



**Christine Castelain-Meunier**

## The Place of Fatherhood and the Parental Role: Tensions, Ambivalence and Contradictions

**T**his article focuses on three issues: the first concerns the conquest of freedoms and new spaces in the deinstitutionalization of the father's role; the second concerns the contradictions, ambivalence and tensions which appear in assuming a parental role during a period of transition; the third concerns the turbulent era we are now entering, and the way the child may be required as an identity support for the adult, for both the mother and father.

Furthermore, the article discusses the complexity associated with the assumption of the parental role and the position of parents in comparison with each other. I then consider both mother and father, as it is difficult to discuss one without the other, whatever the situation. The significance of maternal and paternal symbols is so strong, although they are so different, that it is difficult not to refer to the dialectics of the man–woman relationship, comprising domination and the search for equality.

The tensions associated with assuming a parental role may be summarized around the fact that we are currently witnessing the decline of a paternity model designed by and around the institution of marriage. The family model is being revised. It is traditionally a republican model based on civil marriage and on the definition of the roles, complementarity and the hierarchization of places associated with it. This model is being thrown into question by the strategy of the actors, the men and the women, who are moving away from the institutional family system, for a variety of reasons.

### Change in the Parental Context

The place and role of the father and mother are being redefined because the relationships between men and women are changing.

The private, domestic sphere is being reformulated around the child in a society where the use of techniques of assisted reproduction results in new anguish, new aspirations and new debates. But educative concepts, in conjunction with the difficulty but also the freedom to conceive and to take up new forms of educative duties, cause tensions, conflicts, hopes, and then a whole new dynamics. Parental functions, which are not often discussed in an accurate or concrete way in sociology, but to which we frequently refer, are changing a great deal. The central question concerns the parental ability to accompany the development of the child towards maturation as an adult subject, i.e. to support the construction of the child's subjectivity, autonomy, socialization and self-assertion. This is a particularly complex question as the interests of the parents and the children converge and diverge simultaneously.

Nowadays, parental roles are changing. In the Middle Ages, marital life lasted no longer than 13 years on average, due to a high mortality rate, and because remarriage was frequent, the official dimension of the family as an institution fitting the individual into the filiation made the places and the roles clear.

The changes associated with the genesis of the contemporary family favour a diversity of situations around the valorization of authenticity and autonomy, as stated by the sociologist de Singly (1996).

The selective behaviour associated with the choice and timing of conception does not, paradoxically, contribute to making the children's education easier. If, for the father and the mother, the baby is a symbol of pride and rejuvenation (provided that in society's eyes the baby is medically 'normal'), it is also the symbol of a completion. It symbolizes achievement and the end of a stage. In a society that prides itself on controlling the natural world, including reproduction – the production of life – the philosophical acceptance of limits is not easy. The individual's inner force and psychological balance must be sufficient for the notion of limit to be accepted, in order to allow a third individual, however loveable, to take his or her place.

### Transformation of the Woman's and Mother's Condition

Changes in the female condition are related to equality and to women's position relative to men's.

Nowadays, the universe of birth is surrounded by a specific representation which privileges the approach of women, downplaying the religious and upholding the supremacy of the medical. It is as though the deep-seated tensions which exist today, around male and female, between the search for equality and specificity, are reflected by medical dominance. The male 'ex-teriority' in childbirth is reinforced while, at the same time, a new involvement of the father is desired. Deep-seated tensions plague women's and men's

condition in different ways, both in themselves and with reference to one another. The search for individual assertion and interaction are two major issues at stake. New bases of complementarity between roles have not yet been found; the former roles were in dispute, but they have not disappeared.

The old references associated with the more traditional role of women remain at the same time as new requirements resulting from new roles take prominence. Compliance with the new requirements is demanding for women, while the home life and the child's education call on them at the same time, and it is difficult to find and maintain harmony in their private lives. Sharing of household tasks with the man, though it is precarious and much debated, requires a new form of vigilance from the woman, as does the sharing of educative duties. The woman is the conductor of the orchestra, who delegates and simultaneously pushes the man into a place where he is required to assert himself, to compete and perform, i.e. through cultural models which are not operational in private life. Moreover, the man and the woman remain linked to and refer to the educative context in which they grew up and to the differentiated cultural norms which define them, although at the same time, they try to distance themselves from these norms. Sharing tasks and roles at home is equivalent to a real cultural revolution: the woman remains defined publicly, politically and professionally, but also psychologically, by representations which keep withdrawing her into the private sphere. The man has not sufficient experience or awareness to understand the mechanisms of domination which characterize him. In the woman, the feeling of 'carrying' everything without receiving the expected recognition often becomes overwhelming, causing bitterness, discouragement and resignation. Favouring and encouraging equality through clearly defined policies would contribute to minimize these effects.

The woman, who encounters many difficulties in her efforts to establish priorities among all her roles and to make choices – and who refuses to make some choices – has to cope alone with these difficulties, without any hope of being understood as she is not recognized in her various roles on the cultural and social scales. In most cases, she is still defined through her role of mother or 'incomplete' worker, as a woman and a mother, in a society bent on profitability. Such designation maintains traditional references and confines the woman's condition to an unsatisfactory situation. If the need to cope with challenges stimulates women, there is also a price to be paid, not only in the harmony between man and woman, but also her equilibrium and that of the child.

The difficulties encountered by the woman in asserting herself in contemporary society, which consists of contradictory models, none particularly in her favour, and supported by everyone, are detrimental to the child. The woman is constantly asked to do things as a mother, but she is also defined by other roles. However, the institutions which deal with childhood call for

the mother's rather than the father's attention. This dimension is reinforced by the biologization of society. The state intervenes in private space by approaching the woman as mother. The mother and the child have been drawn closer together in the course of history as the influence of religion was decreased, and woman asserted herself socially. One could say the mother-child duo has been reinforced twice over: first, after the French Revolution, and second, after the 1970s. The women echo back the expectations placed upon them, and they also become slave to them.

The woman feels the tensions between the poles of her universe. The woman has freed herself from her former condition, but she is always being drawn back to it, without being supported in her new prerogatives. She is afraid of losing her job if she is pregnant. She is afraid of losing her professional status if she works less. She is afraid of not bringing her children up well if she works more. She is afraid of losing her partner when she is pregnant, and when she has just had a baby. She is afraid of offending him if she asks him for more help at home. She is afraid of bringing up her children badly if she is away in the evening. She is afraid of displeasing her partner if she disagrees with him about the children. She is afraid of losing him when she becomes older. She is afraid of not being very feminine because she is busy, worried and working hard. She is afraid of imposing her rhythm of diet, sleep, relaxation if it is different from that of her partner or her children. The list of fears and concerns may vary from one woman to the other and could be infinitely longer, but it includes many issues common to all women.

Daily reality in fact requires the woman to be generally more present in the home than the man. The children are also more present, especially when they are very young. The need for exchange, the difficulty of human relationships encourages the woman to turn towards the child, to speak to the child, to treat the child as a confidant, as an accomplice, even sometimes to the detriment of the father. The more difficult her situation, the more she tries to do this, and more particularly as both of them (mother and child) are more often together. Moreover, affection and union, and education and friendship are frequently confused.

When a conjugal conflict exists, resulting in a separation, the woman will be defended in the name of her duties as a mother – not as a woman. The judge will decide the monetary allowance, the compensatory benefits and the custody of the children. The woman will not be supported because of her status as a woman or out of any concern for her equilibrium as woman, but for her equilibrium with respect to the child. Her woman's consciousness is appealed to from her mother's consciousness. She is still appealed to almost exclusively as a mother or worker.

Our society's inability to separate the mother from the child reinforces the difficulty experienced by the woman in defining herself autonomously, or conceiving of the child's autonomy. Fusing the child's interest to the

mother's interest clouds the conception and the sharing of educational duties around the child, with regard to both the child's own needs and the needs of the mother as a woman. As the situation often turns against the mother, the child may sometimes turn and blame her. Nevertheless, new roles as a mother are appearing, and they are better identified, recognized and accompanied, and require a better recognition of the woman.

Furthermore, relationships and sharing of duties between surrogate mothers and 'educative' mothers must be delineated, and positions with respect to the genetic order and filiation must be clarified.

### Male Domination, Matrifocality and Fatherhoods

Regardless of history, we can say that, at present, the positions and roles around the child have been redistributed, and this is due to the fact that changes have appeared in the modes of transmission. We have moved from transmission of economic capital in the agrarian society, through that of cultural capital in the industrial society, to capital that could be called 'identity' in contemporary society. Changes related to fatherhood seem to be reflecting changes associated with modes of transmission.

Nevertheless, contradictions exist between different types of roles and cultural models. The various cultural models of fatherhood can be summarized as follows:

- The traditional model of the religious rural society (the father being symbolic but present, with whom the child identifies).
- The father in the industrial society (the father is away from the home, but still the householder).
- The contemporary father in the postindustrial society (with the so-called proximity fatherhood in the private space, and the deinstitutionalization of the father's role).

Tensions persist between these models which are present in people's consciousness, rooted in practice and running through contemporary representations. While the mother's place is defined naturally, the father's place is not. This is a divisive construction. The father socializes the child by teaching the child to control his or her impulses in order to separate the child from the mother. It is inherent in filiation. If the women bear the contradictions of a society that cannot accept or facilitate matrifocality – defending women's rights and better supporting those of mothers; reinforcing and favouring the stability of new references; valorizing a new distribution of the roles of men and women in the private sphere; favouring better autonomy for each person around the child – then men are also subject to new tensions. Our references are not stable, the forms and modes of domination are changing.

With the control of fertility has come a change in perception, according to which life is no longer given by God, but by scientists and biotechnologists. The dream of the father who gives birth through actually conceiving is becoming nearer to reality, as is the role of the man who uses instruments in the woman's body to produce another life. Another important change is the ability to prove fatherhood, possible since 1955, and the ability to establish proof post-mortem, though this is not frequently used through respect for the wishes of the father while alive.

Redefinition of the positions of the genetic father and the educative father is also problematic: between the biological father who does not share the daily space with the child and the mother's partner who does share it. The question is thus about the fragmentation of the functions, the roles, the duties of these men and the distribution of their respective places around the woman and the child. The split between sexuality and procreation leads to new, varied situations, characterized more particularly by a search for points of reference, equilibrium and stability. It is important not to deny these situations, nor to categorize them too quickly. They will become more precisely defined in the future, but the priority is to clarify the roles of the different people around the child in connection with filiation, exercise of authority, transmission of experience, initiation and affective links.

The new role of the father depends to some extent on the mother's demands on the man with regard to the child, within the contemporary family configuration (separated, single-parent family, reconstituted family). Fatherhood is redefined according to the type of link and the father's specific relation with the child. Fatherhood depends on the woman, including the way in which the father will be able to fulfil his role; at the same time, the father's determination to take his place is reinforced, whatever the mother's position. With assisted conception, the question is to decide whether the identity of the donor should be known or not; and differences exist between countries. For example, in Sweden a child born by artificial insemination has a right to know the donor's name, while in France this is not the case. Another example is the sharing of custody of the child between father and mother: is this more effective in the Nordic countries than in France?

In the contemporary, postindustrial family, the development of new forms of unions and separations undermines the father's prerogatives and his coherence as a householder. At the same time, the educative content of child-rearing has changed in favour of more 'feminine' interventions (communication, consensus). The function of the father is ambivalent and complex.

The replacement in France in 1970 of the father's legal power by parental authority introduced the basis of legal equality in parental responsibilities – this development was reaffirmed with recognition of the principle of joint parental authority in 1993. Nevertheless, there is some controversy around 'natural' families (in which the birth parents are not living together). Such

families have been steadily increasing in number since the 1960s, and in 1995 more than one child in three (37.6 percent) was in a family where there had been a separation. Parental authority can be exercised legally only if the parent in question has officially assumed their parental responsibility; when this is not the case, a father, even if he has acknowledged the child, may encounter difficulties assuming his share of the responsibility for the child and obtaining rights of access. The difficulties encountered by fathers in maintaining contact with their children after separation in a natural family, or a marriage breakdown, reflect the transformations in conditions for the exercise of the centuries-old paternal authority. A survey conducted in 1988 by Leridon and Villeneuve Gokalp, demographers at the French Institute of Demographic Studies (INED), found that 54 percent of children whose parents had separated lost contact with their father, and about 24 percent see him only episodically (less than once a month).

At the same time, changes have occurred in the way fathers behave. The behaviour associated with the pregnancy, the presence of fathers at the birth (more than 80 percent), the participation of the father in the daily environment of the young child, the relational fatherhood, the proximity fatherhood and the more flexible, more consensual conception of paternal authority are all indicative of the new ways of being a father. Fatherhood has been asked to reinvent itself, in a reaffirmation of the wish of fathers to have a role that reinforces their consciousness (Castelain-Meunier, 1998). This is also illustrated in the increase in the number of declarations of acknowledgement of the child by the father at the time of birth, from 50 percent of children in 1980 to 73.7 percent in 1995. This also illustrates a sudden awareness that this link with the child may at present be one of the only means to exercise one's fatherhood (as stated by associations for the defence of fatherhood, such as SOS Papa and the NMCP [New Movement for Fathers] in France).

### Tensions and Contradictions of Fatherhood

Some tensions and contradictions can be summarized:

- Fatherhood is more particularly defined by its exteriority (with respect to the mother-child union). But, at present, it is defined by the father-child proximity. This is an important paradox.
- Economic society is still dominated by men, with the downgrading of the woman's situation (lower wages, seen as secondary income, career subordinate to the children's education, need for flexible working hours, anticipation of children inherent to the woman's career).
- The role of the father is not defined by reference to the private sphere, but nevertheless most family interaction happens there. The woman subjectivizes the man in the private sphere by virtue of her greater participation.

- Spouses and unmarried parents may separate, and fatherhood may thus become 'peripheral'.
- Fatherhood is still defined by an act separating the mother-child union, but the paternal link, a socializing link, is no longer guaranteed by the institution of the family: it must be built.
- The importance of the development of the paternal consciousness takes on a new dimension in society which may have little awareness of fathers.
- The distance between father and child has increased throughout history: it has increased with the biologization of society and the growth of legal agencies regulating childhood, which are oriented to mothers, making them feel 'over-responsible'.

### An Era of Turbulence

There is an illusion that father and mother, woman and man, are on equal terms with one another. We thus face a kind of egalitarian fraud that appears in childrearing (withdrawal of the father) and in situations of conflict (marginalization of some fathers). It is as though an unacknowledged 'matricentrism' exists, although society is dominated by men: i.e. the present situation of women forces society to recognize them as mothers and 'underpaid workers'. A call goes out for allowances and benefits, accompanied by protestations by the fathers when they are asked for help only for economic reasons.

But it would not be right to present an image of fathers exclusively involved in their fatherhood. The number of fathers who do not assume their fatherhood, that is to say who are peripheral to their child's education, is unknown, and this part of the question requires research. We know the percentage of fathers who do not have contact with their children after a separation, but not that of other fathers, because of the lack of appropriate categories of analysis. This is a wide area of study, and one needing to be implemented across countries. It can be assumed that, at present, fatherhood depends on the link developed and maintained by the child, and this link has not the means to develop in the face of conflicts between models of fatherhood, lack of coherence between representations and practices, and the disappearance of the institution of fatherhood. Motherhood is encouraged but only through the downgrading of women, who have the means to keep fathers away from children (by, for example, accusing them of sexual affairs, living far apart, children not being available on designated contact days, and so on).

The situation becomes especially bad when the child is made hostage to the parents' conflict. The study on telephone links between the father and child is an interesting case in point because not only does it show the



difficulties sometimes encountered in maintaining the link between fathers and children when they do not live together, but also the new forms of relationships which may exist, as discussed in the following section.

### Maintaining the Paternal Link: The Example of the Telephone

This section refers to a study we carried out with 166 fathers separated from their children; the results were published in Castelain-Meunier (1997b).

A 55-year-old father, a consulting engineer, recalls the telephone conversations he has with his seven-year-old daughter, whom he phones once a week and who lives less than a kilometre down the road. He describes the numerous different types of interaction and the ways he has to adapt in relation to his daughter's activities and reactions. He is also aware that during their conversations the child is often busy doing something else. He has to imagine her environment and the specific context at the time of the call. These moments, he recalls, involve 'spontaneity', 'pleasure' and 'information on recent events'. There are 'few conventions'. The content of the conversations is

... most often unrelated to the physical separation or parental conflict. ... The reason for the call is often insignificant, for example a TV hero, a new toy, a show she went to with her mother or with friends. ... The call lasts 15 minutes ... after the initial subject has been exhausted we rarely end the conversation. The child's subjects alternate with mine. I don't stop her, it is she who 'imposes' a subject, impatiently interrupting me at the slightest opportunity. ... When I talk it's often on the preceding topic because I was interrupted by my daughter who was impatient to move onto another subject. She switches from one thing to the next unpredictably, without there being any relation between topics. ... If my call disturbed her she'll say so after about five or ten minutes. The reason is always the TV programme which she carries on watching during our conversation [the phone and TV are in the same room]. At that point she'll describe the scene on the TV programme capturing her attention ('Careful, soon Lucky Luke's going to ...', etc.), and mentions several characters and their amazing actions. ... If I don't react immediately to end the conversation, although my daughter has done everything to show how urgently she wants to do so, her voice reveals her impatience. I don't insist, I end off, in good humour. ... Before leaving my daughter I tell her she can call me as often as she wants to, the answering machine will take messages. ... On the answering machine, on mine [the mother does not have one], my daughter always states the reason for her call. The most spontaneous one is: 'I just wanted to chat to you', in a sad voice because of my absence. ... She asks me to call back. ... She never leaves the date or time of the call, of course. ... It's usually me who's the first to say something affectionate ('love you'). My daughter responds likewise. This is only possible at the end of the call because at the start she immediately imposes her first subject, irrespective of who's calling, 'you know, I saw ...' etc. ... As the day of her visit to me approaches she reminds me about it, specifies the day: 'see you on Sunday', with the time I'm to fetch her.

This father's account, composed of fragments of conversations, shows how such interaction fits into the daily life of the child, with her immediate reactions, emotion, voice changes and intonation, which impact directly on the conversation.

This tendency is observed between other fathers and their children, but nevertheless there is an exclusivity in the relationship between the mother and the child. The rearrangements of patriarchy are superseded, and matrifocality widens the distance between the father and the child, who cannot refer to him. The child is then surrounded by uncertainty.

When the fathers are prevented by mothers from telephoning, they protest vigorously because they believe that it affects the 'psychological needs', the 'affective rights of the children', the 'maintenance of reference to fathers'. This is stated, for example, by a 33-year-old nursing student, who has three children, a 12-year-old son, a nine-year-old son and a seven-year-old daughter, and reflects what many fathers feel when they encounter difficulties in telephoning, or are even prevented from doing so.<sup>1</sup> Is the mother perhaps defending her private space, her relationship with the children, their respective intimacy and unity, or protecting herself from painful reminders of conjugal conflicts? Everyone's private space is to be respected – the ex-wives', the children's – and now not only by the actors concerned, but also by the legal system in its delimitation of the mother's and father's rights and duties, and respect for the child's rights.

Responses to being prevented from telephoning differ and show the various ways in which the boundaries between the private and the public are being defined, as well as the protection systems that surround the child.<sup>2</sup>

'The children cannot speak freely' has become a leitmotif. The problem is identified as the mother. She switches the answering machine on, or she does not pass the telephone to the child readily, or, depending on her mood, switches an amplifier on or listens in on an extension, and thus 'intrudes' into the conversation. The mother is then accused of making telephone relations difficult. These reproaches reflect persistent tensions, as well as fears associated with telephone exchanges following conjugal separation. They also reflect states of mind, and refer to questions about the telephone imaginary in such situations, about the propensity of some men to represent 'the other' who cannot be seen, and about the exercise of power in the relationships with the child, even more so because the father feels he is 'on the outside'. This also reflects the difficulty encountered by parents in allowing the child autonomy and in offering a place to the child which is respected, while respecting the quiet of other individuals who live in the child's private space and the freedom of the father to be able to talk on the telephone without intrusion. The caller may seem to be too far away, and the person who is near the child far too close to him or her.

At all events, the fathers, already feeling negative about the situation as

a whole, find the exchanges difficult. As one father, a 34-year-old film assistant with a five-year-old son,<sup>3</sup> says: 'my wife does not want my child to call me', or 'she curtails the conversation', or 'she imposes strict times'.

The problem was not uncommon in the study. A 50-year-old father<sup>4</sup> with a six-year-old daughter describes the mother's systematic refusal: how she'll make excuses, 'The child is in the bath' or 'gone to visit its grandparents'. A 31-year-old executive,<sup>5</sup> father of a four-year-old son, says 'I can sense his mother behind the phone and sometimes she tells him what to say. It's never a free conversation.' A 33-year-old electronics technician, father of a 10-year-old daughter and a seven-year-old son, says that he phones 'even if their mother doesn't want me to . . . moreover, she listens to the conversations and intervenes or interrupts if she doesn't like what's being said; the children daren't speak freely.' A 37-year-old farmer has a daughter and a son (whose ages he does not specify) who phone him 'often, when their mother is not there'.<sup>6</sup> A 37-year-old railway employee, father of a 14-year-old daughter, describes his situation: 'her mother has such a hold over our daughter that she can't talk to me freely. What's more, her mother listens to her telephone conversations . . . so the calls are short, my daughter isn't very talkative, it's me who keeps our rare conversations going.'<sup>7</sup>

The risk of having to talk to the mother if she answers the phone is also a problem for some fathers, as a 54-year-old engineer, father of a 17-year-old son and a 19-year-old daughter, relates.<sup>8</sup> A 36-year-old plumber says that the mother won't allow his child 'to have phone contact with me'. A 31-year-old soldier, father of an eight-year-old son, describes how 'his mother would hang up when she recognized my voice . . . any kind of communication was impossible'. He has now had custody of his son for a year. He notes: 'His mother has never asked for any news about our son, either by letter or by telephone, although I keep her informed about my new life.' The situation was the same for a 48-year-old engineer, who was not able to phone his three children (by two different mothers); the children now live with him. For a 35-year-old driver, the problem is that his ex-wife's new husband answers the phone, and he is especially reluctant for his stepchild to speak to the father. Another father finds it problematical that his ex-wife's girlfriend answers the phone. In such situations the question of the place and role of the father who is making the call is all the more relevant since his position outside the home marginalizes him and increases his feelings of uselessness, intrusion and being forgotten.

It may seem logical that the freedom and the propensity to telephone are a consequence of the amount of time that the children can spend with their father, but in reality there is no correlation. Just because the father has the child staying with him on a regular basis does not mean that he is able to phone the child often at the mother's home. A father may have his child to stay 110 nights of the year (i.e. every other weekend, as in the case of a truck

driver who lives a kilometre away from his ex-wife's home), and yet telephone contact may not necessarily be possible. A similar case is that of a 50-year-old information manager whose son stays with him 100 nights a year: 'The mother refuses to give her phone number', he says, adding: 'She has the approval of the family judge'.<sup>9</sup>

Another father, a show-business technician, is immensely sad that he cannot phone his seven-year-old son, even though he sees him regularly and has him to stay overnight. When he takes the child back to his mother, he sees 'a hand grab him' and the door close on 'his silhouette'. This inability to phone is particularly difficult because it prohibits any exchange of information and can cause difficulties for the child: 'If he has forgotten his medicine for the weekend, for example, if he has a throat infection, we can't even phone his mother to get the prescription.' He and his partner<sup>10</sup> recall the day when the child phoned 'behind his mother's back' (the event was marked with a cross on the calendar): 'Hi, it's me. I'm phoning you very quickly, I have to hang up.' His dad recalls: 'He wanted to talk to everyone . . . to his two older sisters, who live with me.' Moreover, he adds, 'When he's on holiday for a few weeks with me, his mother never phones'; which is a far cry from the prevalent image of the mother spending all her time on the telephone to get news about her child.

It is clear that under these new situations fathers are extremely keen to assume their role, whatever the age of the child, as is shown by fathers 'who are prevented' from doing so. The specific contemporary circumstances, the new relational dynamics between men and women and the new forms of asserting one's identity lead us to question Lacan's statement (i.e. it is the mother who introduces the father to the child); and even also to ways of resolving the Freudian Oedipus complex.

### Inequalities and Changing Behaviours

The current situation of fathers reveals ambiguities and contradictions. Conventional inequitable behaviours exist alongside changing behaviours. A man's wage is generally still higher than a woman's, and this implies that the man is the householder who has to support the woman and the children. This thinking persists; but at the same time a different way of life, one which may include two wages or the woman's wage plus alimony, in the case of separation, is becoming more and more prevalent. It is clear that factors like the differentiation of wages between men and women, and differences in qualifications, or even the difficulty surrounding employment and pregnancy, are all conducive to inequalities in the home sphere; all the more so because the notion of self-assertion through profession continues to characterize the man more than the woman both in people's minds and in practice. The number of

men who reduce their working hours or take parental leave, or who give up work to look after the child at home, is so small as to be virtually insignificant. Will the reduced working week, as it affects men, lead to a reduction in the inequalities between men and women, given that women are usually the first to work part-time (half or three-quarters)? Will men use their new free time to pay attention to the home space, the child? The father's condition no longer refers to an institutional role or specific authority figure, but fathers' behaviours vary.

These behavioural differences contrast with the unanimous perception of the mother's role – the only question there being whether she should work or not; the mother-child relationship is not discussed, except in its psycho-analytic dimension. The problematics of the devouring mother, the fusional, invading mother who allows no autonomy to the child or any place to the father, are ever present, as are those of the mother who gives her child up, or the cold, unresponsive mother. It is above all with reference to the specificity of the mother-child relationship that such questions are considered, but the importance of this relationship is not discussed in its practical and actual dimensions. The relationship of the father is referred to in its symbolic and separative dimension, as if reference to the separation was a direct opposite of the relationship of proximity. The father's place is the subject of controversy; about whether he should be present or not, in the private space, near the child. The important thing is that he is named, designated, that he has a place and takes it. The controversy lies in the way he takes his place, but it also refers to a fundamental question: what place does society make for him? How do men want to occupy this place, and can they occupy it?

Experts on the father and child, such as Lebovivi, Le Camus or even Hurstel, agree that the father has a place if he intervenes in order to create a separation between mother and child and if he respects the difference between his place and that of the child's mother. What should the content of the father's role be? Should he occupy a more involved place? Maybe there are too many contradictions between equality and the distance between the conjugal and parental, that is to say between the role of the father and of the traditional family institution. Maybe greater involvement is legitimate, because in the name of what can we prevent it? At the same time, the distance between the father and the child has inevitably increased in the course of history. The father's role has become more and more problematic, torn between two extremes. Can a man intervene as the mother does, without compromising his masculinity, and on what grounds should the barriers and resistance be breached, even though the history of fatherhood encourages fathers to withdraw, to maintain a distance? The dynamics are all the more complex as reality breaks up without eliminating this polarity between involvement and withdrawal. Or rather, the father has to rethink his role in his determination to maintain the link between his child and himself.

Nowadays, filiation does not automatically assure that this link between the father and the child is maintained, for two reasons. First, the mode of involvement of the father always leads to questions, due to his exteriority. André Haynal (1995), a psychoanalyst, emphasizes the complexity of the male identity, of the child's wishes, and of the reflex of *couvade*. Second, in the case of conjugal separation the separation procedure may reallocate the roles.

These two aspects are on the increase. Problems in the relationship between the man and the woman directly interfere with the father's function and role. Awareness of his role as parent sharpens on both sides, mother's and father's, but also for the authorities that deal with the child's situation (the legal system, schools, health service, institutions in charge of family affairs and so on). On the one hand, the ability of a person to make a place for the other, and, conversely, the other's ability to occupy that place and role, whatever the conjugal situation, are fundamental.

The father's role, guaranteed in the past by the institution of fatherhood, now depends on human interactions and on the exercise of the law in the allocation of parental authority, and assigning custody and visiting rights in the case of separation. The importance of mediation, being aware of the role of each individual in the child's life, becomes fundamental. It is important, too, to understand the dynamics of the parental functions and changes in the representations and practices of the actors who intervene in the universe of childhood. Conjugal separation may trigger new forms of awareness, as stated by some of the fathers we interviewed, who have come to appreciate how important their children are to them and that they are suffering because they are unable to share in their child's daily life. The father's role, then, takes on a new dimension, and the fathers try to make it an effective one. However, some fathers do not understand their role or want to take it up, whatever the situation. Others would like to take it, but fear that their intervention would traumatize the child's mother. It is necessary, then, to think about alternatives and solutions so that the child can refer, on a regular basis, to a clearly defined parental presence, in order to meet everyone's needs.

In the framework of this contemporary problem of finding one's place and playing one's role as parent, there may arise a situation in which a parent withdraws 'into' or 'upon' the child, and this is new. In a context where the child is no longer very well integrated into the community (except for school), his or her capacity for integration and socialization is questioned.

We are entering an era of turbulence and uncertainty, but also one of new openings and alternatives for freeing ourselves from old models. The search for choices of ways to share a life in common is becoming more and more important, as is the plurality of childrearing models associated with the child's assertion of identity.

## Notes

Translator's note: In this article, the author has used the word 'separated' rather than 'divorced' since the focus is on the separation between the father and the child(ren). Moreover, the parents in this study had not necessarily been married in the first place or else may have been married but were not necessarily divorced despite their living apart.

- 1 The researchers were quite surprised to learn that some fathers, when prevented from ringing their children up, had petitioned the courts or were planning to do so, to obtain the right to telephone or alternatively to have the child phone his or her father at a given time on a given day of the week. A 36-year-old engineer, father of a four-year-old daughter and five-year-old son, intended asking during the next hearing (he had been separated from his partner for 15 months) for the right to phone his children, whom he sees every other weekend and for half the school holidays. Some have won their cases, others have not, in the name of respect for the other party's privacy. Faced with these difficulties, some fathers have given their children pay-phone cards so that they can ring their father up, as did one 46-year-old father who lives alone, over 100 kilometres from his two children, from whom he has been separated for two years. Another father is considering buying a mobile phone for his daughter when she is a little older. She is currently two years old. He is 47 years old, and lives with a new partner, 70 kilometres away. Another father wrote to the head teacher of his son's school to ask if his son could ring him from school, because he could not ring him from home and he (the father) had received no news from him and no response to his letters and gifts.
- 2 It would be interesting to explore this question further, both in its own right and in relation to the telephone.
- 3 He has been separated for one year, lives alone, 15 kilometres away from his son, and sees his child every other weekend when he is not shooting a film.
- 4 A railway mechanic, who has been separated for six years and lives alone, 2 kilometres away from his child.
- 5 He has been separated for two years and lives alone. The mother lives in Switzerland, 5000 kilometres away. He has his child for between 60 and 70 days a year.
- 6 They live 3 kilometres away.
- 7 He has been separated for 12 years, and lives with someone else, 100 kilometres away.
- 8 He has been separated for six years, and lives with someone else, 20 kilometres away.
- 9 He lives 6 kilometres away. He feels particularly bitter because he has taken care of his daughter since she was born: 'I took a year's unpaid leave, the year of her birth, today she's five and a half, I feel capable enough to ask the judge for custody of my daughter.'
- 10 We had spoken over the telephone with his partner, who knew that he had answered the questionnaire.

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