

"Family Feud"

The family has come under increasing scrutiny from those on the left. Danny Blackman, Gill Calvert, Linda Carruthers and Margaret Penson argue that this analysis has not been critical enough.

In this paper we want to challenge the concept of the "family", including concepts held by the left. We would argue that left notions accept traditional definitions of the family and sexuality. We want to attempt to redefine concepts such as the family, parents and incest. As well, we will attempt to link concepts which are familiar in a traditional marxist discourse, such as production and exchange, with an analysis of the relations of reproduction.

A materialist analysis requires that no "facts" can be taken as simply given. This is particularly important in relation to an analysis of the relations of reproduction, with all their effects on the production of gender, class and race.

We do not intend to set out a "strategy", defined as a plan of action. We hope that the processes of analysis, discussion and redefinition of various concepts will lead to the development of conclusions about the politics involved in the struggle around the family and sexuality, and thus to some formulation of possible strategies.

We will ask a series of questions about the family and sexuality which will raise some of the problems about the nature of such concepts.

The Family

One of the defining characteristics of advanced capitalist patriarchal society is the prolonged economic dependence of children and the intense nurturing which is required by the ideology of dependence and helplessness. As well, popular concepts of childhood involve notions of innocence and immaturity

(defined as inability to deal with the "real" world). Most importantly, childhood is privileged as a time (0-14, 0-18) and a space (the household, "in the family") whose characteristics are defined in opposition to the requirements of the relations of production in advanced capitalist patriarchal society.

In 20th century advanced capitalist societies, the family is an ideological construction and a system of organisation around the needs of capitalist patriarchy. Implicit in this is the need, dictated by the nature of capitalist patriarchy, for an "efficient mode of production, to remove functions extraneous to the immediate production, from the site of production".

The family is a site of consumption, in terms of practical consumption — food, clothing, shelter; and is also a system of organisation around the needs of individuals, in terms of erotic and bodily needs. It is also a system of organisation in terms of the ideological construction of motherhood/childhood as developed over the last 150 years.

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In other words, within the family, childhood is defined by dependence, helplessness, but outside the family, the ideology operating in relation to production is competitive individualism. How is this switch made? By what processes?

These processes, and the change from the dependent child to the competitive adult occur during adolescence, during which time there is an acting out of the contradictions between the values of the family and the values of society. Adolescents have to maintain relationships with both the family and society, and the family has an investment in the adolescent as a child, until independence is achieved.

One should be aware of the space that pre-school children occupy in the household, and the ideological production they serve in the "family". The family, by definition, *nurturing, safe, caring and protective*, and sometimes *co-operative*, exists in relation to the requirements of childhood.

Significantly, childhood and the values which support its ideological production, must exist totally outside the world of material production. Children, like mothers, are *natural beings* whose existence and needs are presumed to be self-evident. For women, the needs of children and their absence from the world of production serve to create an ideological construction of motherhood as *non-*



productive, but socially necessary. As well, children and mothers are involved in a relationship whose characteristic values are necessarily at variance with those defined as necessary for the world of work (production) and politics (power). The values necessary to support economic and social independence and control for the individual in capitalist patriarchal societies are precisely those from which the child is "sheltered". "the family" is a refuge. Thus, dependency must equal powerlessness, and nurturing is something women do in relation to children. Adulthood and independence are dependent upon both paid employment and the internalisation of values which are at variance with those defined in motherhood and childhood.

The idealisation of childhood and its privileged position in relation to the world of work and politics is necessary to the idealisation of the world of work and politics as both "adult" and "male". Both exist as polar opposites in reference to "natural beings", i.e. children and women. The absence of

children from paid employment for longer periods over the last 200 years is seen as one of the marks of a progressive society, and the abolition of child labour a feature of progressive social arrangements. The contradictions inherent in this are threefold. First, it has been accompanied by the rise of the ideology of motherhood. Secondly, it has served to increase and elaborate the distinctions between the private and the public, between the family and society, between young and old, female and male. And, thirdly, it has led to production being solely defined in terms of the production of goods and services which have exchange value, further removing vast amounts of socially necessary labour from the discourse of political economy.

For the left, the ideological struggle against oppressive and exploitative social arrangements requires redefinition of the terms and concepts around which ideology is structured. "Children" and "mothers" are as much ideological concepts as "wages" and "profit".

The exclusion of children from "work", i.e. paid employment, in capitalist patriarchy serves to reinforce the notion that only wage labour confers "independence", and thus only those in paid employment "should" have any personal autonomy or control — attitudes to children and the realities of their position are not far removed from those towards people on welfare and women workers in the domestic economy.

Women and Reproduction — OR — Wouldn't Technological Reproduction Mean Women's Liberation?

Twentieth century capitalist patriarchal society operates to isolate the realm of reproduction from the realm of production by the construction of sexuality and individualised notions of sexuality.

Reproduction exists within social relationships which encompass both material production and political power. Hitherto, in patriarchal society, the relationship of women to the social and political structure has been through their exclusive ability to bear children. Without women, no society as such could be imagined or, at least, not one that was extended in time. The technical ability to reproduce people outside women's bodies raises the question of women's relationships to society. Women exist in capitalist patriarchy within the ideological functions of reproduction. Given that technology is produced within capitalist patriarchal relations of production and, as such, represents class and gender power, we need to analyse whose interests are served by the drive to make human reproduction a technological feat.

At first, it would seem that test-tube babies and in vitro fertilisation have been a humane scientific response to the needs and demands of childless women. That is, they locate women who may have been outcasts in society back into that society. Criticisms of the in vitro fertilisation program have been met with the response that the critics are denying women the fulfilment of their desire for motherhood. In fact, the programs so far have been mainly attacked by the

Right-to-Lifers and the Church generally; feminists and the left have not hitherto formed a large part of the public discourse around these issues. The public discourse has perforce been limited and there is considerable need to address the underlying assumptions around reproduction and women's oppression.

Ideology of Reproduction

To a certain degree the notion that women's greatest burden is their exclusive ability to bear children is an assumption that is shared by both reactionaries and some radical feminists. Thus, Shulamith Firestone, in her *Dialectic of Sex* (1970), posited the idea that technological reproduction would remove the basic impediment to women's economic, social and political liberation. This was argued in a context where the subordination of women's labour power to male control was seen as the result of the necessary dependence of women, during late pregnancy and early nurturing, on males for food and sustenance. Thus male power and control was established around a biological fact, i.e. that women bear children — and sexism itself is seen to be almost a natural outcome of nature's arrangements.

The reactionary right agree that women's reproductive abilities confer on them a special place in society and argue that women should stick to it. The two positions differ considerably but they share a common thread of biological determinism.

Given that masculinity is constructed as the polar opposite of femininity (i.e. men are "not women") and women are defined as beings (not necessarily human) who have babies, the technological reproduction of embryos outside the uterus threatens several different contradictions. If men can now make babies "scientifically", are they now both father and mother? If women are not necessary for reproduction, what are they?

Hitherto, the sexual politics of reproduction have both deprived women of power and conferred power on them within restricted domains. Thus, "motherhood", with its rights, responsibilities and duties, has

conferred power of a particular kind in families. Publicly, the Education Department and the medical establishment appeal around certain issues to the interests of parents (i.e. mothers) in relation to discourses over the control, socialisation and health of children. Women's political power, such as it is, arises therefore around their undeniable links with reproduction. Once that link is severed, or is in the process of being altered, so are the domains in which women enter public discourse.

All this is, of course, speculative; what is not a matter of speculation is that technology is controlled by and produced in the interests of capitalist patriarchy. Seen in this context, the project of men providing women with the technology to fulfil women's supposed destiny should give cause for concern.

Definition of Family

We need to see the question of incest and the incest taboo as inseparable from assumptions about sex, children, families, power and the construction of gender identity. Although it is generally agreed that incest is widespread and far more common than its reported incidence, estimates of its occurrence vary widely from 10 percent to 40 percent of all families. What is not in dispute is that, as defined, 98 percent of reported incestuous contacts involve father/child abuse and, of these, 10-25 percent are father/son and 75-90 percent are father/daughter.

Issues in relation to incest include the questions of how families are defined, how they are organised, and what the differences are between "love" and "sex".

The incest taboo is a basic principle for the organisation of men, women and children into families. Thus, families are defined as groups of people, relationships between whom *must* be non-sexual, except for that between husband and wife. When incest occurs in families it disorganises the concept of the family (leaving aside for the moment its effects on its victims). Furthermore, particular

social roles such as mother, father, child, aunt, uncle, etc. are defined solely in terms of a series of prohibited sexual contacts.

Within these prohibitions, however, is a series of mandatory physical contacts which are organised in ways serving to support notions about the differences between male and female sexuality, and about the role of mothers and fathers.

The incest taboo organises sexuality and is defined as *sexual* contact between brother/sister, daughter/mother, mother/son, father/daughter, father/son — contact within the immediate family, as it were.

The construction of motherhood has been a process over the last 150 years of intensified physical and emotional involvement between mother and child. Thus, mothers have responsibility for, and are expected to take pleasure in, the physical aspect of the mother/child axis. Toilet-training, washing, general caressing and medical interventions are carried out by the mother on the child. The child, male and female, is "introduced" to its body by the mother via the practices of mothering. The relationship is highly physical, particularly in the early years, for both sexes, but can continue in a particular way between mothers and daughters for much longer. What is pertinent about this relationship is that it is defined as "non-sexual". It is non-sexual precisely because it is women who perform these tasks, and women are not seen as having an independent sexual identity. Their sexuality is only allowed to exist in relation to adult males, i.e. it only exists in a context dependent upon responding to the "other". The erotic aspect of the mother/child relationship is buried beneath the ideology of "pure mother-love". Given that the relationship is erotically charged, it is also characterised by power and powerlessness, both the power of the mother over the child, and her relative powerlessness in relation to the wider social and political framework in which the mother/child axis exists.

Fathers have no emotional role in relation to children; as a practice, fathering has not yet been invented.

For fathers, there is no equivalent ideological construction to motherhood.

We need to ask what would be the effects on mothering and notions of childhood, if fathering were constructed.

Motherhood is, by definition, non-sexual, and the sexual relationship with the father/husband may or may not be satisfying, or even exist but, within the framework of heterosexism, it is the only one that *should* exist.

Relationships between parents and children are characterised by an extensive mythology which includes the following:

- Parents don't have and therefore don't act on their sexual feelings for children.
- Sexual love is not about power. Real "love" dissolves power differences and renders such differences harmless.
- Parent/child love is a "pure" form of love and the power differences between parents and children are absolutely neutralised by the fact that parents "love" their children.
- Children don't have any sexuality.
- Real parents don't commit incest, because parents aren't sexual in relation to children.

These myths provide clues as to what the nature of the incest taboo consists of.

The question of incest has been raised in this context because of the light it sheds on the definition of the family. By definition, incest exists in relation to relations of domination and powerlessness. Therefore, it cannot be seen as in any way "progressive" to advocate the overthrow of the incest taboo as a strategy for overcoming what is an effect of the construction of sexuality and power within capitalist patriarchy and the interlocking network of relations of domination that accompany it.

Relocation of the Family

The satisfaction of the needs determined by and determining capitalist patriarchy *changes* the role of the family in this form of organisation.



Women are now being drawn into more direct relationships with capitalism through their resumption into the paid workforce; the relations of their unpaid work within the family are changed as well with the ready provision of, and the need for reliance on, takeaway food, laundromats, etc.

Patriarchy has also partly relocated control away from individual males in the family to broader forms of social control available through paid employment or the welfare state, and to other areas such as mass media advertising and the pornography industry.

Paid employment not only provides women with money, which increases their bargaining position inside the household (a shift in power relations), but it also increases the range of social contacts available to them: that is, other women and men outside the household.

There needs to be an analysis of the ways in which men's and women's erotic needs are controlled and organised by the family and other forms of social organisation, for example, work and leisure.

Such an analysis should include an examination of the fact that, in this society, women's erotic relationships are becoming "divorced" completely

from reproduction. This would need to include an examination of the reintegration of women into a new form of heterosexuality through consumption and economic independence ideology. The "new" women's magazines like *Cleo* and *Cosmo* provide a good example of the nature of this integration.

The "family" in capitalist patriarchy exists in *relation* to work and politics in different ways over time, and in different *classes*, but it exists as a form of organisation *along* with other forms.

The left should be wary of privileging the family as the only, or the most important, site of construction of gender and class relationships.

Within the framework of the points and questions raised, we would challenge left notions of the family and sexuality. In terms of strategies, one of the first requirements is to develop adequate and historically relevant definitions and concepts.

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