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COVID-19 and Family Schedule

„8 óra munka, 8 óra pihenés, 8 óra szórakozás” (Beatrice)
„There is a season for everything, a time for every occupation under heaven” (Eccl 3:1)

Abstract

The delicate balance between the private and the public sphere affects families in a unique way, whose social place is to be found at the border of the two. Families are fundamental resources for the public – primarily due to their capacity to reproduce – however, they also rely strongly on the frameworks provided by the public. The latter affects especially the time schedule of families. Two current events have also challenged the sensitive balance between the two spheres. The COVID-19 pandemic pushed certain public roles and activities over to the private sphere due to social distancing rules and compulsory lockdowns. Meanwhile, the energy crisis caused by the war delegates these public roles and activities to the private sphere.

Keywords: private and public sphere, family, COVID-19, social duties, time schedule.

“8 hours of work, 8 hours of rest, 8 hours of fun” is the refrain of the hit by Beatrice, one of the major rock bands in late socialist Hungary.¹ This division of time symbolizes the banality and hopelessness of the worker’s life during the Kádár-era. However, it also denotes the symbolic power of time schedules, creating a list of priorities in our lives.

The differentiation between the public and the private sphere is part of the fundamental structure of every modern society (Gestrich, Krause and Mitterauer, 2003, p. 385). This division is observable in every dimension of life, from

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rBNPc5-qq-Y>

architecture to language (Kovács, 2017, p. 21–24). The romantic period is probably the clearest manifestation of this division, when male and female roles were separated in a radical way, men being ordered to the public, and women to the private sphere (Heinz, 2002, pp. 226–282). In today's world – whether we call it postindustrial or postmodern – such a division of the two spheres cannot be validated anymore. This is true for several reasons, such as the use of telecommunication technologies which unavoidably brings the public world into our homes. The negotiation between the public and private spheres remains a characteristic struggle for western societies.

Two current events have also challenged the sensitive balance between the two spheres. The first is when Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organization declared „a public health emergency of international concern over the global outbreak of #2019nCoV” on Twitter on 30th January 2020 (DrTedros, 2020), which marked the beginning of the global COVID-19 crisis. The second is 24th February 2022 marking the start of the war between Russia and the Ukraine. Both events – although with different intensity – are still in progress. While the pandemic and the war do not affect individuals and communities the same way, they both challenge the endurance of social systems. This is true for global industrial supply chains, as well as for national educational systems. The COVID-19 pandemic pushed certain public roles and activities over to the private sphere due to social distancing rules and compulsory lockdowns. Meanwhile, the energy crisis caused by the war delegates these public roles and activities – especially in Europe – to the private sphere in a strange form of domestic outsourcing. These roles, and the duties connected to them, may come from all segments of society, from industrial production to education.

The delicate balance between the private and the public sphere affects families in a unique way, whose social place is to be found at the border of the two. Families are fundamental resources for the public – primarily due to their capacity to reproduce – however, they also rely strongly on the frameworks provided by the public. The latter affects especially the time schedule of families.

As Isabella Guanzini formulates the notion of “apocalyptic feelings” concerning the COVID-19 crisis (Guanzini, 2020, p. 257). The phrase not only denotes the end of an era, but points to the revelatory² character of the COVID-19 crisis. This essay will use this apocalyptic character of our time of ongoing crises to highlight the changes in family schedule and the restructuring of the relationship between the public and the private spheres.

² The Greek word ἀποκαλύπτω means to reveal or disclose something.

1. Time management

The time management of a particular society can be determined by numerous factors. These can be physical and physiological factors, such as the time of sunrise and sunset, the change of temperature, or the bio-rhythm of the human body. However, social factors can have a similar influence by aiming to coordinate social processes. The start time for schools depends just as much on the time of sunrise and sunset as it does on the ability of a society to provide sufficient conditions for traveling from home to school. Without school buses and traffic controls preventing traffic jams, Hungarian students living some distance from their schools could hardly make it there by 8 am.

A publicly available time schedule, concerning physical, physiological, and social factors is a necessary point of reference in every society. School could theoretically start at midnight; however, this would hardly synchronize with the bio-rhythms of students and teachers and would certainly reduce the efficiency of teaching. It would also be difficult to harmonize such a school's time schedule with other segments of society.

In the lives of individuals and societies, time appears as both linear and cyclical. There is a natural course of human life from conception to death and contains certain common milestones. The history of a society or of mankind bears similar features of linearity – at least in the western world view based on the Jewish Christian tradition. Time, however, can also appear as cyclical since our world necessarily contains certain recurring and periodic elements. Physical (the path of the sun or the change of seasons), physiological (thirst or hunger), or social factors (public holidays, festivals, or religious events) may be responsible for this cyclical nature of time.

The more complex a society is, the more coordination it needs. Simultaneously, it needs to be more responsive to address the needs of individuals and smaller communities. It also requires a higher-level capacity for adaptation on the side of the individuals and smaller communities, since they need to adjust their lives to the expectations of complex social institutions and processes.

2. The dichotomy between the private and the public

The dichotomy between the private and the public is a modern phenomenon, however, in the west, it has its roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Originally Sabbath was “as an ethnic-religious identity marker for the exiled covenantal community.” It “provided hope and continuity for exiled Judeans”, and it served

as an “institution contributing in this way to a new form of religious and cultic practices” (Lukács 2020, p. 76). The first creation account (Gen 1) with the days of creation provided a firm foundation for Israelites to live their everyday lives accordingly. Modern industrial societies keep the seven-day structure of the week, but with a different accent: “long weekends are there to provide freedom for a short time from work, but with its cyclical passing, connect again with the time of labor. (...) On weekends, efficiency and institution are replaced by the elated spirit of personal being, informality, and spontaneity” (Takács 2002, p. 93). The sacral dichotomy is taken over by the profane with a different logic: enabling the work force to recreate its energies for the public sphere.

In agrarian societies the time schedule of families is determined by seasons, the weather, and the conditions for agricultural production. Other factors may certainly be added, such as cultural or religious frameworks, which are also defined by the necessities of agricultural work. In developed western countries, however, the order of social institutions is the key factor. Cornerstones like the start and end of school, working hours, business hours, and – on the yearly level – summer and winter holidays, the change of semesters, and the cyclical annual duties, define the time schedule of our daily lives. Social institutions in modern societies are just as definitive as weather and seasons in agrarian societies.

There are certain cases when society complies with the time order of the family, for example in the case of childcare leave, securing time for parents to fulfill their family duties. The public is forced to do so, since it relies heavily on family processes, such as conceiving, caring for, and raising children. The two spheres thus are interdependent, even if this relationship often appears unbalanced.

4. Lockdown changing borders

Time schedules are bound to symbolic and real spaces: in its simplest form the public sphere refers to the homes of families, while the public to everything beyond it. The pandemic and especially lockdown measures, changed the time schedule and the spatial setting for families. The spatial limitation to their homes meant also temporal confinement for families. It showed the liberating nature of public time schedules for purposes beyond the walls of family homes. Although modern telecommunication technologies brought these purposes into the homes, the public and the private time schedules were difficult to harmonize in a space that, up until the pandemic, was usually deemed part of the private realm.

With lockdowns, families seemingly gained back some key functions, which they have lost with the modernization of societies (Mitterauer 1991, pp. 44–45): the teaching and the education of children, economic production, and their religious role. Homes were turned into schools, stock markets, meeting rooms, or churches. Families experienced the dichotomy of security and vulnerability, being significant and overwhelmed at the same time. These dichotomies also characterized the changes of perspective during the pandemic: fellow people became possible carriers of virus, people to avoid from one moment to the next; faces turned into masks, supermarkets into food depots, homes into offices and meeting-rooms, churches into studios, and shopping malls into pestiferous swamps.

The pandemic and the lockdown measures changed the relationship between the public and the private spheres in at least two ways: on the one hand it showed the importance of the private sphere for the public – including its potentials. (E.g., there is no need to hire offices anymore if the homes of personnel can serve as such.) On the other hand, it placed a severe burden on the families who now had to provide the space for both public and private duties and expectations. This convergence of the public and the private at the home changed the regular time schedules which provided solid frameworks for actions in both spheres.

5. Family time-schedule during lockdown

The extent to which these changes affected families and their life-shaping time schedules is best illustrated by article titles from the pandemic period: *How to structure your family schedule while in isolation* (Burgess 2020) or *A schedule can be your family's best ally during the coronavirus lockdown* (N.N. 2020). Even UNICEF formulated guidelines to support families: “How to organize time in home quarantine, daily routine during home quarantine” (UNICEF 2020). As Sánchez-Mira writes in her study on *The Reshaping of Daily Time during the COVID-19 Pandemic*, “parents who remained employed faced the greatest time pressures” and despite “more flexible schedules (...) parents with the greatest work and family demands sought more time-structured organization to facilitate their articulation” (Sánchez-Mira 2021, p. 1).

Sánchez-Mira gives an example from Switzerland to illustrate the difficulties of families with the lockdown time schedule.

Gisela is employed at 80 percent of full-time hours in the professional services sector and a part-time student. She is also a mother of two children aged 11 and 13,

and moved in with her latest partner after more than 5 years as a lone parent and other non-successful relationships. Gisela had to change to working from home due to the pandemic, while at the same time her children's school closed. Under this new configuration, she struggled to combine her work, her studies and home-schooling her children, particularly the younger child, who had some behavioural issues. At the same time, her children could not visit their father because his new partner is at-risk for COVID-19. Hence, they were constantly under her care, which further increased Gisela's burden (Sánchez-Mira 2021, 2).

This single example shows how ordinary time schedules collapsed in a very short time during lockdown and how private matters had to be rearranged due to the withdrawal of public support. Her home became smaller by suddenly having to function also as an office and a schoolroom. Simultaneously, she became not only the primary but practically the sole caretaker. The confinement to her home meant the limitation of possible social support too. Spatial limitation resulted in social limitation and sharpened the division within the private sphere. As her home was constricted, she herself was stretched.

6. In the long term

Although family life and schedule seemingly returned to normal, there are several questions which need to be raised in the long term, especially since the Ukrainian war and the evolving energy crisis threaten to yield similar measures as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The first is whether the arrangement of duties between the public and the private sphere before the pandemic is still valid for the post-pandemic situation. Did families give all the duties back to the public? Did services provided by public social institutions change?

The second concerns the boundaries of homes. Are we able to draw the boundaries of the private, of families and homes, to protect them from the encroachment of the public? Can they really serve as homes if they are treated as offices by public institutions?

The third concerns the fruitful cooperation between the public and the private. Can we use the knowledge and experience gained through the pandemic creatively, and attempt to attune them in a fruitful way?

Although these questions might seem to be minor in contrast with “How to stop the virus?” and “How to end war?”, they will prove to be crucial for a future humane life.

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