Covid-19 and 'the making of families' in (post)welfare state

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1 Introduction

In western superstition Friday the 13th is considered an unlucky day. In Halle on the River Saale, as well as in several other regions of Germany and Europe, Friday, March 13, 2020 was the day that daycare centers and schools had to close for the first time during the Covid-19 pandemic. Millions of children who had previously spent several days for numerous hours in educational institutions were now to remain at home for an uncertain period of time. Both the general public and the social sciences perceived this moment as a turnaround. A decades-long process of institutionalising (early) childhood had been interrupted. Especially in West Germany, there was a nationwide expansion of childcare facilities, which was intended to enable parents to better reconcile family and work and children to benefit from high-value, school-preparatory educational processes. However, the requirement to restrict physical contact outside the home led to a temporary break, which was (and is) described with the buzzwords of re-traditionalisation or re-familialisation. Whereas work tasks and hours had previously started to converge between the genders, with the onset of the pandemic there would have been a relapse into old patterns. Depending on the occupational field, women, rather than men, reduced their working hours, lost or quit their jobs. The main burden of families' new or full-time childcare responsibilities resulting from the closure of schools and childcare facilities was therefore almost certainly shouldered by mothers (Allmendinger 2020; Collins et al. 2020; Zoch et al. 2020; Kulic et al. 2021). The collapse of childcare landscapes has also led to a severe restriction of participation and educational opportunities for children of daycare[1] and primary school age (Andresen et al. 2020). The danger of an increased reproduction of social inequality in (post)pandemic times also brings the family as a central factor into the focus of research.

1 The term daycare here refers tot the field of public early childhood education and care and consists of center services like Krippe (age 0–3), Kindergarten (age 2–6) and also family day care (age 0–3).

Despite these impressions and scientific findings, from a welfare state perspective the question arises whether in the context of the first two major waves of the pandemic one can actually speak of a return to the so-called traditional family. I would like to approach this question in the following paper, in which I have a look at processes of making family in welfare state practices and discourses and how these have changed since the beginning of the pandemic. My argument proceeds as follows: First, I outline a welfare state approach towards childhood and family. In doing so, the welfare state is described in a broad understanding that extends beyond the concrete policy of a government and also encompasses a political sphere fought out in arenas. Hereafter I look at the process of transition from a distributive to a social investment type of welfare state, which is central to Western Europe. Then I would like to discuss to what extent the pandemic represents an interruption in this process. It turns out that there were at least two phases in the making of families in the context of the pandemic: one of irritation and one of restoration of the social investment pattern of (early) childhood.

2 A welfare state perspective towards childhood and family

When 'family' is spoken of in the following, it does not mean a natural fact that comes about through blood relationship. Instead, family is seen as a historically changeable construct. However, even if family is a social construct, this does not mean that family does not have great significance as such in terms of social practice. It is the very fact that family as an idea has such a normative impact that it influences the everyday life of participants (Winkler 2002). A welfare state perspective assumes in this context that (ideas of) childhoods and families are constituted in and through a specific social and economic order (Mierendorff 2018). Accordingly, the importance of society for the production of historically changeable family patterns is examined. The concept of the welfare state is useful here to emphasize that it is not singular policies that determine social practice. Instead, common characteristics are sought in the nexus of political and everyday doings and sayings (Mierendorff 2019). From this perspective, the political can also be understood as a public sphere in which the shaping of social order is contested. It cannot be reduced to elected officials or committee structures, but encompasses places where the struggle for consent and interpretive sovereignty proceeds. Doing family takes place in relative autonomy, but nevertheless in a welfare state context, that frames the everyday coexistence of families and thus enable specific family forms and rather limit or even hinder others. Thus both childhood and family are assigned a prominent position in the social structure of Western European welfare states (Grunau/Mierendorff 2022).

The potential of such an approach lies in detecting transitions in the pattern of making families in welfare state contexts. In the case of Western Europe a transition

from a distributive welfare state to a social investment state can be noted (Lessenich 2013). Germany is an excellent example of this transition. After the Second World War, the country was initially governed by the principle of strong restraint on the part of the state with regard to families. The establishment of appropriate conditions led to the middle-class nuclear family becoming accepted as an ideal and, for many people, as an empirical reality. The guiding assumption, supported by attachment theories of the time, was that preschool children should grow up first and foremost in the arms of the family. At that time, educational processes were to be safeguarded by the mother in particular. Although the state should monitor and control the family's educational achievements and abilities, it should intervene in its concerns only in extreme cases (Grunau/Mierendorff 2021; Esping-Andersen 2002).

By the 1970s at the latest, however, this paradigm began to falter. A crisis of the welfare state was discussed. Step by step, the welfare state's benefit principle was reorganised: Instead of interventions in case of emergency, preventive measures should be used to avoid long-term social and economic costs. For example, Esping-Andersen (2002) criticised the German welfare state as ineffective. An early start should be made by supporting children from disadvantaged families through institutional education programs. By the turn of the millennium at the latest, this social investment paradigm was gaining ground. Early childhood care services were expanded and the use of these services was aimed at so-called risk groups in particular. Under the slogan "auf den Anfang kommt es an" (literally: "it all depends on the beginning" comparable with the slogan: "no child left behind"), a network of medical, pedagogical and psychological controls was created to identify developmental problems as early as possible and to deal with them by means of systematic measures (see Jurczyk et al. in this volume, Dahmen et al. in this volume). The public and political perception of the family changed from a provider of to a potential threat to child development. In Germany, this is especially the case for single parents, families with many children or families with a so-called migration background, who are seen from the outset as potential risks (Grunau/Mierendorff 2021, 2022; Betz/Bischoff 2018). In the terms of 'doing difference', there is a shift of responsibility to the families mentioned. The reasons for social inequality are mainly or even exclusively assumed to lie in specific characteristics of the children and their families of origin and accordingly not in structural conditions (Diehm 2016).

3 Covid-19 and the making of family – methodological aspects

How did the emergence and political treatment of the Covid-19 pandemic affect the described shift towards a social investment state? How does the making of families unfold in pandemic times? I would like to explore these questions in the following. Since I understand the welfare state from a relational perspective as a nexus of polit-

ical and everyday doings and sayings, I have investigated different levels of the social in several sub-projects: firstly, the level of social legislation, secondly the legitimisation of the measures against the pandemic (and its consequences) on the media level, and thirdly the negotiation processes between private and public education on the level of families and day-care centers. That means, I explored regulations on the containment of the Covid 19 pandemic, media reports, and interviews with parents and directors of day-care centers. In the following, I would like to focus mainly on the political regulations and media reports.

From a methodological perspective, I am guided by the Situational Analysis according to Adele Clarke (Clarke 2003; Clarke et al. 2015). From this point of view, the pandemic can be seen as an arrest of action under inhibition (Mead 1938) that leads to the emergence of social arenas in which it is fought out how the state of social crisis can be overcome. In the sub-project presented here, a collection of material was made on the discourse level of the media of approx. 600 print and online articles in which the Covid-19 pandemic is discussed in the context of (early) childhood, family and educational institutions. The sampling was designed contrastively with different publishers, target groups, but also phases of the pandemic ("Lockdown 1", "Lockdown 2"). The media reports were placed in the context of political regulations. Analytically, the project was oriented towards the mapping procedures of situational analysis (Clarke 2003) as well as the distinction between a temporal and a spatial structuring of the discourse in Nonhoff's hegemony analysis (Nonhoff 2007).

4 First wave: "Parents are obliged to perform their duty..."

Let's get back to Friday the 13th in March 2020. During this period, the Covid-19 pandemic began to spread across Europe. After initial reservation, the situation was defined politically and publicly as a social problem (Blumer 1971). This increased the pressure for political action. The level of knowledge about the SARS-CoV-2 virus was still low, but there was initial empirical experience as well as prior expertise about previous viral diseases. Not surprisingly, virology was the dominant science for producing politically significant knowledge during this period.

Two assumptions were crucial here: on the one hand, older people and those with previous illnesses would have an increased risk of a fatal course of the disease triggered by the corona virus, and on the other hand, children would hardly develop any symptoms, but would spread the virus strongly. This objectification of children as main spreader was the dominant assumption during the initial phase of the pandemic and led to widespread policymaking. This can be summarised in a brief way with the strategy: Daycare facilities are the first to close and the last to re-open. That is what happened in large parts of Germany. Consequently, this led to a housification of childhood and family. The social investment pattern described earlier was

interrupted. But it would be short-sighted to speak of a return to the traditional family. It is true that family was equated with a domestic community, which was a major challenge, especially for transnational families (Bollig/Eßer 2019). Accordingly, the boundary between "family" and "non-family" was once again identified with the boundary of the household. Moreover, it was primarily women who did the care work which had been shifted back into the private sphere. However, at the same time, in the majority of cases women were not released from their employment duties, which led to a double burden. In addition, parents should adapt and fulfil the requirements from school and daycare at home. The blurring of private and public spheres, already described before the pandemic (Jurczyk/Szymenderski 2012), thus, reached a formerly unknown dimension in many families.

The following fragment of the COVID discourse illustrates the previous description. It is part of a report of a press conference by the former Minister President of North Rhine-Westphalia, Armin Laschet, in which the closure of schools and kindergartens was announced.

> "On Friday, the cabinet of North Rhine-Westphalia also decided in a special cabinet meeting that all schools would be closed on Monday as a precaution. On Monday and Tuesday, teachers will still be available for backup care ("Notbetreuung"). A ban on entering day care centers will apply from Monday onwards. 'Parents are obliged to perform their duty to educate their children,' said Prime Minister Armin Laschet (CDU) on Friday. It is now urgent to protect older and weaker people from the insidious threat, as the virus is particularly dangerous for them, he added. Therefore, the prime minister urgently warned against giving children to grandparents for care. 'I am aware that this distancing of any family, the distancing of grandchildren and their grandparents, makes every heart ache.'" (FAZ 2020)

The explained interruption of the social investment pattern is shown in the short extract in a striking way. Whereas school and pre-school childcare facilities were expanded in the past decades to preventively counter the danger of reproducing social inequality, the opposite take place here. The closure of institutions is framed as a precautionary measure. Although the intervention is regretted in emotional terms ("makes every heart ache"), the spatial separation of children and their grandparents is nevertheless presented as quite without alternative. The distancing is in consequence a demand for the return or production of a neolocal nuclear family. Accordingly, there is a reference to the German constitution, which states that the upbringing and care of children is the primary duty of parents. The family or the parents, potentially a danger to the children's education in the social-investment pattern, in this case becomes a catch-all for the children, who in turn are now seen as a potential danger to society and especially to elders. Admittedly, the insidious threat in the

empirical example is still the virus. But the children are seen as its most important physical host and thus become a danger themselves.

5 Second wave: "There is a threat of high social subsequent costs."

Even though the articulation presented in the last section became a hegemonic project (Nonhoff 2007) in the first phase of the pandemic in Germany, this does not mean that there were no opposing positions in the discourse on children and families. This aspect will be addressed in the following chapter. But at first, sharply falling incidences ensured that schools and childcare facilities reopened in the early summer of 2020. In autumn, though, the number of cases rose again and there was once again nationwide discussion about tougher political intervention to contain the pandemic. The pattern just presented persisted, but lost legitimacy. It was possible to draw on experience from the first phase of the pandemic. Moreover, knowledge of the assumed situation of children gained social recognition. Not only virological requirements for action, but also long-term economic and psychological consequences for children if public child care facilities were to close again were discussed. There were now calls to keep the economy and accordingly care facilities open as well. In public and political debates, the focus was on current children, but they were addressed in their future roles as students or employees. While children were objectified as main spreaders of the virus in the first phase of the pandemic as described above, here an objectification of children as future human capital is taking place. The concern of the children in the here and now is actually the concern for the future adults. For the sake of children, day care centres should be the last to close this time and the first to reopen toward the end of the lockdown. Overall, there was a shift from housification at the beginning of the pandemic to an attempt to re-normalise the pre-pandemic state. This was justified, among other reasons, by a distrust of the educational achievements of families. In addition, concerns have been raised that the number of child welfare endangerment incidents in the home environment may have increased. Parents or families were therefore seen as a potential danger to the well-being of children. Thus, it can be said that there has been a return to the social investment paradigm in political discourses and actions. This is also supported by the fact that in the second wave of the pandemic, specific risk groups were identified rather than families in general.

The aspects described can be illustrated by the following discourse fragment. The example is rather special in that the open letter of two politicians from different federal states and parties appeared very early (in April 2020). The articulations of the contribution at this time were on the one hand familiar (in the sense of the time before the pandemic), but on the other hand unusual, since at this point in the pandemic the pattern of housification presented above dominated the discourse.

One of the two politicians, Joachim Stamp, was also Minister for "Children, Family, Refugees and Integration" at the time – in the cabinet of Armin Laschet, from whom the analysed quote in the last section comes. Accordingly, the restoration of the social-investment pattern was advanced from within the own ranks.

> The shutdown of daycare centers exposes the youngest members of our society to the most restrictions. After all, every day without a daycare impacts our children's educational and developmental opportunities. While some educationally strong families can compensate for this, others are overburdened [...]. For children who do not grow up with German as their mother tongue at home, there is a break in learning our language. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds need a daily structure and regular meals at daycare centers or elementary schools. From a child's perspective, it is unacceptable that this loss of educational justice is accepted almost with a shrug of the shoulders. From a developmental psychological perspective, it is devastating. We are increasingly putting ourselves in a situation where, in addition to the economic consequences of the crisis, there is also the threat of high social subsequent costs [...]. (spiegel.de 2020)

As already mentioned, the guest contribution at "Spiegel Online" is remarkable because it was written by two politicians from different federal states and, what is more, across party lines. In this way, both an urgency and a lack of alternatives (Laclau 2005) are already marked in the context of the article. This refers to the discursively produced necessity of a return to institutionalised childcare. The demand to keep educational institutions open as long as possible is legitimised from two directions. The open letter firstly refers to the high burden on families and children and thus to those affected who would suffer from the closure of daycare centres. Secondly, however, it is made clear that there would be an existing interest in opening up early education institutions beyond those directly affected, thus making children and their (working) parents a common good of a (pedagogical) public. Alongside the distinction of children as concretely affected and as public common good runs the distinction between present, acute problems and concerns and risks that will have an impact only in the future. Viewing children as developmental beings to avoid future dangers is, as noted above, a signature of the social investment pattern of early childhood. The loss of institutional education leads to economic and "social subsequent costs" that would be unacceptable. Social impacts of the pandemic are hereby described in terms of costs and placed in an economic context.

This is where the intragenerational differentiations come in. While all children would need institutionalised care, specific educational losses would mainly affect certain groups. "Educationally strong" families are consequently contrasted with disadvantaged ones. The latter include those "who do not grow up with German as their mother tongue at home" because they did not learn "our language". The

possessive pronoun "our" is used to contrast non-native speakers and a hegemonic mainstream society. Through this othering (Said 2017), speaking a language that is not German is made a potential deficit and, in pandemic times, a threat to the educational success of the corresponding children. However, it is not only the reference to speaking German that is remarkable, but also where it is placed in the text. Thus, before the text sequence there is a reference to be "overburdened" and after that the term "disadvantaged backgrounds" and associated characteristics (lack of daily structure; regular meals). Not speaking German joins an chain of equivalence of risk factors for successful educational processes beginning in early childhood, which functions as a justification order for the return to institutionalised childcare. And this argumentation in turn is a central sign of the pattern of socially invested childhood.

6 Conclusion – children as danger vs. children in danger

Starting from the "unlucky day", Friday the 13th 2020, when many daycare centres and schools in Germany and Europe had to close due to the spreading Covid-19 pandemic, this contribution posed the question of how the emergence and political treatment of this disease did affect the previously stated shift from a distributive to a social investment welfare state. More precisely, it was about the often shared assumption that the pandemic had led to a (temporary) return to the traditional family.

To answer this, a broad understanding of the welfare state was presented, which goes beyond singular policies and (also) understands the political as a sphere that is formed in public arenas. Welfare state practices thus have an influence on the making of family insofar as they enable certain family configurations and limit or even prevent others. Conversely, the pattern of a welfare state can only be reconstructed in the interplay of family, state and market (Honig 2011; Joos 2003). A transition from a distributive to a social investment welfare state that has been taking place for several decades was outlined. In Germany, this pattern has prevailed in a special way since the turn of the millennium. In essence, the view of families is changing from a provider to a threat to child welfare. The focus here is on so-called risk groups. With a view to media reports and political regulations, this article examined the extent to which the pandemic has caused an irritation in this process. One empirical anchor example for each of the first two pandemic waves was therefore analysed in depth.

It became apparent that the family, or rather the making of the family, plays a central role in the course of welfare state "doings and sayings" in the context of the pandemic. First, there were the closures of educational institutions in spring 2020. Here, an irritation of the social investment pattern occurred. However, as could be seen, this was restored during the second pandemic phase at the latest. It is signif-

icant in this context that in the second wave of the pandemic, not only virologically based calls for action were dominant, but also economic, educational and psychological arguments were considered relevant. In the first wave, children were predominantly seen as an acute danger to contemporary society. In the second wave, on the other hand, it was more their learning losses that were seen as a danger to future society. But children were more strongly understood as beings in danger. It is also important to emphasise at this point that at the beginning of the pandemic, all children were addressed, while later a focus was placed on specific risk groups where a potential for learning losses was identified. It is striking that in both cases (children as danger vs. children in danger) an objectification of children takes place.

In spring 2020, parents or families were considered responsible to take care of their children. In the fall of the same year they were considered accountable for the children's lack of learning and other problems. Accordingly, the strategy of the first wave of the pandemic was one of housification, while in the second wave it was an attempt to re-normalise the social investment paradigm of childhood. In summary, the patterns of administration of care and administration of education can be contrasted in context of the first two waves of the pandemic in Germany.

It should be noted that there was an irritation of the social investment pattern of childhood and family especially in the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic. In social arenas, family was hereby often equated with a domestic community. But in my view, it would not be helpful to assume a re-familialisation. It is more productive to speak of a constant adjustment of the relationship between private and public education. And the pandemic has provided a special pressure to adjust. It would be short-sighted to speak of a return to the traditional family. The reason for this is that families were confronted with different, synchronous tasks that did not exist in this way in the golden age of the neolocal family. Life was concentrated in the domestic space of family members living together. However, the demands from daycare, school and the workplace persisted at the same time. This led to multiple burdens. The pandemic made visible, or more visible than in pre-pandemic times, a crisis in caring, where paid work tasks conflicted with household work such as childcare, which serve to sustain and reproduce life itself. For many families, this meant having to spend a full day teaching, entertaining and educating children, while at the same time trying to work more demanding or unusual hours, whether on or offline. So if one wants to speak of a return, then of a return of the oikos, the pre-modern domestic unit of economic and private life. This raises the question of how the making of family in (western) welfare state contexts will be shaped in the future if working from home becomes a permanent solution for more and more employees. However, this article does not yet have an answer to this.

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