

WHO CARES? NARRATIVES ON FAMILIES IN EUROPE

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COST Action CA18119 context

The **CA18119** ascribes to the notion that there were three crucial actors in the historical development of social welfare: the states, voluntary associations and families. **WG1 – Families and Social Welfare** pays special attention to the “constant negotiation among families, states and welfare associations as they have struggled to define and redefine *what the family is* and identify the different kinds of support they need”. This, in turn, means that *what constitutes a “family” at a given place and time* is central for WG1, which tries to understand the *normative frames* shaping the various meanings of the notion of family.¹

Main argument

By portraying the complex effect of various social, political and economic processes over the last fifty years, this volume aims to understand what constitutes a family in Europe today. Central to this portrayal is the question – *who has been caring for the family in Europe?*

With the recession of the welfare state and the collapse of the socialist state, the state care for the family has been deeply transformed and often severely curtailed. The transformation became integral part of the real lives of families, shaped by various material and symbolic factors. These were, in effect, offshoots of both progressive and regressive movements which contributed to the narratives of what a family is or, rather, should be. One such narrative, promulgated by the (ultra-)conservative political parties and voluntary associations alike, uses care for the family as its central discursive political strategy. These *narratives of return* build upon the old trope of the restoration of the family, understood as the ‘natural place’ which precedes the socio-political order of the state. This “natural” family, which is defined as an exclusive effect of a procreative marriage between a man and a woman, is to be granted rights on a par with individual human rights; a move that undermines the results of the emancipation of women, most notoriously the right to abortion.² The *narrative of return* today has certain novel features, one of which is the exploitation of the trope of the deficit of care for the family. It is premised on procuring care and giving it back to the family, but only to a certain type of family *defined as family proper*.

The *narrative of return* thus uses “care for the family” as its central discursive political strategy. This can be generally understood as an outcome of 1) the recession and attendant transformations in welfare policies, 2) the general demographic decline in Europe, and 3) the strong (re)establishment of highly conservative normative frames. In this framework, the family is posited as a static, immutable unit, which has a defined, socially productive and nationally reproductive function and is the basis of all subsequent social partnerships. To counter these normative frames, this volume would provide a complex rendering of the family as a dynamic, mutable entity whose structure, social meaning and political roles prove dependent on larger processes. Looking back across the last fifty to seventy years, which in Europe saw not only the transformation of economic paradigms, but also profound political changes, the volume will show how certain symbolic frames became vital in shaping legal documents, how they corresponded to the emancipation of women, and later to liberation of

¹ Memorandum of Understanding for the Implementation of the COST Action “Who Cares in Europe?” (WCE) CA18119.

² “Male and female He created them”, Congregation for catholic education (for Educational Institutions); *Convention on the Rights of the Family*, Ordo Iuris; *Restoring the Natural Order*, An Agenda for Europe.

LGBT persons; and to what extent have they framed the state policies and for what political aims.

Starting from a seemingly essentialist question – what constitutes a family – this volume is supposed to demonstrate that no essentialist, one and simple definition of family is possible today, without detrimental consequences on the liberties of the members of actually existing families. Contemporary families lead complex lives which are constantly negotiating social, political, and economic and institutional settings. They are integral to what families *are*, they put in question the notion of the *family proper*. How is it possible to care for families in Europe today, without the abrogation of the existing familial forms of life?

The design of the Handbook

The volume should act as an alternative answer (or series of answers) to the *narrative of the return*, as it will strive to provide a nuanced and multilayered understanding of what constitutes a family today. In doing this it will rely on transdisciplinary approaches (historical, sociological, constitutional, ethnography, political discourse analysis, etc.) and comparative analysis.

We envision the chapters as communicating with each other. The contributors are encouraged to develop a diachronic approach focused on the links between contemporary narratives related to family life and previous historical, social and political ones. Chapters may be co-authored, ideally by multi-disciplinary scientists, especially in view of elaboration of the diachronic structure.

The chapters will cover all regions of the European continent. In addition, the volume will provide ‘transnational chapters’ focusing on family discourse in EU politics, family in the Europeanisation processes, pre- and post-accession European families, families in European regions (South, East, North, West), cross-border families, and families and grassroots activism across Europe.

Deadline for submission for COST members: December 7, 2020.