

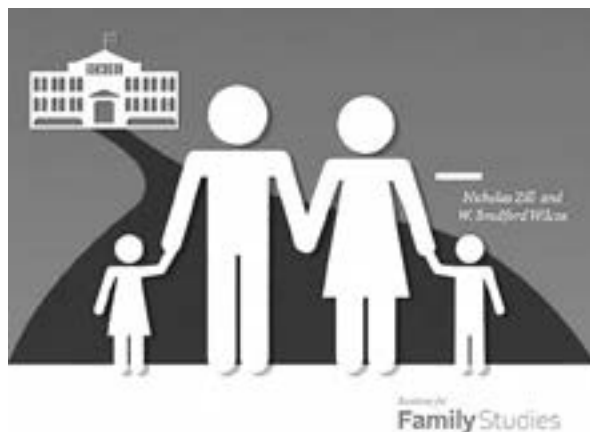
The politics of the family today

Marnie Holborow shows that the one model of the ‘natural’ family, promoted by right wing lobby groups, is a myth. She argues that the Marxist explanation of the family remains key: it shows how the family suits capitalism and is linked to social class, but it also points the way to radical change.

The family in our society is complex and contradictory. It can be the place of loving, intimate relationships but also one of violence, stifling authority and horrific abuse. We are all born into some sort of family structure and a high proportion of people aspire to creating a family for themselves. Because of its importance in society, it is the object of much political commentary – from the loaded assumption that there is a ‘natural’ family to seeing in the decline of the traditional family, a crisis of society.

‘Family values’

High on the political agenda of the right-wing Irish think-tank, the Iona Institute, is defence of the what it calls the ‘natural family’, by which it means a biological father and mother and children. The Iona Institute, set up in 2007 by David Quinn, takes its lead from the American Institute of Family Studies, an influential rightwing think-tank supported by big corporate players, like the Koch brothers. In Ireland, ‘family values’ is identified



with the Catholic Church, but, internationally, it is the trademark of the conservative and far right. Brazil’s new right-wing President, Bolsonaro, has replaced his government’s human rights ministry with one to include family values, headed by a female evangelical pastor who believes that women are born to be mothers. In the US, family values pressure groups also lobby for censorship of movies and popular culture, for tax and welfare cuts, and against gun control. ‘Family values’ can even be code for white and middle class.¹ They most certainly don’t apply to the immigrants whose families Trump has torn apart.

In some parts of Europe too, the reactionary ‘family values’ agenda has made something of a comeback. Italy’s neo-fascist, Salvini, advocates the ‘natural family’, opposes same-sex parenthood and, following in Mussolini’s footsteps, promotes women’s primary role as mothers. Such views are not confined to the far right. The new leader of Merkel’s CDU party – Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer – is a social conservative and promoter of the traditional family. She has opposed tax equality and full adoption rights for same-sex couples. For AKK, “the traditional family unit is the core of not only Germany but all nations”. Incredibly, for a party heading the EU’s leading supposedly modern state, she has actually said that recognition of same sex marriage would be the forerunner of marriage between close relatives or “even marriage between humans and animals”.²

The traditional view of the family is not just supported by the backward-looking right: it can suit the neoliberal narrative. When Margaret Thatcher declared that there was no such thing as society, only individual men and women and families, she was expressing the belief that

everything revolved around people as market actors, with the traditional nuclear family at its hub. For Chicago School sociologist Gary Becker, the nuclear family was the obvious rational choice for people to succeed in the capitalist market: good for child outcomes good for adults as child care could be shared, the optimal solution for maximizing 'social capital'.³ Conflict did not figure in this idealist, functionalist view of the family which, of course, fitted very well into the developing patterns of capitalist consumption.⁴

Diverse family forms

Yet family households, past and present, have varied so much in gender, marital, childrearing arrangements that it is impossible to argue that nuclear families are the natural state of things.

In many societies, the mother-child relationship, which we think of as central to the family, is irrelevant. Among the peoples of Southeast Asia, for example, if parents separate, the mother is considered to have no relationship with her children. In many African and Native American societies, there are no set roles based on gender or biology in kinship groups. Amongst the Cheyenne Indians, for example, the most significant emotional relationships are not between children and their fathers and mothers, but with their aunts and uncles.⁵ Even incest taboos are by no means universal; among the ancient Egyptians, the practice of brother-sister marriage was accepted. The social significance of the wide variety of kinship and household arrangements which have characterized the family throughout human history shows that there is nothing natural or universal about the nuclear family.

Today too, family living arrangements in capitalism, while often smaller than earlier societies, are very diverse. While the political mainstream and catholic teaching still churn out the nuclear family as the norm, the fiction is blatantly obvious.

Over a third of live births in Ireland are to parents who are not married and, while this is lower than France or the Scandinavian countries, it follows a similar pattern in the EU, as Figure 1 shows. 43% of births in the EU are now outside marriage.

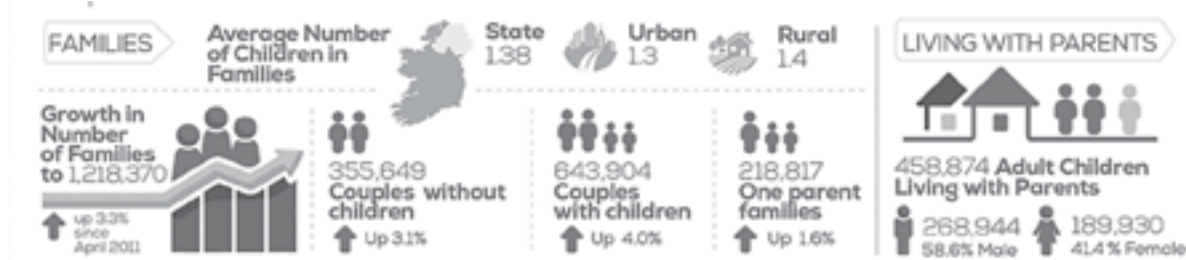
It is also worth pointing out that widespread lone parenthood is not a new phenomenon. The high number today of families which are not nuclear families is not a result of what is called modernisation, nor as one

Figure 1 ⁶



recent volume on the Irish family argues, of the tension 'between tradition, modernity and postmodernity'.⁷ Working class families have long flouted conventional norms as regards marriage, not least because they could not afford to marry. In most capital cities in Europe in the mid 1900's, children born to non-married parents was a major phenomenon. No less than one third of all births in Paris, half in Vienna and more than two thirds in Klagenfurt (in what is now Austria) were out of wedlock.⁸ That this may be surprising is indicative of the strength of the dominant ideology about the married couple family, and how misleading it can be.

The nuclear family is only one among many other types, as Figure 2 shows. Today's families and households can be a married couple, lone parents with children, (increasingly) a cohabiting couple with children, single people with no children, same sex couples with or without children, blended (step)

Figure 2.⁹

families, adoptive families, non-binary or transpeople with or without children, extended inter-generational households, either with grandparents living in the home or with children returned home as adults. The last example highlights how domestic living arrangements are mainly determined by economic – not affective or normative – factors.

The housing crisis, lower wages and precarious work have created a ‘boomerang effect’, that of young people being forced economically to return to the family home. This has impacted in all sorts of ways on the composition, nature and tensions of the modern extended family today. And the chart does not include 400,000 people living on their own nor same-sex couples in civil partnerships, recorded as over 4,000 in 2016. The diversity of our living arrangements is there to see; and the passing of the same sex marriage referendum in 2015 confirmed that most people had already recognized this. The seeds of changes in family life derive more from social and economic factors than from cultural norms, and it is these which alter the make-up of family households.¹⁰

The social basis of the family

Some accounts of the family focus on patriarchy to explain power relations within the family. Writer on the Irish family Linda Connolly defines patriarchy as a label to describe the system of unequal power relations between men and women in society.¹¹ One account about male power in Ireland, describes the family as a site in which the wider social ‘patriarchal dividend’ or ‘male privilege’ is realized.¹²

Others take patriarchy in a narrower sense, as male power in the family, the power of fathers and husbands. In his vast study of the family world-wide, Göran Therborn argues the traditional family forms

are ‘suspended between sex and power’ and have comprised three regimes: patriarchy, marriage and fertility. For him, the greatest loser of the 20th century has been familial patriarchy – dismantled in three distinct phases: first, World War One and the October revolution, then the upheavals of World War Two and finally the rebellions of the late 60s which gave rise to modern feminism.¹³ Paul Ginsberg’s book on the family also takes patriarchy as a comparative theme through his interesting account of the family in Russia, Turkey, Italy, Spain and Germany in the first half of the 1900s, and its relationship to revolutions and dictatorships in each country.¹⁴

Stephanie Coontz, writer on the origins of women’s oppression and the American family, finds patriarchy an unhelpful, ahistorical term to uncover the workings of the family in capitalism.¹⁵ Certainly, Therborn’s thesis of the demise of familial patriarchy in the modern world would not have predicted today’s turning back of the clock and the return of openly anti-women views in the political mainstream.¹⁶

Patriarchy as a description of how power works in society is short on explanations, relying more on symptoms than causes. It certainly speaks to the existence of male authority in the home and the glaring fact that fathers and husbands continue to commit terrible abuse and violent crimes to women and children behind closed doors. But it is difficult to point to male power, separate from violence in society, the complex distortions of alienation, and twisted ideas of sexuality, as an adequate explanation. More specifically the broad concept of patriarchy glosses over the fact that some males are more powerful than others, and the inverse of this, that some women suffer much worse discrimination and oppression than others. Patriarchy would also seem to have less to say about trans, non-

binary and fluid sexual identities and their oppressions.

Marxism offers a broader society-based analysis starting from the fact that kinship and household groups have not always been dominated by men. It was the key insight of Engels, despite the rudimentary and sometimes incomplete anthropological evidence that he relied upon, that the roles and functions of the family have constantly changed and adapted to different modes of production throughout history. Engel's argument was that in capitalism, the family is part of the social division of labour in an overall system whose object is the accumulation of capital through the exploitation of workers. The capitalist family institutionalized unequal relations between men and women. He took issue with the dominant ideology of his day which saw the family as the foundational, stable, and moral unit of society. Rather, he argued that the family was historically shaped by the mode of production and by the conflicting interests within it.¹⁷ Engels also argued that, even within any one mode of production, the family differs across social classes.

The ruling class family

The ruling class family is about property and inheritance.¹⁸ Family law provides a way for the owners of capital to pass on the capital they have accumulated to their family members and prevent wealth distribution. This still applies today. Inherited wealth begets more wealth. Piketty's research found, in today's crisis prone and vastly unequal capitalism, there is a renewed importance of inherited wealth with dozens of those in the top wealthiest in Forbes rankings having derived their wealth from their families.¹⁹

What's more, family background is still the greatest determinant of how much you earn. In the US, it is said that it accounts for 55 to 85 % of the earnings advantage of those who succeed.²⁰ In the UK, only 18% of sons born to low income families make it to the top earning group, and in OECD countries since the 1990s, families on low incomes are trapped at the bottom of the earnings ladder, and more likely to be so than they were thirty years ago.²¹ In Ireland, children from middle-class families have a head start in society and are likely to outperform those from less well-off homes even before they begin primary school.²²

It is the ruling class family that is the model promoted across society. It was always deeply hypocritical: it

proclaimed monogamy but in practice seldom was and existed alongside widespread prostitution.²³ The perfect family of today's ads is one of lavish consumption and personal fulfilment – the comfortable, wealthy family. But it, too, shouts hypocrisy. Despite a range of protective legislation and programmes, the home is still the most dangerous place for women. A recent UN study shows that 137 women across the world are killed by a member of their own family every day.²⁴ Social acceptance of the always-harmonious family contributed to keeping hidden the reality of rape and abuse in the family, the victims of which, before recent times, were fearful of speaking out at all. The working-class family does not escape these repressive features; it can be more tense and violent because its members have few ways of escaping it.

The working-class family

The function and place of the working class family in society, however, is very different to that of the ruling class.

Firstly, as Marx argued, it plays a specific role for capital. Workers sell their labour power to capitalists in return for a wage. Employers need a constant supply of workers for production and profits. The family is both where a new generation of workers are produced and where essential recuperation and sustenance for today's workers is provided. This is not the only way that the labour supply is kept going – for example slavery and immigration also provide a crudely cheaper form – but the family, in all its contemporary forms, is the main provider of the replenishment and reproduction of labour power. In other words, domestic care in individual households plays a role in the overall exploitation of workers in capitalism, as this old poster (Figure 3.) shows rather quaintly. Swap the traditional factory shown here for offices and call centres and

put many more women into the lines of working men, and you have a good idea of how today the family relates to work. In this set-up, workers are paid not for what they have produced in terms of value but, what is considered necessary in order to live – to feed themselves, put a roof over their head, look after their children, and to be work ready the next day, as the poster shows. Today, of course, this so-called 'living wage' falls far short of even basic needs, not only for the traditional manual worker but also for new layers of service, office and



Figure 3 ²⁵

tech workers. Although for these workers, expectations may be higher, the trend today is that their pay falls increasingly into the bare necessities category, or less, and well below what they expected to get for the skills that they have paid to acquire. In the unequal and regressive capitalism of today, their salaries now barely allow them to rent a place, let alone buy one.

The home-work chain more than suits the system. Capital gets for free the domestic care vital to the reproduction of labour power. Marx summed it up neatly: 'domestic care involves the production of labour power which produces wealth for other people'.²⁶ The state may fund or partly fund some services – education, a health service and, to some extent, pensions, the so-called 'social wage' – to get the skilled, healthy and stable workforce they need. But even these services depend on basic care being provided in the home.

Because women are still the main carers at home, responsible for looking after those that work, don't yet work, too old, too young, too sick to work, not able to work, major disadvantages for them on the labour market ensue. They may have to take time out to have children, go part time for childcare, or stop working to care for a family member, with the result that a higher proportion of women find themselves with lower pay and worse job opportunities.

Added to this, the image of the woman as primarily a home builder, a carer, or a mother, creates a stereotype of passivity and social marginalization. This is only one step away from categorizing women differently, judging a woman on how she looks, seeing her as a sex object to be taken advantage of. The ruling class model of the

family and women's domesticated role in it reinforces sexism. The Russian revolutionary Alexandra Kollontai argued that it was the model of the bourgeois family, and women as the possession of the man in it, which robbed all women of autonomy and independence, a theme which was taken up and challenged a great deal in the 1960's.²⁷

It is to the credit of the growing number of Social Reproduction Theorists that they have brought Marxist theory to bear on what was an earlier feminist domestic labour debate. They have demonstrated that domestic care in the family is not a parallel system running alongside production, as was claimed, but intricately tied to capitalist production and profit accumulation.²⁸ However, with their focus mainly on of the political economy of labour power, a rather one-sided view of social reproduction emerges, with ideological and political aspects of social reproduction side-lined. The tensions within social reproduction, including those within the capitalist family itself, are crucial, however, to understanding the social dynamic of the family in capitalism.

Women working and the family

Capital relies on the free care provided in the family for the replenishment of labour power, but it also constantly requires more and more workers. One of the new sources of labour, along with migrant workers, is women. The entry of women into the workforce has been one of the striking features of capitalism over the last fifty years. Today, world-wide, more women than ever before are in higher education and participating in the labour force. In developed countries, women's participation rates are gradually approaching those of men; 51.2 per cent of women are working compared to 68 per cent of men (it is higher in developing countries).²⁹ As the services industries have ballooned, so have the numbers of women working in them. The percentage of Irish women working has risen by a significant 12 % since the 1990's, to reach the present level of 45%, only just behind the UK and the US – both countries where the change took place several decades ago.³⁰

Women becoming participants in paid work undermines the old traditional family. Marx and Engels, Zetkin and Kollontai argued that women's incorporation into paid labour is a material precondition for the liberation of women because the expectation to work

alters women's perceptions of themselves – about pregnancy, about abortion, about contraception, about male violence and about their rights in the workplace. In Ireland, growing numbers of working women have played a key role in making social change happen. In the Repeal campaign, they were in the forefront of rejecting the Church's dictates about women being primarily mothers. In so doing, in one fell swoop, they threw off the 'muck of ages' that had kept them down so long.³¹

Neoliberalism, austerity and the family

If capital has needed more women workers, women too have needed paid work. In neoliberal capitalism, as Oliver Nachtwey points out in his study of social decline in Germany, more and more women have been forced to take low wage jobs partly because partners' incomes are no longer enough to meet family needs. Alongside their underprivileged position as workers, the care and reproductive work that women performed was never supported nor officially integrated into the new capitalist economy narrative.³² One of the most disadvantaged set of workers alongside migrant workers are women, especially those without college qualifications. They bear the full brunt of low pay: 29% of female workers in Ireland are in low paid jobs, in comparison to 19% of male workers.³³

Neoliberalism has pushed working class families even further back onto their own resources. Privatization of services and austerity cutbacks in benefits, have seen working class families increasingly forced to step in and fill the deprivation gap. Many have fallen deeper into poverty and homelessness as a result.

The ESRI has found that women and children were hit the hardest by the austerity budgets. The fact that women are more likely to be lone parents explains some of this but also, within couples, women's disposable income has dropped particularly in households with children. Women with children suffered badly by cuts in child benefit and other welfare payment reductions. Lone parents were given tighter income eligibility. Child benefit rates were reduced from €160 each for the first two children and €195 for subsequent children, to €140 per child, per month. The upper age limit of children for the One-Parent Family Payment was drastically brought down, from 18 to 7.³⁴ For all the talk in Irish society of the sacredness of the family, working class families have literally been savaged by successive neo-

liberal governments.

Nowhere is this more apparent than the impact on families of homelessness and lack of affordable housing. In Ireland, there are nearly 10,000 people homeless, and at least 90,000 households on the social housing waiting lists. Rents have increased exorbitantly and the number of properties available for rent has sharply declined. Between October 22 and October 28, 2018, there were 1,709 families with 3,725 children in emergency accommodation. Between a fifth and a quarter of homeless families are headed by a parent aged 18 to 24 and for 9% of these, homelessness is their first experience of living outside the family home.³⁵ The neoliberal commodification of housing has pushed us back a century, in terms of mothers and children left abandoned, literally on the roadside.

Families have always been a means through which workers protect their lives the best they can. When a family member becomes unemployed, or homeless, or is simply on very low wages often the family home becomes the place of refuge, as young people retuning to the family home proves. Exorbitant child care costs in Ireland often mean that it is family members who step in to help. It is estimated that in Ireland today, almost one-third of people aged 50 or over provide care to a child or grandchild at least weekly.³⁶ In this case, family members act as a safety net which takes the pressure off the government to provide public childcare. But, inversely, often it is through the family that class solidarity finds expression. Some of the recent struggles against austerity, because of the privatisation of services, have sprung from working class communities with whole families participating in the resistance. Certainly, in the water charges campaign in 2015 in Ireland this was the case, with the many women activists to prove it. In Barcelona and Madrid the anti-eviction movement was centred around family homes and women played leading roles. Because the family is tied closely into capitalist exploitation, it can also become the place where resistance is strengthened.

Freedom to choose

While pressures to conform to a family model still exist, the diversity of today's families show that people defy these norms in so far as they can. At certain periods there have been generalized challenges to the traditional family, like in the late sixties, but without

social transformation of privatised family care, there are material limits on the freedom people can have in their private lives. No doubt this is why Alexandra Kollontai, in the period after the Russian revolution, spent so much energy on finding ways to provide actual alternatives – high-quality public nurseries, schools, communal services and help with housework – so that a wider freedom for people’s relationships could begin.³⁷

The family has specific material and social roots. It is impossible to understand the family as we know it today without reference to capitalism. The care that it provides serves a purpose for capitalism, the replenishing and reproduction of labour power. The system relies on individualized family life to keep its production-for-profit system going.

It is impossible to leave capitalism out in another sense. It has proved itself unable to provide the wherewithal in care and services to lessen the burden of women’s oppression, let alone revolutionise domestic life. Capital is dependent on the care provided in the family but, even where welfare states are more extensive, still relies on the individual family for basic care and support for people. Without this provision, and with women increasingly working, in many ways the pressures on working class family life are greater than they have ever been.

And yet the goal of freedom remains: from the material constraints and the official uniformity that our society imposes on us regarding our private lives. We must fight now for childcare, for full care for the disabled and elderly, which will involve a redirection of resources towards publicly funded community services, towards a housing system run not on the capitalist market, but as a basic social right for all. We need to remove the confining material constraints of public spending cutbacks that force people into household arrangements from necessity rather than choice. That will require a social revolution but the need is urgent. Ultimately this is about liberation, in which personal living arrangements can be those that people themselves chose.

Notes

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- 2 Melanie Amann, Dietmar Hipp and Peter Müller, 2013, ‘Gay Adoption Debate Flusters Conservatives’ *Der Spiegel*, 11 June, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/gay-adoption-debate-flusters-german-conservatives-a-904875.html>
- 3 Gary Becker, 1993, *The Treatise on the Family*, Harvard.
- 4 For the structuralist functionalist view of the nuclear family see Betty Hilliard, 2007, ‘Family’ in Sara O’Sullivan (ed.) *Contemporary Ireland; A Sociological Map*, Dublin, pp83-100.
- 5 For many examples of different family forms, see Coontz, Stephanie 1998 *The Social Origins of Private Life, A History of American Families 1600-1900*, Verso, and also Eleanor Burke Leacock’s classic *Myths of Male Dominance*, 1981, *Monthly Review Press*
- 6 Eurostat 2016 <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/DDN-20180809-1>
- 7 Linda Connolly (ed) 2014, *The Irish Family*, Routledge, p31.
- 8 GöranTherborn, 2004, *Between Sex and Power: Family in the World 1900-2000*, London Routledge, p148.
- 9 Central Statistics Office, 2016, Profile 4, Households and Families, <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp4hf/cp4hf/fmls/>
- 10 Coontz, *The Social Origins*, p16.
- 11 Linda Connolly 2014 p19
- 12 Pat O’Connor, 2000 ‘Ireland: Man’s World? The Economic and Social Review Vol 31, No 1 January, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/2c94/9530b4bdf44f326b6215481958d29da3567.pdf>
- 13 GöranTherborn, 2004, *Between Sex and Power: family in the world 1900-2000*, London, Routledge.
- 14 Paul Ginsberg, 2014, *Family Politics: Domestic life, devastation, and survival 1900-1950*, London, Yale. Interestingly, both these authors, one a wayward social democrat the other a former Marxist, rate the achievements of the October revolution and the Family Code passed by the Bolsheviks in 1918, which introduced radical changes in marriage and divorce, women’s and children’s rights, and the laws on inheritance and abortion, as the high point of women’s emancipation so far.
- 15 Stephanie Coontz interview on capitalism and the family, *Catalyst*, Vol 1, Issue 4, 2018, <https://catalyst-journal.com/vol1/no4/capitalism-and-the-family-an-interview-with-stephanie-coontz>
- 16 Therborn’s understanding of the demise of familial patriarchy is informed by (Swedish) Social Democracy whose theme of gradual modernization and proof of how capitalism can adapt to provide reforms.
- 17 Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family Private Property and the State*, 1972, London, Lawrence and Wishart. See also Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, 1974, *The German Ideology*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, p52. In his critique of the family Engels challenged Hegel’s understanding of the family, which along with civil society and the state, was considered a moral pillar of society.
- 18 Frederick Engels *The Origins*
- 19 Thomas Piketty, 2014, *Capital in the Twenty First Century*, Cambridge, Mass Harvard University Press, p440-1
- 20 Coontz, *Social Origins*, p 12.

- 21 OECD Report, The Guardian, 15 June 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/jun/15/social-mobility-in-richest-countries-has-stalled-since-1990s>
- 22 Carl O'Brien, 2018, 'Middle-class children outperform others before starting school' Irish Times, May 30, 2018, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/middle-class-children-outperform-others-before-starting-school-1.3512956>
- 23 Engels, p138
- 24 United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime Gender related killing of women and girls, p10 https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/GSH2018/GSH18_Gender-related_killing_of_women_and_girls.pdf
- 25 The poster was displayed at Red Women's Workshop in California in 1983
- 26 Karl Marx 1867, *Capital*, p 719
- 27 Alexandra Kollontai, 1977, *Selected Writings* (Alix Holt) London, Allison and Busby. See also Paul Ginsberg, 2014, *Family Politics Domestic Life Devastation and Survival*, London, Yale for a sympathetic account of Kollontai's view of the family.
- 28 The volume edited by Bhattacharya would be a good example. Tithi Bhattacharya (ed), 2017, *Social Reproduction Theory*, London Pluto Press. See IMR, Issue 21 for a review.
- 29 ILO Report World Employment 2018 Social Outlook, Trends for Women https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_619577.pdf
- 30 World Bank data 2017.
- 31 The need for society to rid itself of 'the muck of ages' through revolution was an expression used by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*, p89.
- 32 Oliver Nachtwey, Germany's hidden crisis: Social decline in the heart of Europe, Kindle Edition, 2018, Verso, location, 421-431
- 33 TASC. 2016. "Submission on the underlying reasons for the preponderance of women on the minimum wage, https://www.tasc.ie/download/pdf/tasc_low_pay_commission_women_final.pdf).
- 34 Karina Doorley and others, 2018, The gender impact of Irish budgetary policy Dublin. ERSI, <https://www.esri.ie/pubs/bkmnext367.pdf>
- 35 Kitty Holland, 2018, 'Homeless families headed by young adults particularly vulnerable' The Irish Times, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/homeless-families-headed-by-young-adults-particularly-vulnerable-1.3728924>
- 36 Chrissie Russell, 2017 The minefield of free childcare The journal. ie, July 26th, 2017, <https://www.thejournal.ie/grandparents-childcare-3514818-Jul2017/>
- 37 For Kollontai's views on the family and how care for people could be differently provided see her pamphlet *Communism and the Family*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1920/communism-family.htm>
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