault 1981, 143), with new access to an array of social relations, multiplying and optimizing the reach and utility of biopower in society. Moreover, the attempt to induce female subjects to “make choices” that allow them to “free” themselves from the antiquated baggage of gender roles to both reproduce the species and capital reflects not only the context of neoliberal governmentality into which the gender discourse has now entered, but also the ways in which these changes are in complex tension with welfare logics.

The first section sketches the broader economic and demographic rationalities underpinning the rationality of gender equality apparent in EU policy discourse. This entails examining the shift from welfare towards neoliberal governmentality and its implications for social governance. The second section examines key Western demographic research produced in the 1990s and 2000s on declining fertility in order to grasp the underlying scientific discourses that tied gender equality to population, fertility, and the market economy, transforming gender equality into a technology of biopolitical governance. As EU gender equality policy paradoxically entails little concrete intervention into the lives of women and men, yet rhetorically advocates changes in gender roles throughout various policy fields through gender mainstreaming, the final section suggests that gender is now deployed as an “invisible hand” through which sexed individuals are subtly encouraged to manage and regulate their reproductive and productive labor that, in accordance with neoliberal human capital theory, should benefit the life of the whole populace.

Bioeconomic Renewal and the Crisis of the Welfare State

While the issue of declining fertility was flagged by demographers in the 1970s, it was not until the 1990s that it became engrained in political discourse. In the 1994 White Paper on “European Social Policy”, the Commission of the European Communities stated that “the globalisation of trade and production, the huge impact of new technologies on work, society and individuals, the aging of the population and the persistent high level of unemployment are all combining to put unprecedented strains on the economic and social fabric of all the Member States” (European Commission 1994, 1). Europe’s aging population and declining fertility, combined with
high unemployment and pressures of global competition, purportedly jeopardized the feasibility of the welfare model. The White Paper sought to provide instruments for the development of a “European Social Model” that tackled Europe’s high unemployment rates and social exclusion by investing in education and improving job opportunities and social cohesion, while bolstering the market economy and protecting the rights of the individual.

The centrality of demographic problems is apparent throughout the document. The first sentence of the preface stated that “Europe is living through a period of profound change”, elaborating in the next paragraph that “the globalisation of trade and production, the huge impact of new technologies on work, society and individuals, the aging of the population and the persistent high level of unemployment are all combining to put unprecedented strains on the economic and social fabric of all the Member States” (European Commission 1994, 1).

The 1994 White Paper on European Social Policy exemplifies the crux of the biopolitical dilemma that emerged in the beginning of the decade. It questioned whether the welfare model could keep on “providing cash benefits through the redistribution of income, shouldered to a large extent by an ever declining active population—without preparing them or encouraging them sufficiently to contribute to economic activity” (European Commission 1994, 4). Fertility declined as the baby boom generation retired, producing “significant changes in [the EU’s] demographic structure within the next 20 years” (European Commission 1994, 35). As a consequence, in the near future, the shrinking working population of many European countries would not produce the taxable income required to run European welfare regimes. The White Paper put the welfare model and its foundational socio-political principles of social protection and wealth redistribution in tension with the material and structural “realities” of a changing demographic and economic situation.

While neoliberal principles conflict with welfare logics by undermining the latter’s social democratic principles (e.g. Walby 2011, 113–6), neoliberal and welfare governmental reason can also be seen as competing tactical discourses in the regulation of life and economy. In the Birth of Biopolitics lectures, Foucault argued that inherent to the welfare economy was the implementation of social policy to allegedly counter the “destructive effects on society” (Foucault 2008, 142) such as inequality that accompany uncontrolled economic growth. Foucault suggested, however, that welfare was not about achieving equality, but managing inequality for the secure pursuit of economic production, to “reduce the costs of the economy by pacifying social conflicts by enabling wage claims to be less steep and pressing” (Foucault 2008, 199). While capitalism endows life with value, a move that forms the basis of wage calculation, the mechanism of social security integrates the means of pacifying bodies for productive labor into the wage itself.

This kind of Foucauldian analysis complicates the postulation that “good” welfare structures are being replaced by “bad” neoliberal principles (Walby
2011). The management of inequality and societal, economic and personal uncertainty under welfare schemes for the better production of wealth and management of life is a reminder that welfare state is born out of the surplus value produced by the laboring body to maintain the surplus (or non-working) population and is therefore functional to capitalist accumulation (Hewitt 1983, 77). The rationalities of welfare and neoliberal economy are therefore constituted through the related capitalist and biopolitical rationalities that are at times each other’s rivals, territorialized as they are with different tactical elements and operative intensities. The main strategic difference between the welfare and neoliberal governmentality is in the latter’s “intent to efface the boundaries between the spheres of production and reproduction, labour and life, the market and living tissues, the very boundaries that were constitutive of welfare state biopolitics and human rights discourse” (Cooper 2008, 9). This means that instead of securing social life to safeguard capitalist production against the fluctuations of financial capital, neoliberalism scratches out the boundaries customary to liberal thought and radically reorganizes the social according to free-market economic logics. The strict divisions between public/private, production/reproduction, labor/life, and market/society around which the welfare state was organized are effaced in radical reconfiguration of social, economic, and personal life.

Tensions between welfare and neoliberal economic discourses are apparent in the White Paper on European Social Policy. On the one hand, it urged the European Union to “consolidate and build on the achievements of the past” in social policy and “to preserve and develop the European social model . . . to give the people of Europe the unique blend of economic well-being, social cohesiveness and high overall quality of life” (European Commission 1994, 1). At the same time, the paper deliberated on how to create a “well-educated and highly motivated adaptable working population” as the Union’s “key resource” for meeting the challenge of moving “towards an efficient, quality-based economy with a high rate of investment in new technologies” (European Commission 1994, 4). The White Paper proceeded with an instrumental rationale that emphasized the importance of social cohesion for economic restructuring

This is not just a question of social justice; the Union simply cannot afford to lose the contribution of marginalised groups to society as a whole. At a time when major technological, economic, and social changes are increasing the insecurity of a growing number of people, the Union needs to ensure that the most vulnerable . . . are not excluded from the benefits of—and from making an active contribution to—the economic strength of a more integrated Europe (European Commission 1994, 37).

In other words, welfare rationale and neoliberal economics were in tension through their different responses to the challenges posed by population aging,
changing family patterns, high levels of unemployment, changes in the modes of production, and social exclusion, which threatened the social, economic, and personal well-being of European citizens. At the same time, while the Union could not “afford” to squander human resources lost through social exclusion and poor economic structuring, states could not be expected to cover the costs of ensuring the social protection schemes designed to provide those excluded from labor markets with the necessary support: “the traditional social protection systems of Europe—based on the concept of the welfare state—are an important achievement that needs to be maintained. But it is also clear that there needs to be a move away from more passive income maintenance measures toward active labour market measures” (European Commission 1994, 35). The White Paper therefore recommended shifting these costs to subject/object individuals by transforming them into active economic subjects.

In particular, economic and personal well-being relied on the willingness of a motivated and flexible female population to “maximise their potential contributions” (European Commission 1994, 31). Women were seen as flexible and creative individuals whose productive risk-taking potential should not be squandered. As the White Paper stated, the “adaptability and creativity of women is a strength that should be harnessed to the drive for growth and competitiveness in the EU” (European Commission 1994, 31). Gender equality policy was the means by which women could be mobilized to boost the capitalist economy through their self-transformation into entrepreneurs and job seekers. While increased flexibility undoubtedly benefits some individuals, as David Harvey (2007, 75–6) notes, the asymmetries of power today are such that flexibility has become a useful method of creating more adaptable means of accumulating capital at the expense of lower wages, increased job security, as well as the loss of benefits and job protections. The neoliberal predilection to reduce all aspects of social policy to a cost–benefit analysis and to develop institutional practices for enacting this vision (Brown 2005, 40) is also apparent in the view that the support of women’s rights “should be underpinned by an evaluation of the economics of equal opportunity, especially the costs of not applying equal opportunity policy” (European Commission 1994, 31, emphases added). Gender equality was a central economic policy, rather than a merely social one, as “the contribution which women can make to the revitalizing of the economy is one of the reasons why the issue of equality should be seen as a key element to be taken into account in all relevant mainstream policies” (European Commission 1994, 31).

The Commission’s view was therefore that women were too bound by domestic and childcare duties to engage in the market economy, and as such were a squandered economic resource. Moreover, in addition to the problem of aging, the Commission expressed concern that “family patterns are changing: larger number of families are being formed outside marriage, people are having children later and partnerships are often less stable” (European
Commission 1994, 35). Not only were women devoted exclusively to childcare duties unproductive, but the conventional institution of the family was crumbling and young couples were having children later if at all. Population aging put even more pressure on women’s care responsibilities. Dealing with these issues, the Commission wrote “will require new thinking on many issues that have been taken for granted until now, such as traditional career patterns, retirement age and the role of the nuclear and extended family” (European Commission 1994, 39). Owing to “the lack of prospects for new entrants to the labour market” (European Commission 1994, 9) and the lack of opportunities to reconcile work and family life, women performed satisfactorily neither on the labor market nor the reproductive/care front. Equally problematic, however, were the mothers who left working life permanently to care for their children. The Commission’s gender equality policy thus proposed that “European efforts should be redoubled to develop actions and policies which reinforce women’s rights and maximise their potential contributions” (European Commission 1994, 31). The origins of the economic problems of demographic change were therefore located within social and economic structural problems that negatively affected the work and family life balance of heterosexual couples, with a particular focus on the uneven and inefficient distribution of women’s labor capacities.

Having problematized the situation thus, the Commission set out to harness women’s reproductive capacities and their labor market potential according to the new needs of “adaptability and creativity” (European Commission 1994, 31). To develop such a strategy, the Commission decided to monitor the demographic situation in Europe and assess its impact on society and the economy. It would produce a “regular report on demography in the EU” that would “illustrate the ways in which demography—in the short and longer term—will impact on and interrelate with social and economic policy” (European Commission 1994, 35). Since women’s use of their reproductive and productive time relative to men’s was identified as the problem, gender equality understood thus was born as a key field of knowledge for the EU. Gender equality policy therefore emerged as a bioeconomic mechanism of neoliberal governmentality that, in line with neoliberal rationale, sought to encourage citizens to assume the role of self-responsibilized workers and consumers (Giroux 2008, 590).

The Science and Technology of Gender Equality

At the same time that the EU started to propose gender equality as a solution to declining fertility in the 1990s, a growing number of scholars across the social and population sciences (e.g. Andersson 2000; Chesnais 1998; Duvander, Lappegard, and Andersson 2010; Hoem 1993; Hoem and Hoem 1996; Kravdal 1996; McDonald 2000; Neyer 2003; Oláh and Bernhardt 2008)
argued that advancing gender equality would have a positive effect on European fertility and productivity. Many of these scholars worked as advisors to the European Commission and other governmental bodies, thus disseminating their research findings to policy-planners and policy-makers across Europe. In this section, I therefore examine widely cited demographic research on gender equality and family policy published in international demography journals in the 1990s and 2000s for the light they shed on the epistemic politics of “regime of truth” (Foucault 2008, 18) behind gender equality as a policy solution to declining fertility.

Before the 1990s, demographers understood the relationship between gender equality and fertility in two different ways. In the context of international development, gender equality was seen to have a “positive” effect because it led to lower fertility rates believed to be necessary for industrialization (e.g. Cain, Khanam, and Nahar 1979). In the Western context, however, women’s participation in the workforce was linked to a “negative” decline in fertility (e.g. Becker 1981). Yet in the 1980s Sweden was able to combine gender equality with above replacement-level fertility rates, prompting demographers and social scientists to start to differentiate between different levels of gender equality, the level of economic development, and their relation to fertility. In a move away from the dichotomous model of “more or less” gender equality, Australian demographer Peter McDonald (2000) analyzed levels of gender equality in different institutional and policy settings, concluding that it is neither simply “too much” nor “too little” gender equality in general that led to low fertility. Instead, once a degree of gender equality outside the home in highly industrialized countries caused an initial drop in fertility, this would fall even lower if gender inequality within the family persisted. This phenomenon is known as the “second demographic transition” (Lesthaeghe 2010, 211). While changes in women’s rights in property, suffrage, education, equal pay and employment opportunities “represent radical or revolutionary change,” according to McDonald, “progress towards gender equity within the family and hence family-oriented institutions has continued to advance very slowly” (2000, 436), which led him to conclude that “when gender equity rises to high levels in individual-oriented institutions while remaining low in family-oriented institutions, fertility will fall to very low levels” (McDonald 2000, 437). Thus the “mainstreaming” of gender into family policy was crucial.

Demographers and social scientists thus focused their attention on how to best regulate “gender equality” in the family to optimize both reproduction and production. For example, German demographer Gerda Neyer’s (2003) examination of maternal protection, parental leave and childcare services and benefits concluded that a gender equal application of family policy was the most effective format for increasing fertility. Other measures, such as financial incentives for each added child, had contrasting results. While they “did not have a noticeable impact on the total fertility level” in Austria, in France and Britain it had “a clear effect . . . on the progression to third births and the
timing of birth” (Neyer 2003, 79). Similarly, the provision of childcare services was not seen as influential in case studies of Norway or West Germany (Kravdal 1996). In Norway, the availability of childcare was positively correlated to having a third child, but not the first or second. Based on this observation, Kravdal concluded that increasing private and public childcare would have “little stimulating effect on fertility” (1996, 201). Nevertheless, research on paternal leave in Sweden suggested that if fathers took paternal leave with their first child, they were more likely to have a second child than those who did not. Likewise the length of maternity leave increased the possibility of second and third births. Thus if both “fathers and mothers are not given sufficient opportunities to balance production and reproduction,” concluded Holter (2007, 247), “fertility will suffer.” In other words, while mechanisms such as childcare provision or financial support for families had varying effects on fertility, the ability for parents to reconcile work and family life was seen as the crucial factor for stimulating birth rates.

The Swedish case has been cited by demographers since the 1990s for its ability to combine high levels of gender equality with near-replacement level fertility. German demographer Jan M. Hoem used the Swedish case to argue that there was “a direct causal effect of [family] policy reform on demographic behaviour” (Hoem 1993, 19). Hoem suggested that following the Swedish introduction of a “speed premium” extending parental leave benefits past the birth of the first child in the 1980s, “parents reacted by increasing their fertility” (Hoem 1993, 19). Danish sociologist Esping-Andersen argued that “without an adequate supply of family care services, women’s entry into the labour market may still rise (as it does), but at the long-term cost of low fertility” (Esping-Andersen 1996b, 83). The welfare state enabled the family “to harmonise work and family objectives” by ensuring that “social services and liberal provisions for leave are available” (Esping-Andersen 1996a, 7) to them. Reconciliation was a significant technology of power because it unified the previously separate Malthusian variables of reproduction and production and subsumed them under the same technology of biopower. While in the past “it [was] often feared that female employment will jeopardise fertility, and thus aggravate the aging crisis” now reconciliation made it possible for “female employment and fertility [to be] record-high [as] in Scandinavia” (Esping-Andersen 1996a, 7). Reconciliation promised to simultaneously mobilize, discipline, and harness both the reproductive and productive capacities of the female body.

With a renewed focus on family policy, population research thus began to target the unequal division of labor between men and women in the household as the main structural discrepancy hindering fertility growth in highly industrialized liberal democracies. Therefore, while tax benefits and childcare were acknowledged as important, reconciliation was identified as the crucial element of any policy solution. While tax benefits could increase fertility, they alone did not encourage women to return to the labor market (Chesnais
1998). It also required the provision of parental leave with the guarantee of the right to return to the workforce afterwards.

Modifying Reproductive Behavior Through the Invisible Hand of Gender

In what follows, I examine the processes of power/knowledge through which EU gender equality policy and gender mainstreaming became entangled with not only neoliberal strategies of governance (Griffin 2009, 132–6; Squires 2007, 138–43; Teghtsoonian 2004; Woehl 2008), but also biopolitical strategies that subscribe to the neoliberal logic of human capital. I suggest that gender equality and demographic policy together aim to induce European citizens to become “entrepreneurs of themselves, shaping their own lives through the choices they make among the forms of life available to them” (Rose 1989, 230), in the attempt to persuade them to self-regulate their reproductive and productive behavior. In this context, gender has been taken up as an apparatus of biopower in the attempt to influence reproductive behavior and decision-making.

The drive to increase both women’s fertility and employment gained momentum in the EU’s policy agenda as the new millennium opened. The 2000 Lisbon Strategy defined the EU’s economic objective to “become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion” (European Council 2000). As Hermann and Hofbauer (2007, 129–30) have argued, the Lisbon Strategy broke ground by accelerating the deployment of the European social model “in the argument for the radical restructuring and restricting of existing European welfare systems”. It was taken as the main framework for “innovative measures to support the [fertility] rate and judicious use of immigration [so that] Europe can create new opportunities for investment, consumption and creation of wealth” (European Commission 2005, 10). The 2002 Barcelona targets for increased access to childcare, the 2006 European Pact for Gender Equality, and the Commission’s 2006–2010 Gender Equality Roadmap were also framed as tools to “meet the demographic challenge” by achieving the goals of the Lisbon Strategy and the European Employment Strategy (European Commission 2007a, 11). These documents strengthened the rationale that linked together gender equality, fertility, and “economic and social cohesion, sustainable growth and competitiveness” (European Commission 2010b, 3).

Measures to enable work–life balance comprised mainly non-binding recommendations of policy tools that endorsed the creation of incentives for women and men to make different life choices. The Commission argued that the implementation of the Lisbon Strategy was essential to enable the self-mobilized and flexible employment of women, who would bring “innovation”
and “productivity” (European Commission 2005, 2). As the 2005 Commission Green Paper on “Confronting demographic change” makes clear, what this effectively meant was influencing the way couples made “working and family life choices” (European Commission 2005, 3). This was premised on the belief that all women and men wanted to have children, but that they were “discouraged from doing so by all kinds of problems that limit their freedom of choice” (European Commission 2005, 2), which could be corrected by mainstreaming gender into social policy. Because “these decisions . . . have an impact on the economy and society”, the Commission reasoned that it was “in everyone’s interest to offer genuine choices equally for women and men throughout the different stages of their lives” (European Commission 2010a, 3). The feminist struggle for work–life balance was therefore carefully reinvented biopolitically as a question of individual freedom in life’s marketplace of choice.

What was striking about the “Strategy for equality” was that it problematized “gender roles” as the factor that “continue[s] to influence crucial individual decisions on education, on career paths, on working arrangements, on family and on fertility” (European Commission 2010a, 3). It was therefore the degree to which roles affected the choices available to women and men that was the problem. The lack of flexible working hours and care services left women overburdened with family responsibilities (European Commission 2006a, 2).

More specifically, gender roles were identified as a key variable that obstructed the ability of sexed individuals to make cost–benefit analyses in their everyday lives. Gender roles were seen as determining the capacity of men and women to modify their reproductive activity. The main line of argument was that the socially acceptable forms of sexually codified behavior (as “gender”) were too limited for men and women to be sufficiently reproductive and productive. According to the Commission, “rigid gender roles can hamper individual choices and restrict the potential of both men and women” (European Commission 2010a, 10) and thus impact fertility rates and economic competitiveness. In this sense, European women and men were assumed to be the rational-economic actors of neoliberal governmentality “respond[ing] systematically to modifications in the variables of the environment” (Foucault 2008, 270) through cost–benefit decision-making processes. Indeed, in neoliberal governmentality what needs to be governed is not the individual, but rather that the individual is governable through environmental variables. It would appear that a version of gender in line with sex/gender theory was deployed to govern those environmental variables and thus regulate re/productive human behavior. Sex/gender as a theory of human capital involved reducing sex to the status of a neutral material manifestation of biology that had no bearing on the ability of individuals to make choices, and gender as a set of environmental or socio-cultural factors that either strained or worked in favor of the capacity for sexed individuals to make choices. The sex/gender split thus became internalized by human capital rationale as a bioeconomic mechanism.
It is worth noting, however, that the EU did not advocate the elimination of gender roles, but their relaxation so as to enable women and men to perform a broader range of behaviors in their working and intimate lives. “Rigid gender roles” were not necessarily those that were oppressive, but those that restricted individual life-choice making. By changing them, the Commission hoped to “promote genuine opportunities for both women and men to enjoy a work-life balance” (European Commission 2010b, 3). The Commission therefore did not endorse a genderless world, but rather one where social construction of behavioral imperatives was liberated from “rigidity” and optimized to “contribute thus both to the realisation of family plans and the employment of women” (European Commission 2007b, 5). Gender should not be eradicated but deployed and manipulated, because it was the “invisible hand” that “draws together the threads of all these dispersed interests” (Foucault 2008, 279), in this case: behavior, fertility, and economy.

Human capital theory not only assumes that individuals use economic reasoning to make decisions based on cost–benefit analysis, but also that those decisions can be manipulated through the provision of incentives designed to stimulate responses from individuals based on their “desires, values, and identities” (Giroux 2008, 591). As such, Commission documents also referred to the need to provide couples with the right conditions to modify their behavior in a way that would increase fertility and female labor force participation. The policies of reconciliation such as family benefits, parental leave, child care, and equal pay were no longer welfare provisions, but “incentives” that Member states could offer to facilitate a competitive economic climate (European Commission 2005, 5; Harvey 2007, 80). Thus in gender equality policy too, the state becomes governmentalized as a neoliberal co-conspirator in the design to produce rational-economic behavior in every member of society (Brown 2005, 41, 44) by offering benefits and services that are deemed to encourage women to have children and return to work soon after.

As discussed earlier, many of these “incentives” come in the form of elements of the welfare state that are being retained and refurbished on the terms of neoliberal economics. While the demographers discussed in the previous section spoke of the Swedish welfare state as a system, EU gender equality and demographic policy distanced itself from the welfare discourse in favor of discussing individual policies like parental leave, tax benefits, and childcare that could be developed to stimulate demographic and economic revitalization. Policies originally introduced under the welfare system are therefore being re-fashioned to fit the biopolitical imperatives of neoliberal governmentality—from insurance against economic uncertainties and protection against social exclusion to choice and competition. Deleuze and Guattari remind us that capitalism is constantly recoding, “decoding and axiomatizing flows in order to extract surplus value from them” whereby “everything returns or recurs: States, nations, families” (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 37) albeit under new strategic configurations. From this perspective the de/recoding of the welfarist
elements of reconciliation into the neoliberal economy is not due to a fault in neoliberal governmentality, but is rather one of the many contradictions through which neoliberal rationality operates (Harvey 2007, 77–80).

The EU directives on gender equality in the 1990s and 2000s thus largely focused on providing women with incentives to combine work and family life. The 1996 Parental Leave Directive stipulated that mothers and fathers be provided with a minimum of three months’ benefits on the arrival of a child by birth or adoption. The 1997 Part-Time Workers Directive prescribed equal treatment, pay, and working conditions for full-time and part-time workers. The deployment of gender as an invisible hand has meant that aside from certain initiatives to create some possibilities for women to reconfigure their work–life balance, very little else has been done to advance gender equality. Neoliberal governmentality operates paradoxically too in its “trajectory of intensification” (Read 2009, 29): neoliberal technologies of power intervening in human fertility are less restrictive and less corporeal than in the past (for example, compared to forced sterilizations and eugenic marriage laws in the first half of the twentieth century). At the same time, they target the totality of the human body, mind, and behavior directly by encouraging women to self-govern, modifying their reproductive and productive behavior through subtle interventions into the gender order.

The ability of “gender” as a technology of power to accommodate the flexibility and adaptability demanded by neoliberal governmentality is also apparent in the European Commission’s attempt to make allowances for contextual variation. In 2007 the Commission reported that each Member State needed to find the “successful policy mix” (European Commission 2007a, 75) suited to its specific societal needs to enable the “reconciliation” of work and family life. Demographers still purported that “replacement fertility can be achieved in an egalitarian gender structure” (Matthews 1999, 21), but politically the kind of policies required to implement gender equality and hence increase fertility needed to be adjusted to the state of gender equality in a given country. Fertility rates varied considerably among Member States, the highest being in North-western Europe and the Nordic countries and lowest in Southern and Eastern Member States. Benefits like parental leave allowances were already in place in many Member States when the EU Directives came into force, but not in others. Also, there are big differences between Member States in the area of childcare, oscillating between privatized childcare in most countries and state supported care in a minority of mostly Nordic countries (cf. Kantola 2010, 116–8).

For the Commission, the different social and political structures of Member States meant each had to find the right gender equality policy mix to “unlock the potential for more births” (European Commission 2007a, 75) mainly through some combination of (i) financial support (mainly cash benefits or tax breaks), (ii) access to services (parental leave, childcare, preschool) and (iii) flexible working conditions (flexible working hours, narrowing the
pay gap, more part-time employment for women). For example, Southern European and North-western European couples were seen to require different kinds of reproductive incentives not only because their fertility rates differed, but also because varying family systems and welfare structures meant couples had different reasons for not procreating. In other words, the country-specific arrangements of sex/gender difference required an individually tailored gender equality apparatus. In this context, equality is revealed as a contextually supple technology for the regulation of difference. It can be applied in a number of ways according to the perceived status quo of difference in a given society, as well as the desired outcome. “Equality” comes to mean the ability of men and women to have the same degree of freedom of choice to take risks with their lifestyles and livelihoods according to their interests. Paradoxically, then, in order to regulate sex and hence optimize fertility, the intervention into gender by political agents must be prohibited and subjects are entreated to take responsibility and govern their own lives.

Gender is an equally flexible apparatus of power. Through gender, biopower multiplies the means and contexts in which sex can be regulated. By manipulating the socio-cultural (gender), biopower can better govern the human organism (sex), and hence, life. When the technologies of gender and equality are combined, the regulation of gender becomes reoriented through a mode of governmentality specifically developed to govern difference in ways experts deem favorable for the optimization of life.

Governing Life Through Gender

I have argued that, since the nineties, a new mode of re-optimizing the life function has been under development in the EU under the guise of gender equality policy. The EU’s neoliberal vision for “a productive and dynamic Europe” (European Commission 2006b, 10) expects women to replace the retiring male workforce by joining the labor market while at the same time reproducing the next generation of wage-earners. These interventions are enacted through “gender equality”, which is being extended to ever more diverse areas of the lives of the population through gender mainstreaming.

In the demographic and social scientific quest to discover the possible social problems that caused fertility decline in Western Europe, demographers and policy-makers did not limit themselves to monitoring historical trends or life processes, but rather focused on understanding human behavior, assumed to be determined by economic decision-making. The EU has not used this data to enforce repressive or prohibitive measures. Rather the EU’s approach is grounded in the ostensibly emancipatory discourses of equality, prosperity, individual freedom, choice, and personal self-fulfilment through which it aims to persuade women and men to modify their behaviors so that their life
courses better correspond to the biopolitical and neoliberal governmental imperatives.

The idea of gender itself is at the heart of this strategy. Here the EU’s use of the gender term is not a merely a politically correct synonym for sex. In its policy texts, gender is articulated as something produced through the socialization of (sexed) individuals into gender roles. In drawing on the idea of sex/gender, therefore, sex is understood as functional matter, in other words, the biological facts and bodily capacities that make sexual reproduction possible. Rather than trying to control sex directly, the EU aims to tap into gender, the socially produced sexed behaviors and desires that determine how individuals make use of their sex. EU gender equality policy formulates gender as an invisible hand that guides individuals’ decision-making processes. Restrictive gender roles can obstruct the availability of life options for the interest-driven human and are therefore an affront to the freedom of choice from which society as a whole may suffer. The objective of gender equality policy is therefore not to remove gender roles, but to allow individuals to make allegedly better, more rational choices for the benefit of the species and the economy. If Foucault described how “relations of power ... established [sexuality] as a possible object” (1981, 98) in the nineteenth century, the documents examined here suggest that gender is the most recent apparatus of biopower, complementing and extending (but not replacing) the apparatus of sexuality in order to access human decision-making processes that bear upon the life courses of individuals so carefully scrutinized by demographers.

Gender is therefore being deployed now as a biopolitical apparatus in a similar fashion that sexuality was upon its deployment in the nineteenth century. The deployment of gender cannot be detached from its operational context of neoliberal governmentality any more than sexuality could be from the rise of bourgeois society in the nineteenth century (Foucault 1981, 69). The subject of gender equality is a self-examining and self-governing rational-economic subject. By applying economic language to the discussion of women’s and men’s personal life choices, neoliberal governmentality shifts the responsibility for governing fertility and economy to individuals themselves, who must engage in techniques of self-inspection, calculation, and self-governance. Women in particular are rendered responsible for both fertility and productivity, and hence, the well-being and prosperity of society.

Gender equality responds to the needs of neoliberal governance as a flexible and expansive mechanism of power. In addition to transforming and unifying the biopolitical technologies that regulate production and reproduction, reconciliation policies encompass a whole host of social, economic, and personal relations. Reconciliation not only regulates the personal relationships between women and men, but also the family unit as a whole, society’s organization of reproduction and production, life and capital, as well as the relations between human bodies and health and welfare authorities, children and their carers and educators, and employers and employees. Reconciliation gathers all of
these relations under the same field of power/knowledge and renders them reachable through a single biopolitical mechanism of gender equality. The gender equality apparatus therefore provides biopower with access to an unprecedented set of relations through the scientific measurement and assessment of the social relations surrounding the heterosexual couple. In its aim to include gender in a range of policy fields, gender mainstreaming also holds the potential to extend the reach of biopower to countless aspects of social life. Gender mainstreaming as a biopolitical technology tracks, processes and controls the varying forces of reproduction “by modulating all divergences of information” whereby it is also able to change “its activity of selection from one moment to the next” (Parisi 2004, 133). As “gender” can be discovered virtually anywhere in the social field, the biopolitical technology of “gender equality” can be instituted in any area of life, legitimizing and enabling the biopolitical control deemed necessary in it.

For Foucault, sexuality was a discursive event rather than an identity, preference, or desire. Gender too can be figured as one. Sexuality was a discursive event because it emerged as “an area of investigation” (Foucault 1981, 98) and was formed “a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies” (Foucault 1981, 100). Sexuality became a “will to truth” with “a history” (Foucault 1981, 79) rooted in biological, psychological, and demographic truths about the life of human kind in a way that radically transformed the strategies and tactics of power relations. The same can be said for gender. Gender had purposeful, strategic “laws of construction” (Foucault 1972, 30) in its separation of impartial, functional material sex from the socio-cultural normative realm of gender. The deployment of gender had specific “conditions of existence” (Foucault 1972, 28) in the political-demographic problematization of fertility and economy in Europe. Gender as a discursive formation and apparatus of biopower is specific to this period and context alone. In the context of the EU’s demographic and gender equality policies, the idea of gender constitutes nothing less than the deployment of a new technology of power to understand, measure, regulate, and optimize human fertility, economy, and life.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Johanna Kantola, the two anonymous reviewers, and the editor Rianne Mahon for their helpful comments and suggestions, and Joanna Österblom and Caroline Werner for their invaluable research assistance. This research was funded by the Kone Foundation and the Academy of Finland project “Policy Instruments and Global Governance”.

2. The Maastricht Treaty’s Protocol on Social Policy dedicated a clause for the European Community to help “support and complement the activities of the Member States” in a number of fields including “work on equality between men and women with regard to labour market opportunities and treatment at work”
(European Union 1992, 37), thus furthering the protection of gender equality in an expanding EU.

3. Many of these scholars are from the Nordic countries and have worked together in different combinations on research articles and alongside their academic work act as expert advisors to bodies such as RAND Corporation, the European Parliament, and the European Commission. Understanding the rationale underpinning their work is therefore highly significant not only as a background or parallel discourse to the EU discourse, but because this research has also informed the shape that discourse has taken.

4. The Gender Equality Roadmap, for example, is “an example of traditional soft law that lays out the policy priorities for the Commission in relation to gender equality” (Kantola 2010, 7) but is often criticized by feminist scholars because such methods rarely result in any real structural change in gender relations in the member states.

5. Below-replacement level fertility refers to fertility rates which are below the so-called replacement level, 2.1 children per woman in her lifetime. A 2.1 fertility rate is necessary in order to maintain the current size of the population. A fertility rate slightly above 2.1 is deemed optimal for economic growth. According to Eurostat (2011), the fertility rate of the total population of the European Union in 2006 was 1.52 children, with lowest fertility in Eastern and Southern European countries like the Czech Republic (1.33), Italy (1.32), Poland (1.27), Romania and Slovenia (1.31), Slovakia (1.24), and Spain (1.38). Iceland (2.08), Ireland (1.93), France (2.00), Finland (1.84), Norway (1.90), Sweden (1.85), and the United Kingdom (1.84) have the highest fertility rates.

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