

BESSIÈRE Céline, GOLLAC Sibylle, 2020, *Le genre du capital. Comment la famille reproduit les inégalités* [The gender of capital: How the family reproduces inequalities], Paris, La Découverte, L'envers des faits, 336 p.

Mathieu Trachman, Translated by **Paul Reeve**

In **Population** Volume 75, Issue 2-3, April 2020, pages 410 to 411

ISSN 0032-4663

ISBN 9782733220450

This document is the English version of:

Mathieu Trachman, Translated by Paul Reeve, «BESSIÈRE Céline, GOLLAC Sibylle, 2020, *Le genre du capital. Comment la famille reproduit les inégalités*, Paris, La Découverte, L'envers des faits, 336 p.», *Population* 2020/2 (Vol. 75) , p. 410-411

Available online at:

<https://www.cairn-int.info/journal-population-2020-2-page-410.htm>

How to cite this article:

Mathieu Trachman, Translated by Paul Reeve, «BESSIÈRE Céline, GOLLAC Sibylle, 2020, *Le genre du capital. Comment la famille reproduit les inégalités*, Paris, La Découverte, L'envers des faits, 336 p.», *Population* 2020/2 (Vol. 75) , p. 410-411

Electronic distribution by Cairn on behalf of I.N.E.D.

© I.N.E.D. All rights reserved for all countries.

Reproducing this article (including by photocopying) is only authorized in accordance with the general terms and conditions of use for the website, or with the general terms and conditions of the license held by your institution, where applicable. Any other reproduction, in full or in part, or storage in a database, in any form and by any means whatsoever is strictly prohibited without the prior written consent of the publisher, except where permitted under French law.

BESSIÈRE C., GOLLAC S., 2020, *Le genre du capital: Comment la famille reproduit les inégalités* [The gender of capital: How the family reproduces inequalities], Paris, La Découverte, 336 pages.

The work of Thomas Piketty has shown that today, wealth inequalities accrue less through the incomes of individuals than through inheritance. But while this work analyses recent transformations in the landscape of class inequalities, it does not analyse gender relations. What of wealth inequalities between women and men? Starting from this question, Céline Bessière and Sibylle Gollac do not content themselves with simply adding a variable to existing analyses of capital. They draw and expand upon feminist research on the family, identifying the practices that favour men's capital accumulation in a context of increasing paid employment among women. By showing that it is the family that produces wealth inequalities between women and men, they revive the analysis of the political economy of patriarchy first set out in the 1970s by Christine Delphy, who notably established the key role of domestic work in the reproduction of the labour force. While the sociology of gender has produced a large body of research on women's paid employment, and the sociology of the family has focused on analysing affective ties and their political framing, this book returns to the political economy of patriarchy, integrating the changing structures of capitalism. The authors thus approach the family as an economic institution, within which goods circulate, their value and possession depending on the status and relationships of its members and their ties.

The available statistical data demonstrate the current relevance of this perspective. While the INSEE Patrimoine [patrimony] survey does not precisely capture gender inequalities, in particular due to the limitations of the statistical category of the household, it nevertheless evidences recent increases in wealth inequalities between women and men. Bessière and Gollac also draw on a database of the legal records of 4,000 union separation cases, assembled with other researchers. These data show how these separations amplify economic inequalities between spouses to the disadvantage of women. But while the statistical data highlight inequalities, they do not show us how they are produced. To do this, the authors analyse what they call 'family economic arrangements': that is, the ways in which money and goods circulate within the family. These arrangements take place through inheritance following a death, when a family business is passed on to one of the children, or when the couple's property or alimony are negotiated in the course of a divorce. Family monographs—established over the course of 20 years of research through repeated interviews with the various members of families, but also through the collection of samples of private writing—show how the differences between daughters and sons, wives and husbands, are established in practice. Family economic arrangements when families encounter the law, in the offices of notaries and lawyers, are also captured through ethnographies and interviews with these legal professionals.

The book often deals with moments of conflict, no doubt because they involve relational work through which individuals classify and explain the links between family members and their economic consequences. This process thus facilitates the sociological study of what would otherwise most often remain hidden within the silence of practices. The influence of Viviana Zelizer is notable here. These moments also show how legal professionals intervene in the definition of family ties, not only to help resolve conflicts or, for the wealthy, with tax optimization, but also to reproduce inequalities. In this way, the authors extend the materialist analysis of the family through a sociology of the legal and political framing of the private sphere.

They thus evidence the phenomenon of ‘male domination through inheritance’. In addition to this central result, Bessièrè and Gollac also highlight what might be referred to as the patriarchal unconscious of supposedly egalitarian institutions. The privileges of sons in family reproductive strategies, those of fathers in marital separations, and ‘reverse accounting’ in the division of inheritances (where property is distributed according to the statuses of individuals rather than its economic value), are not the result of explicitly sexist strategies but the consequence of arrangements that assign differentiated positions and roles to women and men. Finally, the authors show how inequalities of inheritance contribute not only to widening gender inequalities but also to maintaining class inequalities. Not only are there differences in wealth between families, but there is also a different relationship to the law which disadvantages less affluent families, whose affairs are more quickly dispatched. For working-class women, the question is not receiving an inheritance but managing everyday budgetary constraints. Legal professionals often remind them of their role as mothers.

By analysing the multiple ways in which women’s opportunities to accumulate wealth are limited, this book explains how economic gender inequalities are accumulated not only at the level of the labour market and of domestic work but also at the level of the family, and in particular in the differences in material and symbolic investments in daughters and sons. Bessièrè and Gollac show how, in addition to the gendered functioning of employment and domestic tasks, limiting women’s opportunities for accumulation is an essential component of social relations between the sexes.

Mathieu TRACHMAN