

THE EUROPEANISATION OF RECONCILIATION POLICIES IN FRANCE: BOASTING... BUT LEARNING

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Abstract

France has a reputation for having generous family policies and was considered to be a pioneer in 'reconciliation' policies before they even came to be known by this term. Although they were created for other purposes (i.e. education and natalism), French policies indirectly favour women's participation in the labour market. One might thus expect that Europe would not have had a significant influence on French policies, even after the emergence of the reconciliation issue on the European agenda. However, despite conditions that would preclude any EU influence on French family policies (a small 'misfit' in the content of the policies, and a reluctance to refer to Europe), we show that family policies have been constantly reformed in France in recent decades in a direction that brings them closer to the EU model. Our approach, which looks at the usage of European resources within the national reform processes, shows how some important actors have seized the opportunities and concepts provided by the EU on reconciliation policies in order to remain central actors at the French level. The introduction of references to Europe has contributed to a reframing of the French debate and policies. Even though natalism is still central to many actors' concerns, the employment rate of women, and to a lesser extent gender equality, have become new driving forces within French family policy.

Keywords: Europeanisation; France; reconciliation policies; social policies; usages of Europe

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1. INTRODUCTION

France has a reputation for having generous family policies and is considered to be a pioneer in ‘reconciliation’ policies before they even came to be known by this term. However, these policies were not really intended for this purpose when they were first put in place (Jenson and Sineau 1998). Rather than explicitly aiming at supporting women in their family and working lives, French family policies have since 1932 been strongly structured and deeply influenced by natalism: an approach to family policy intended to support fertility and encourage large families (*familles nombreuses*).¹ French policy measures are usually much more favourable to families with three or more children, whereas families with only one child receive very few benefits other than access to childcare facilities. Along with the goal of the Republic of providing early-years education to all children, natalism was one of the main justifications for early policy measures on reconciliation, and has been prominent throughout the relatively long history of women’s participation in the labour market. In France, the ‘*école maternelle*’ (‘maternal school’) – for children aged 3 to 6 years – as well as day care centres and ‘*assistantes maternelles*’ (‘maternal assistants’) – individuals providing childcare for small groups of children in their homes – provide a series of services that help women to combine family and work life (Jenson 1998). In addition to this, the state has also developed labour market regulations concerning working hours, the duration of contracts, and the status of short-term contracts. On the whole, despite sometimes being created for other purposes (in particular education and natalism), French policies favour women’s participation in the labour market.

One might therefore expect that Europe would not have had a significant influence on French reconciliation policies even after the emergence of the reconciliation issue onto the European agenda and the development of ‘hard law’ and ‘soft law’ in this area. This is firstly because French policy outcomes only imply a small ‘misfit’ (Caporaso, Green Cowles and Risse 2001) between the European interpretations of reconciliation (Jacquot, Ledoux and Palier, pp. 26–46 in this issue) and the French reconciliation regime. Secondly, it is because France has become reluctant to refer explicitly to EU policies to justify national reforms. European integration has long been supported in France by a ‘permissive consensus’ (Inglehart, 1970), in that the political elite built the single market and French citizens did not oppose it. However, in the early 1990s, more and more French citizens started to question the way Europe was being built, as was shown by the very small majority that supported the Maastricht Treaty in the 1993 referendum – only 51.05 per cent of voters were in favour of it. This

¹ Public action targeted at families constitutes an autonomous pillar of the social welfare system. A specific social contribution exists for family allowances. The state defines the amount and eligibility conditions for a large part of these allowances, which are delivered by a specific funding institution, CNAF (French *National Fund for Family Allowances*). The CNAF is managed by social partners and UNAF (the French National Union of Family Associations), a federation of family organisations created in 1945 and financed by the state.

was so unexpected that French elites stopped using Europe as a scapegoat to justify unpopular decisions (Eichenberg and Russel 2007). In France, there is an awareness of belonging to an old and large Member State, and both elite and public opinion tend to see national standards as being superior to European ones (Grossman 2007, Lequesne 2008, Schmidt 2007). The relationship with Europe has been ambiguous, combining jealousy over France's sovereignty, a conviction of the superiority of its social model, and the will to extend this model to the other Member States, as well as a failure to seriously implement EU decisions. According to Falkner, France belongs to the 'world of transposition neglect': European legislation is regularly met with inertia at the domestic level because of 'national arrogance' (Falkner *et al.* 2005).

Despite conditions that would preclude any EU influence on French family policies (the small misfit in the content of the policies, and the reluctance to refer to Europe), we demonstrate in this article that family policies have been constantly reformed in France in recent decades, and reformed in a direction that brings them closer to the EU model. Our approach, which looks at the usage of European resources within the national reform processes, will show how some important actors in family policy have seized the opportunities and concepts provided by the EU for reconciliation policies in order to remain central actors in French family policy. The introduction of references to Europe has contributed to a reframing of the French debate and policies. Although natalism is still central to many actors' concerns, the employment rate of women and to a lesser extent gender equality have become new driving forces within French family policy.

We begin by analysing the main features of French family and reconciliation policies (section 1) before moving on to an analysis of the concordances and discordances between the two models, and the parallel development of the notion of reconciliation in French and European policy agendas (section 2). This help to underline the fact that Europe has provided not only cognitive resources but also strategic resources to French actors. Even if the main form of relations between the French reconciliation policy community and the EU tends to be a combination of denial and boasting, there is also a process of learning from EU policies (section 3) at work.

The empirical material used in this chapter is mainly based on primary sources (i.e. on French policy documents) and on semi-directed interviews with French conciliation policy actors, whether public or private, including academics who have taken part in the national and European debate on the issue of 'reconciling paid work and private life'.²

² See the list of interviews on p. 85.

2. RECONCILING PAID WORK AND PRIVATE LIFE IN FRANCE: A COMPREHENSIVE BUT GENDERED SYSTEM

France is one of the European Member States with the highest public expenditure on families (Math 2009). The French welfare regime can be characterised as a modified male breadwinner model (Lewis 1992), which supports the family (Leitner 2003). According to Leitner, France alternates between ‘optional familialism’ in child care and ‘explicit familialism’ in elderly care. In the optional familialism model, ‘the caring family is strengthened but is also given the option to be (partly) unburdened from caring responsibilities’, while explicit familialism ‘explicitly enforces the caring function of the family because of the lack in public and market-driven care provision coupled with strong familialisation’ (Leitner 2003: 358–359). According to Leitner, France ‘clearly resembles a gendered familialism: long leave periods together with insufficient parental benefits and a lack of incentives for shared parenting structurally enforce the caring role as well as the financial dependence of mothers’ (Leitner 2003: 370). Moreover, this situation is nested in entrenched natalism – usually referred to as ‘familialism’ in French – which has an impact on the content of reconciliation measures.

2.1. CHILDCARE FACILITIES: FRENCH CLAIMED SAVOIR-FAIRE

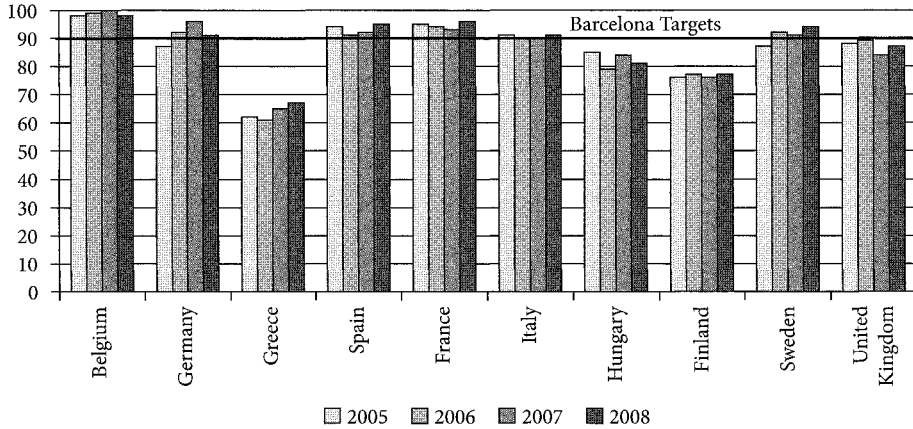
France has subsidised collective childcare facilities for children between 3 years and school age since 1881, and thus has easily reached the Barcelona targets³ for this age group (see Figure 1).

It is different however for children under 3 years of age. Ten years before the first 1992 Council Recommendation on childcare, a national plan subsidising childcare facilities for children under 3 was already in place. According to French statistics, in 2002 around 21.5 per cent of children aged between 4 and 28 months were cared for by child-minders and 10 per cent were enrolled in an institutional childcare facility (Blanpain 2005). According to European statistics, France had close to 30 per cent coverage with subsidised childcare facilities when the Barcelona targets were introduced, even if the EU-SILC way of counting was different from the French one.⁴ The target was reached a few years later (see Figure 2).

³ In its conclusions, the European Council sets precise objectives for 2010. ‘Member States should provide childcare by 2010 to at least 90 per cent of children between 3 years and the mandatory school age and at least 33 per cent of children under 3 years of age’. (European Council, Barcelona, 15 and 16 March 2002, Presidency Conclusions).

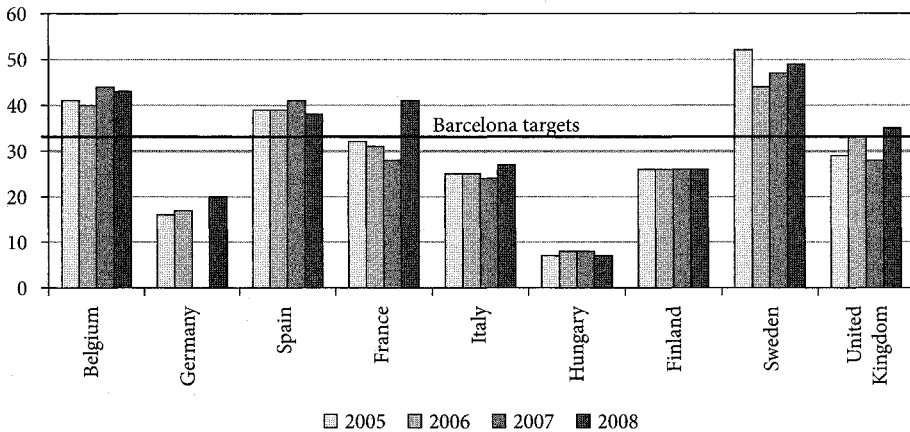
⁴ EU-SILC statistics only include care organised within a formal facility: professional child-minders operating from their homes or at the child’s home are not always considered as formal arrangements. French statistics do count subsidised child-minders operating outside a formal structure.

Figure 1. Percentage of the population of children between 3 years and school age in formal institutions



Source: EU-SILC data 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008.

Figure 2. Percentage of the population of children under 3 years of age cared for in formal institutions



Source: EU-SILC data 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008.

2.2. GENDERED AND NATALIST LEAVE

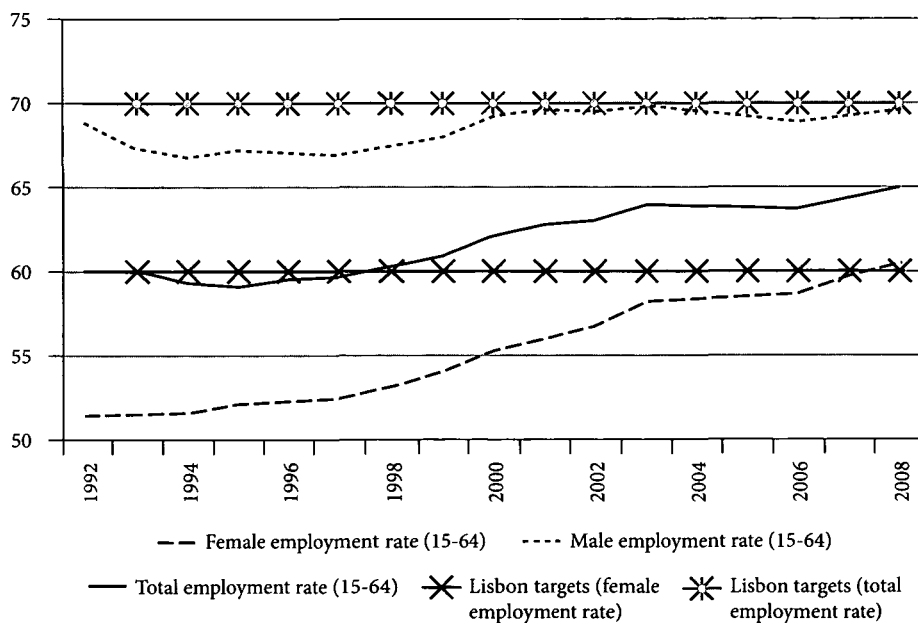
Despite the fact that in France leave-taking was individualised in the mid 1980's, it remains gendered. In 2003, 33 per cent of mothers took parental leave, while only 1 per cent of fathers did (Boyer 2004). Between 1993 and 1996, after the extension of parental leave to the second child, the percentage of low-skilled women leaving the labour market after the birth of their second child rose from 40 per cent to 60 per cent

(Péresse 2006). This situation can be explained by the fact that French parental leave has always been set at a flat rate (all those eligible receive the same amount, around €550 per week in 2010). Consequently, it is the poorest couples, and the individuals with the lowest household incomes (who are mostly women), who have the greatest incentive to leave the labour market. Moreover, parental leave in France is subject to different eligibility conditions depending on the number of children in the family. These characteristics of the policy instruments lead to the claim that French reconciliation policy has never been totally in line with European reconciliation ideas, at least inasmuch as they are linked to gender equality. If the outcomes of these policies can be considered good, in comparison with other countries, gender inequalities nevertheless remain inherent to the system.

2.3. GENDER INEQUALITIES IN THE LABOUR MARKET

French women continue to increase their presence in the labour market, but gender inequalities still persist in employment patterns (Morel 2008). Unequal work patterns are visible in all aspects of women's participation in the labour market, not only in the rate of employment but also in the types of employment. Indeed, the employment rate for women is still lower than the rate for men (see Figure 3). These differences increase for women with children (Maruani 2005).

Figure 3. The evolution of gendered employment rates in France



Source: Eurostat, Labour Force Survey.

France has conformed to the Lisbon targets, with a female employment rate of 60.4 per cent achieved in 2008. In France, part-time employment among women has been stable at around 30 per cent since 1996, compared to 5.5 per cent for men.⁵ There are also more women in temporary employment (Maruani 2005). As a consequence of these specific work patterns, the net gender pay gap was estimated at 19 per cent in France in 2006 (Petit 2006). Despite the transposition of EU legislation and regular law-making processes intended to lower this gap since the beginning of the 1980s, inequalities still remain.

2.4. FERTILITY AS A SOURCE OF NATIONAL PRIDE

Although fertility has always been a major preoccupation of French political actors, France's fertility rate was high at the end of the 1990s in comparison with all other European countries. In 2008 it was 2.00, reaching and then surpassing Ireland's.

On the whole, a relatively comprehensive system of reconciliation policies exists in France. However, French women still suffer from important gender inequalities, and the system remains more generous for large families. The French situation can thus be described as reaching most of the EU targets, but with some discrepancies, both in terms of its explicit goals (natalism instead of reconciliation) and with regard to gender equality. Can this small misfit explain the role played by the European Union in the latest French reforms?

3. FRENCH AND EUROPEAN RECONCILIATION POLICIES: INCREASING CONCORDANCE BUT DIFFERENT MEANINGS

The issue of 'reconciliation of paid work and private life' came onto the European policy agenda as the result of incremental changes in the field of European gender policies (Hantrais 2000, Ostner 2000, Stratigaki 2004). In a nutshell, the whole sequence of change can be divided into three phases: from being an unlikely sphere of activity at the Community level (1), to reconciliation policies emerging as an instrument of equality policy (2), on to being consolidated as an instrument of employment policy (3) (for developments, see Jacquot 2008 and Jacquot, Ledoux and Palier in this special issue). In this section, we compare the development of French policies with the content and timing of those at the European level. We will see that the usage of the 'reconciliation' category in France corresponds to this sequencing, but with a specific 'indigenous' meaning, particularly during the first and second period. The most recent decade (1997–2009) shows a more systematic usage of the term 'reconciliation' in the French

⁵ <http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/setupModifyTableLayout.do> (consulted on 12 July 2010).

policy debate, and its institutionalisation, as well as an increasing alignment of French policy measures with the orientation and meanings given by the European Union.

3.1. 1984–1989: DOES RECONCILIATION DISSOLVE INTO NATALISM?

Prior to the mid-1980s, there were already many policy instruments in place in France to help individuals or families reconcile, or ‘articulate’ as it is often phrased in France, private and professional life. In addition to the ‘*écoles maternelles*’ established in the late 19th century, both family allowances and benefits covering social contributions for non-working parents have been available since 1972. Parental leave was introduced in 1977 and childcare facilities were developed through the creation of a new state-recognised status for ‘maternal assistants’ (child-minders caring for children in their home) and the development of formal care (in day-care centres for example) for children under the age of 3. It is in this context that the notion of ‘reconciliation’ began to be used in the mid-1980s in France.

During the 1980s, three main measures were introduced: systematic funding programmes for childcare institutions, new childcare benefits, and an expansion of paid parental leave. Childcare institutions began to be systematically funded through contracts between the family funding institution (CNAF) and local government. In 1980 and 1986⁶, individual allowances for employing child-minders at home were introduced. The previously introduced parental leave was targeted at mothers; the father was eligible only if the mother refused to take it. A new law in 1984⁷ changed this and gave the same rights to mothers and fathers. Although an evolution towards more equality in parental leave can be discerned, the natalist particularity of French familial policies remains: tax deductions are higher for families with more than two children, payment during parental leave applies only to these families, and the main family allowances are given only to families with more than one child.

Whilst European reconciliation initiatives in the 1980s mainly focused on childcare and equality, in France they also covered the regulation of working time. France developed part-time work⁸ before the issue emerged on the European agenda. However, these policies in France are best understood as a means of supporting male industrial workers by diminishing the presence of women in the labour market (Morel 2008).

The first usage of the notion of reconciliation in France appeared at the beginning of the 1980s, following the election of Francois Mitterrand: improvement in the work-life balance was included in the Socialist Party’s programme for the 1981

⁶ Law 86–1307 of 29 December 1986.

⁷ Law no. 84–9 of 4 January 1984.

⁸ Law no. 80–1056 of 23 December 1980 and law no. 81–64 of 28 January 1981.

presidential election.⁹ This had quite an ambiguous meaning however: it was used by the government to legitimate both the development of childcare facilities and the creation of a flat-rate allowance for parents with more than two children taking parental leave.¹⁰ Opponents to paid parental leave argued that the new benefit was a way of diminishing the number of active women and reducing unemployment benefits. Throughout this debate, the notion of ‘reconciliation between paid work and private life’ was often replaced by the notion of ‘reconciliation of maternity and work’. Even if parental leave was amended so that it could also be taken by fathers, it was generally considered as targeting mothers. In this period, the French objectives in this policy realm were in fact closer to the goal of ‘reconciling maternity and work’. The first French usages of the ‘reconciliation’ objective were thus very diverse and unstable, but they were consistently far from the European definitions of that time.

3.2. 1989–1997: RECONCILIATION TO FIGHT UNEMPLOYMENT AND TO MAINTAIN FERTILITY

When the first communications of the European Commission and EU Directives promoting reconciliation were adopted in the 1990s, France had already introduced a law applying the principle of equal pay. Childcare facilities went beyond the requirement of the 1992 recommendation.¹¹ Tax breaks were also increased in 1991 for households wanting to hire workers at home.

The 1996 EC directive on parental leave¹² underlined that this leave should be a right of citizens on a non-transferable basis. French parental leave, introduced in 1977, was, until 1984, exclusively a right of working mothers, and families with a single child were excluded. This aspect of the allowance did not correspond to the meaning of the directive: it was not based on citizenship and overlooked Recommendation R96/5 of the Council of Europe, which underlined that fathers could also be encouraged to take parental leave – the French policies did not incorporate such incentives.

During the 1990s, reconciliation policies were more firmly established on the European agenda: they were increasingly mentioned as an objective in their own right. This began to frame the French debate more directly, even if conflict remained as to the meaning that should be given to the notion. French actors began to refer to reconciliation in order to gain added legitimacy, even if the reforms they proposed did not objectively correspond to the reconciliation between paid work and private life as understood at the EU level during this period. Moreover, actors defending opposing measures also used the notion of reconciliation. During this second period the debate

⁹ ‘110 propositions for France’. See: www.lours.org/default.asp?pid=307 (accessed on 19 October 2010).

¹⁰ See propositions 71 to 73.

¹¹ Council Recommendation of 31 March 1992 on childcare (92/241/EEC).

¹² Council Directive 96/34/EC.

was dominated by the shared idea that fertility and the fight against unemployment should be the priorities of family policy.

3.3. 1997–2010: RECONCILIATION ‘À LA FRANÇAISE’: MAKING WOMEN MOTHERS AND WORKERS

In the third period, French reconciliation policies slowly began to include elements that did not correspond to the original goals of French policies, i.e. encouraging fertility and sustaining the creation of large families through allowances targeting families with two or more children. At the same time, data and statistics from the European level were increasingly used, particularly in the area where French policies were the most removed from European perspectives, parental leave. The meanings given to fertility, childcare facilities, and work arrangements also evolved to the point where the French system of parental leave was denounced as a measure that made women inactive. The legitimate goals of these policies were increasingly defined as free choice and activity. The core elements remained, but they were increasingly coloured with European ink, and new objectives, principles, procedures and instruments have gradually been introduced.

3.3.1. *Introducing new policy tools*

After the change of government in 1997 and the accession of socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, family policies underwent a profound process of change. Two laws¹³ established the 35-hour working week, laws that were also presented by the government as facilitating the conciliation of paid and private life. New types of leave were introduced: family solidarity leave¹⁴, and 11 days of paternity leave¹⁵, all justified with concern over reconciliation issues. In 2001, a new benefit payment was created for care of the elderly.¹⁶ After the 2002 change in majority, the new right-wing government maintained this policy direction and insisted on bringing businesses and parents closer. In 2004, a new tax break for firms creating childcare facilities or proposing training programmes for parents on parental leave was introduced.¹⁷ These orientations correspond with the recent trend of European policies towards activation (see Jacquot, Ledoux and Palier, pp. 26–46 in this issue).

The most important reform of this period is called ‘PAJE’ (*Prestation d’accueil du jeune enfant*) introduced in 2003 by the right-wing government of the time.¹⁸ The

¹³ Law no. 98–461 of 13 June 1998 and law no. 2000–37 of 19 January 2000.

¹⁴ Law no. 99–477 of 9 June 1999.

¹⁵ Law no. 2001–1246 of 21 December 2001.

¹⁶ Law no. 2001–647 of 20 July 2001.

¹⁷ Law no. 2003–1311 of 30 December 2003.

¹⁸ Law no. 2003–1199 of 18 December 2003.

goal was to unify the various social benefits for parents into a means-tested family allowance that could be complemented by other benefits explicitly emphasising freedom of choice between work and childcare. The 'CMG' benefit payment – '*Complément libre choix du mode de garde*' gave more equal rights to all caregivers, and the 'CLCA' – '*Complément de libre choix d'activité*' – extended parental leave to families with one child.

The new childcare allowance changed both existing benefits for parents and the meaning of reconciliation in France: it made subsidies to care-givers more equal, enforcing the meaning of free choice. The extension of the new parental leave payments (the CLCA) to families with only one child marked a step towards a reduction in the natalist foundations of French policies, and a step towards the European perspective. Nevertheless, this natalist orientation has not been entirely abandoned, since the duration of leave and conditions for eligibility continue to depend on the number of children in the family.

The ambiguity of French policies can also be seen in a new payment for parental leave that was introduced in 2006 exclusively for parents with more than three children. This benefit, called the 'COLCA' ('*Complément Optionnel de Libre Choix d'Activité*') is more substantial than the others. To receive this payment parents must stop work entirely, and it is only available for the child's first year. This is therefore a step towards shorter leave – an orientation that seems to be gaining ground. Indeed, in a February 2009 speech¹⁹, Nicolas Sarkozy strongly criticised the existing family policies, arguing that the existing parental leave was too long and thus detrimental to women's careers.

3.3.2. *Increasing birth and employment rates: the Europeanisation of the French debate*

Alongside the idea of increasing alternatives for parents, and thus increasing freedom of choice, the idea that the fertility rate in France was insufficient also contributed to shaping the debate around reconciliation policies. Comparisons between the number of children that individuals would like to have and the actual birth rate flourished. Since the age of first childbirth is increasing, a consensus was reached that the way to improve the fertility rate was to encourage people to have children at a younger age.

The debate on the payment of parental leave in 2005 raised new arguments. Hubert Brin, the head of the main family organisation ('UNAF', '*Union nationale des associations familiales*'), wrote a report on the desire to have children, in which he proposed making the allowance dependant on one's former wage so that fathers, highly skilled women, and younger parents would take leave more often. The new

¹⁹ www.elysee.fr/president/les-actualites/discours/2009/la-politique-familiale.6503.html (accessed on July 13th 2010).

policy tool, directly inspired by existing measures developed in Sweden, retained the objective of increasing the birth rate and accommodated the fact that highly skilled women generally postpone their first child. The objective was not to decrease gender inequalities but to promote a younger society.

In 2006, another report on reconciliation issues was written by a right-wing majority MP, Valérie Pécresse (Pécresse, 2006). The report systematically refers to European countries and statistics, directives and communications. It presents the participation of women in the labour market as a goal of public policy, depicts long leave as a risk for parents as it possibly hinders their return to the labour market, and emphasises the need for more childcare facilities – seen as a tool for reconciliation.

Despite an undeniable attenuation of the specificities of French policies and their greater concordance with the main goals of European policy, reconciliation arrangements continue to be based on a vivid natalist heritage and on the central importance of the rank of the child to conditions of eligibility, through the integration of new policy objectives with old ones.

Table 1. The evolution of French policies on reconciliation between paid work and private life

Policy goals	Policy domains	Policy instruments
1984–1989 Reconciliation as a means to promote natalism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Demography policy – Family policy – Labour market policy – Childcare policy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Financial instruments (family benefits, maternity leave benefit, parental leave benefit) – Legal instruments (part time regulation)
1989–1997 Reconciliation as a means to fight unemployment and to promote natalism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Demography policy – Family policy – Labour market policy – Childcare policy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Financial instruments (family benefits, maternity leave, parental leave benefit, tax breaks) – Legal instruments (working time regulation)
1997–2010 Reconciliation as a means to develop women's activity in the labour market and to promote natalism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Demography policy – Family policy – Labour market policy – Childcare policy – Parental policy – Elderly care 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Financial instruments (family benefits, new leave benefits, tax breaks) – Legal instruments (working time regulation, fixed term contracts, new forms of leave)

4. FRENCH RECONCILIATION ACTORS USING EUROPE: BETWEEN RELUCTANCE AND LEARNING

We begin this section by analysing in more detail the typical general attitude of 'boasting' over the French model of reconciliation. Secondly, we then point out that boasting does conflict with usage and learning.

4.1. DENIAL OF EUROPEAN INFLUENCE, BOASTING OVER THE FRENCH MODEL

The actors in French reconciliation policies, who identify themselves as members of the family policy community, usually deny any European influence on French family policies, and emphasise 'the success of our model'. French policies in this domain are seen as a model in the two meanings of the word: both as a coherent set of norms, interests and institutions, and as an archetype, which should be used as an example and imitated by others.

4.1.1. *An ambiguous consensus over 'the best model'*

The French model is repeatedly praised and glorified by many family policy actors, who underline the importance of the *école maternelle* for children over three years old, the availability of collective care, and the diversity of solutions provided to parents. The recurring image is indeed that of France as a pioneer, as being ahead of European requirements and targets. As one French interviewee said: 'On parental leave, we are above the standards. On reconciliation between family and work: 'cock-a-doodle-do', we are the best in Europe because we have the highest fertility rate'.²⁰ Or, according to this French economist, who specialises in family policy issues and is a European expert: 'France already meets the targets, so Europe has had little impact'.²¹

This attitude is a general one: this position towards the French model applies to all groups of actors and stakeholders. It ought to be noted, however, that this consensus on French family policies is quite ambiguous (Palier 2005) – since different actors with different interests praise the French model for different reasons. The consensus can be encapsulated in a simple equation: 'high female activity rates + high fertility rates = the French miracle'. It brings together in shared satisfaction three seemingly irreconcilable groups of actors: family interests, feminist interests and policymakers. They all take the same line concerning the measures, the content of the policies, and the praise due to the French model – but for different reasons. Family actors see a correlation between the French system and high birth rates in France (i.e. emphasising the importance of large families and a young society) and argue that most families are

²⁰ Interview 2.

²¹ Interview 1.

satisfied due to the flexibility of the system (i.e. including flexibility for stay-at-home mothers). Feminist NGOs and ‘femocrats’ consider that the French model increases women’s ability to participate in the labour market – especially on a full-time basis – which they consider to be necessary for women’s independence. Policymakers and bureaucrats praise both the diversity of the model and its role regarding fertility rates, which is central for the sustainability of the social welfare system.

4.1.2. *‘The best model’ should also be ‘the best practice’*

The ambiguous consensus over the French model of reconciliation is reinforced by a widespread idea, according to which the French model is not only a successful model for France, but is *the* best model which should be exported and used as a best practice by other European countries. In the French case, the EU is not directly acknowledged as providing ideas and tools to be used in France. On the contrary, there is a conviction that France should be a resource for the EU and for other countries, French actors expressing a will to ‘illuminate’ other countries. In the words of a French policymaker: ‘We are the best. We do not have much to learn and to receive, but on the contrary we could sustain the European debate with our expertise thanks to our family policy. Europe? We did not talk much about it at the CNAF, except to say that ‘we should be a light in Europe’.²² The attempt to upload the idea of ‘free choice’ from familialist countries, and especially France, to the EU level is a good example of this process. Concretely, it means that many actors embark on lobbying actions to export their expertise and some elements of the French model to the EU level. They do this essentially via direct contact with the European Commission or, for example, through COFACE (the Confederation of Family Organisations in the European Union), a largely French-tainted lobbying organisation active in Brussels. This materialises through the expression of a more informal goal, seeking the diffusion of the French approach, which can only be conceived of as a solution to the problems European countries are facing.

Finally, and more directly, an example of the reluctance to take EU requirements into account in the area of reconciliation can be found in the usage of comparative statistics. After the Barcelona summit, the EU Employment Committee decided to choose EU-SILC as the European statistical source for measuring the objectives included in the employment guidelines concerning the provision of childcare. According to French actors, this indicator does not sufficiently take into account individual child-minders employed by parents and caring at home, who are relatively numerous in France. Consequently, while France attained the Barcelona targets in 2005 and 2006 according to its own statistics, with childcare facilities available for 48 per cent of children under three in 2006 (including all at-home child-minders), this was not the case with the Eurostat figures. Nevertheless, French decision-makers

²² Interview 8.

have chosen to continue to measure performance with national indicators, explicitly neglecting the less favourable European indicator (Direction de la Sécurité Sociale 2010). The French model cannot appear to perform worse than other countries.

4.2. CHANGE, CONTINUITY, AND USAGES OF EUROPE

Boasting over the French model of reconciliation policy is a strong characteristic of this particular approach. However, adopting our perspective on the relationship between the European and domestic levels, and focusing on the strategic actions of different actors within the reform process, allows us to observe that the EU has played a role in the recent evolution of French policies: boasting is not necessarily contradictory to learning and to making use of Europe.

From a cognitive point of view, EU orientations and requirements are used as substantive guidelines for framing national reforms, as shown in the most recent period of family and reconciliation policy reforms in France. Elements of continuity are present, but reconciliation policies have undergone profound changes influenced by EU coordination procedures (see Table 2). Beyond boasting, interviews also indicate that French actors do take the European level into account in a variety of ways.

Table 2. French reconciliation policies and the usages of Europe

	EU resources	Main actors	Objective and political work
Cognitive usage	Cognitive instruments (data and statistics, ideas, networks of experts)	Family policies community (policymakers, interest groups, experts)	Elaboration of solutions
Strategic usage	Cognitive instruments (ideas)	Interest groups (UNAF in particular)	Staying in the game
Positive legitimating usage	Cognitive instruments (data and statistics, ideas)	Policymakers	Additional arguments to enhance legitimacy of new measures
'Boasting' about the national model, to have it 'uploaded' at the EU level	–	Family policies community (policymakers, interest groups, experts)	Justification and defence of the French model

Firstly, they show the importance of comparison with other EU countries and the central role of EU statistics in this process. During the reforms of parental leave for instance, the Swedish model was extensively analysed and used as a point of reference. Interviews also show the importance of European networks of actors in this field

(EGGSIE, ESIP, COFACE, etc.), and their role in the circulation of ideas and in the socialisation of actors.²³

Secondly, over the last decade, traditional French family policy has been reformulated in order to be more 'Euro-compatible'. New arguments coming from the EU have been used to add new legitimacy to some measures. Reconciliation policies are now acknowledged not only to be useful in increasing the fertility rate, but can also be defended because they contribute to the sustainability of the welfare system and promote gender equality (the latter two being typical European arguments).

Thirdly, the spread of the notion of reconciliation by the EU has become a resource for some actors, who use this fashionable notion for strategic purposes in order to stay in the game. It appeared impossible for some traditional actors to maintain too great a distance from the dominant trends (in society, policies, statistics) in this area, or to maintain a purely natalist objective for family policies. The most blatant example of this is certainly that of UNAF (Family Union) and family interests. They have finally agreed with the idea of shorter and better-paid parental leave²⁴, but for reasons other than those put forward at the European level. UNAF sees this measure as potentially allowing the wealthiest families to have more children, and all families to have children earlier, i.e. ultimately to have more children and a younger population (Brin 2005). They are also more in favour of the provision of childcare services than in the past, referring to European comparisons showing that the countries with the highest fertility rates are also the countries with the highest female activity rates.

Finally, it should be noted that beyond apparent consensus, there are still conflicts between actors, and that some are losing ground. If family interests have been able to use the resources provided by the EU and to adapt their discourse, feminist groups on the other hand seem to have lost the battle and, as can be seen at the EU level (Lewis, 2006), have become less relevant in the conciliation debate.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The French care regime that is so unanimously praised in France has undergone many changes over the past decades, to the point where it has begun to conform more and more to the model diffused at the European level. The weight of natalism in France – both as an ideology and as a policy objective, which has largely contributed to the design of reconciliation measures – is key to understanding the ambiguous relationship between France and Europe in this domain. Natalism helps us understand why relatively extensive reconciliation policies were introduced so early in France, implying only a small misfit between the French regime and European orientations.

²³ Especially interviews 2, 7, 8 and 9.

²⁴ For example, Eurostat reminds us that 'Empirical and theoretical findings advanced in the economic literature agree on the fact that parental leave (...) may have a negative impact on mothers' participation and career prospects' (Eurostat, 2009: 94).

However, natalism also provides an insight into the gap that remains between the two, especially concerning the ongoing importance of the rank of the child and benefits allocated to families with more than two children. Even if this gap is shrinking at the level of policy instruments, it remains significant at the level of objectives, where population concerns are still high on the agenda in France.

However, in France, Europe is increasingly used as a reference on this issue and the policy objectives and discourses themselves are more and more in line with European ones. The framing of this issue at the European level is increasingly seen as the legitimate way of approaching reconciliation. The game played by natalist actors (UNAF and the administration of social affairs), and their usage of Europe, helps us to understand the recent changes in French policies. These actors could not keep misfits between the French regime and European orientations too visible. They have therefore accepted and proposed incremental change, focusing on instruments that are able to sustain fertility. They have mainly used European cognitive resources (especially since legal instruments largely 'fit' with European requirements anyway, and European political resources are not such a positive point of reference in public debate), both in order to stay in the game and to fight, as far as possible, for the conservation of the advantages of large families.

To conclude, the French situation can be helpful in drawing attention to the ambiguities of European reconciliation policies, in which demography and population concerns are not entirely absent (and perhaps even increasingly present – if only for purposes of financial sustainability), and undoubtedly come at the expense of gender equality.

LIST OF INTERVIEWS

	Date of the interview	Institution	Function of the interviewee(s)
Interview 1	12 December 2008	University Paris 1	Economist. Member of the European Commission's Network of experts in the fields of employment, social inclusion and gender equality issues (EGGSIE)
Interview 2	17 February 2009	CNAF (Caisse nationale des allocations familiales – National Service for Family Benefits) CAS (Conseil d'analyse stratégique – Council for Strategic Analysis)	Member of the research and prospective unit Member of the social issues department
Interview 3	20 February 2009	OFCE, Sciences Po	Economist

	Date of the interview	Institution	Function of the interviewee(s)
Interview 4	2 March 2009	SDFE (Service des droits des femmes et de l'égalité – Administrative Unit for Women's Rights and Equality)	Administrator
Interview 5	2 March 2009	SDFE (Service des droits des femmes et de l'égalité – Administrative Unit for Women's Rights and Equality)	Administrator
Interview 6	2 March 2009	SDFE (Service des droits des femmes et de l'égalité – Administrative Unit for Women's Rights and Equality)	Administrator
Interview 7	18 May 2009	CNAF (Caisse nationale des allocations familiales – National Service for Family Benefits)	Member of the Unit of International Relations
Interview 8	1 September 2009	UNAF (Union nationale des associations familiales – National Union of Family Associations)	Responsible for the studies unit
Interview 9	1 September 2009	UNAF (Union nationale des associations familiales – National Union of Family Associations)	Member of the direction committee

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