

Stout Centre forum

BOOK REVIEW

Paid and unpaid work: an insightful view

False Economy, the conflict between paid and unpaid work.

Anne Else, Tandem Press, 1996.
176 pp.

Reviewed by Karen Adams

In this accessible book, economic and social analyses are combined with the experience of everyday life to provide an insightful view of the conflict between unpaid and paid work in New Zealand. The failure to appreciate the value of unpaid work is of course nothing new. However, Anne Else reveals that what is new is the way the economy is taking unpaid work over, establishing a 'false economy' which is not reimbursed at market value. What happens to a society when family time, the care of children, older people, friends and relatives is no longer protected from the dictates of market time? Can women continue to absorb the shocks created by changes in labour market structures, and the Government devolution of responsibility for previously state funded services? These are some of the issues addressed by Anne Else in her new book *False Economy*, which joins the growing body of work highlighting increasing economic and social inequality in New Zealand.

False Economy has the hard hitting statistics that you might expect from a book of this description. But statistics are one thing, experience is another. This book is equally about the lives of real people and the stress being placed on real relationships and communities. Else captures the fabric of family life and the conflicting demands of paid and unpaid work through the

Cover illustration for 'Ringing the Changes', the Report of the National Work Family Phone-in, Ministry of Women's Affairs, 1993.



narratives of women from across the social spectrum. Other commentaries are provided from an equally diverse base which includes economists, consultants, government employees, and voluntary sector workers. Equally refreshing is the inclusion of the author's own experience. The result is a synthesis of story telling and statistics which make *False Economy* sobering and compelling reading.

The relationship between paid and unpaid work is thoughtfully and thoroughly explored in *False Economy*. The point Else makes, which is so often neglected by those charged with developing policy, is that paid and unpaid work are different sides of the same coin, worth nothing without its other half.

By highlighting the interdependence of paid and unpaid work, the flow-on effects of new employment structures and technologies on family life become apparent.

Changes in New Zealand employment patterns have seen a growth in part-time, temporary, and casualised work in industries traditionally dominated by women. At first this may sound like good news for those with unpaid work commitments. However, such conditions are useful only if the work is regular and meets income needs. The stories and statistics presented by Else demonstrate that this is not the case. Instead the boundaries between work time and family time are being eroded. The growth of on-call casual jobs, in which twice as many women are employed than men, can make planning ahead and fulfilling caring commitments difficult. Instability in the labour market is leading to instability in family life. Increasing pressure is being placed on the under-resourced community services expected to catch the increasing number of people who are falling through the large holes in the safety net. The boundaries between paid and unpaid work are equally being blurred by changes in community service contracting. This new contracting environment has set up a false economy or free market system, with free being the operative word. The lack of real funding for services provided in this sector is placing unsustainable demands on it.

In Anne Else's analysis, it is the labour provided for minimal wages by the 'functional underclass' that keeps the economy going, makes modern life possible, and supports the 'favoured community'. To protect this system strategies for reducing unemployment and so called 'dependency' on the welfare state are designed to make people desperate enough to take any paid work, regardless of its effects on them or their families. Tired of hearing 'culture of dependency' rhetoric, I welcomed access to the experiences of real people trying to negotiate complex systems, and escape the poverty and hardship that result from inequitable policies, increased job insecurity, inadequate benefit levels, strict targeting and eligibility criteria, and punishing abatement regimes. *False Economy* provides a grounded assessment of the New Zealand experience and a refreshing alternative to the views expressed by David Green in 'From Welfare State to Civil Society'.

Despite the grim tale this book has to tell, it is surprisingly optimistic and full of the determination and hope of the people who contributed to it. Else is able to see the silver lining and present alternatives which could stabilise jobs, acknowledge the contribution of unpaid work, and move society towards a future that is in the interests of all citizens. The erosion of jobs is considered an opportunity to get priorities the right way around and value human work. However, the move away from full-time work will only benefit everyone if the core concept of what works means is altered and our systems reflect this. The strategies proposed by Else include flexible employment and family-friendly workplace policies which benefit employers and employees alike, and alternative tax and social welfare mechanisms.

At the base of Else's vision is the radical concept of Universal Basic Income (UBI), a form of social wage. It is through this mechanism that Else considers it possible to generate security and well-being for all, and acknowledge the contribution of unpaid work. Given that UBI is a platform from which Else recommends building a more equitable society, the brevity of discussion provided on it is disappointed. For instance practical insights into how UBI would work are not offered. Because UBI is not outlined more fully, there is the danger that it could be mistaken for and used as an argument for 'workfare' by those who are all too eager to create a workfare state. Else's reliance on UBI also prevents discussion of other practical recommendations which could reduce the stress she documents throughout the book. This aside, the UBI is one position from which New Zealand can move beyond the 'dependency to contribution' debate which is central to current welfare discourse and policy. This book will undoubtedly encourage further discussion on the topic. Anne Else's ultimate challenge is for policy makers to acknowledge the contribution that is already being made through

unpaid work and to promote policies which will support and enable this contribution to continue in the future. She reminds us that without unpaid work there is no real future to look forward to.

Without families and communities, the economy means nothing. It has no life of its own. Its only purpose is to enable us to live, to care for one another and to raise our children to take our place. If we lose the power to do that, no matter how fast the GDP rises or how much the budget surplus grows, we will have no future worth working for.

COMMENTARY

What chance for Cultural Studies in New Zealand?

Rolf W. Brednich

Currently a Research Fellow at the Stout Research Centre at Victoria University, investigating German immigration to New Zealand, I am a teacher of folkloristics with a special focus on European anthropology and ethnology at Georg August University of Göttingen. The fact that this discipline is not represented in New Zealand universities gave me cause to consider my own approach to cultural studies, and to what extent my discipline could contribute to a better understanding of New Zealand's multiplicity of cultures and traditions. In sharing some of my conclusions, it seems useful to begin with definitions of *folklore* and *folkloristics*.

The word *folklore* was coined in 1846 by the Englishman William John Thoms to represent the 'lore of the people', as 'manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs, etc, of the olden time'. Folklore studies or folklife research became a distinctive field of study in Europe and North America around 1900. The discipline of folklore, which is devoted to the identification, documentation, explanation, and analysis of traditional expressive forms, processes, and behaviours, is defined as *folkloristics*. Folkloristics is now well established at universities, archives, museums, and institutions in many countries and has its own assumptions, concepts, hypotheses, theories, lexicon, issues, and international organisations.¹

I will try to show that, although New Zealand does not have folkloristics as an academic discipline, it has a lot of folklore and that due to the distribution of this field amongst several disciplines at New Zealand universities (New Zealand studies, Pacific studies, Maori studies, social history, popular culture, anthropology, sociology, art history, and so on) a number of topics worthy of investigation are in need of scholarly study.

As a rule, folkloristic research in 19th century Europe started with the study of folk literature, that is