

Paper presented at the WELLCHI Network Conference 2

**Well-being of children and labour markets in Europe
Different kinds of risks resulting from various structures and changes in the labour
markets**

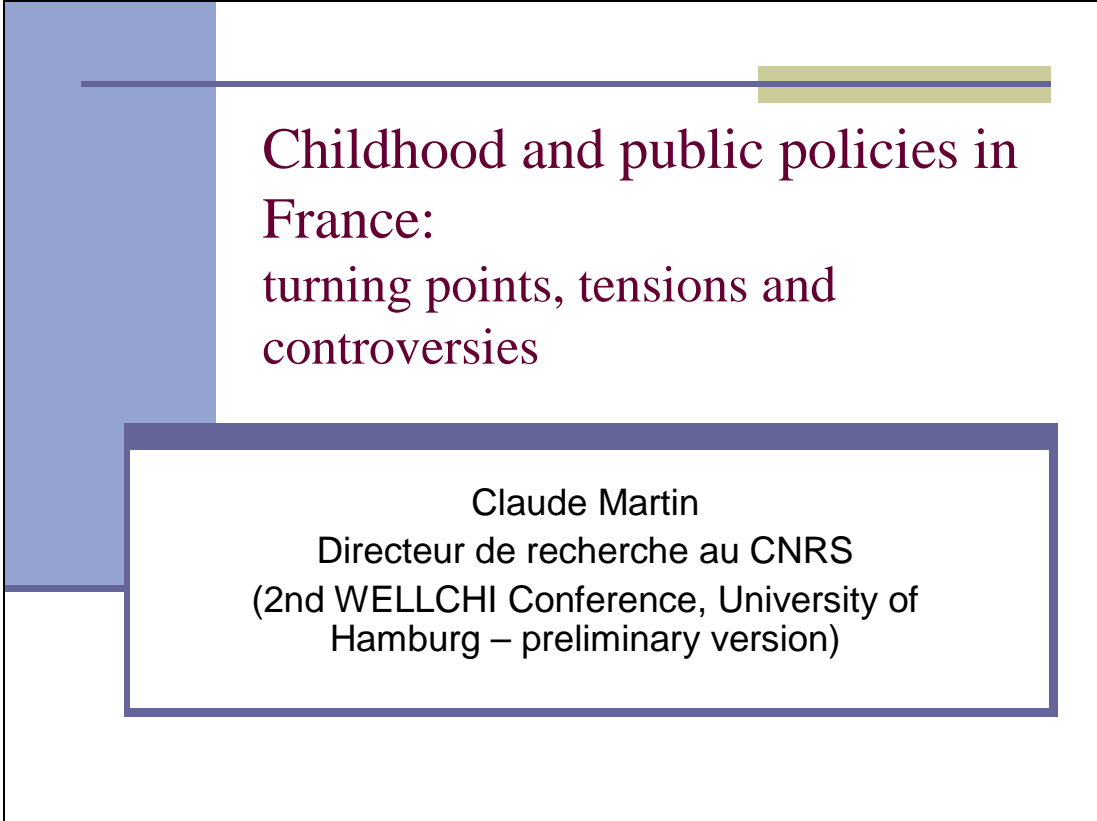
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Childhood and public policies: the French case

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Slide 1



Childhood and public policies in
France:
turning points, tensions and
controversies

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Family policies in France: a success story?

- France is probably one of the EU member states which defined explicitly family and childhood as a State concern from the very beginning of the 20th century;
- In that sense, childhood was understood as a « common good » and a human capital
- The low level of fertility during the 19th century and the trauma of the 1st world war explain a pro-natalist issue
- The end of the 19th century and the first third of the 20th century combine the elements for the definition and institutionnalisation of an explicit « family policy »

Family as a public issue at the end of the 19th century

- First, a public debate confronting different traditions of thinking: familialism, republican natalism and hygienism, and libertarian movements,
- Second, a public issue: the low population growth during the 19th century and its impact in terms of geopolitical influence
- Third, social movements to promote family and fertility, called « family movements » (institutionnalised by the Gounot Law in 1942)
- Fourth, some experimentations which prepared the French public family policy: the family premium in patriarchal industries and for civil servants at the end of the 19th century; institution of mutual aid fund

Institutionnalisation of a French family policy

- These elements make possible the « décrets lois » of 1938 and 1939, institutionnalising the French family policy as a pro-natalist policy
- Even the break of Vichy Government didn't affect fundamentally this basic pro-natalist policy
- The French « Social security Act » in 1946 finalised this institutionnalisation process, by creating a « family branch » of our Bismarckian Welfare State

Policy process and incrementalism

- The policy framing of family policies in France is incremental
- The different phases of this process depend on the political agenda and the main public problems defined at a given period of time
- Different issues appear as main problems at different moment
 - Fertility deficit and the cost of children
 - Promoting women's rights in family law
 - Equity and social solidarity
 - Unemployment
 - Family responsibilities

Policy debates, public problems and family policy reframing

- New problems mean new measures and different phases of the French Family Policy (FFP)
 - 1945-1965: FFP golden age
 - 1965-1975: Women rights' revolution
 - 1975-1985: Rediscovering poverty in a rich country. Equity issue
 - 1985-2005: Regulating unemployment with family policies

French public debate at the beginning of the 21st century

- These different phases are not real turning points, but rather a combination of new objectives with old ones
- The old doesn't disappear. The new is piled up on the old (incrementalism)
- This means that ideas, arguments, rhetorics are combining themselves in the public debate
- But politicization of family issues is particularly strong at the moment

Main arguments, main oppositions

1. Family is the basic institution: promote universal norms
2. A policy of childhood as a social investment strategy
3. Family policy as an element of employment policy (developing services and « emplois familiaux »)
4. The equity challenge: to support the more needy

1. Family is the basic institution of society

- Main French expectation: to succeed his/her family life
- So family is still considered as the main condition for happiness
- And on the contrary, family is also the main factor to explain social problems, the source of them
- Public responsibility : to defend and protect family institution and define universal norms
 - Importance of family law
 - Definition of a « policy of marriage »
 - Definition of a « police des familles » (as stated by Jacques Donzelot), which means to control and punish family irresponsibility and deviance

2. A policy of childhood

- The social investment strategy
- An individualised society needs more individualised policies: a policy for women, for children, for youth, for elderly people, etc.
- To invest in childhood means to give priority to prevention, to avoid some of the social problems in 20 years that will impose inefficient assistance policy
- Priority is: education, health, housing, to promote women's labour force participation, etc.
- Priority may also mean social control and detection of undesirable behaviors

2. Family policies to promote employment

- From 1985 to 1997, family policy reforms to promote conciliation between work and family responsibilities (for women only) were at the same time focusing on employment issue
 - Example of the flat rate paid parental leave
 - Example of the benefits to help parents to pay for childminders and home-helpers
- Some experts underline that this trend was an implicit employment policy hidden behind an explicit family policy

4. To support the more needy

- A universal family policy which gives the same whatever the level of resources of the households is considered as unfair
- Family policy has to be an element of social policy with an objective of equity
- More « means-tested » allowances
- A policy of services
- Positive discrimination

Hesitation blues: The come back of old demons

- Different groups of actors defend these different arguments: political actors, media, experts
- It is sometimes difficult to understand what is finally the objective of a reform, because there are many-sided with explicit and implicit dimensions
- One aspect is denied: the links between conditions of employment, work time schedules, difficulties linked to precarity, unpredictability and family responsibility.
- Childhood and parenthood are presented as universal concepts, requiring universal norms, but they rarely are presented as concrete experiences of real people