There is a more subtle level in which this is true as well. While there are still some sectors of the work force that are kept in line by direct authoritarian control on the work floor, labour militancy is increasingly undermined by the workers themselves who are encouraged to internalise feelings about themselves that make them feel powerless.

The family, in all its many forms, is the key institution for passing on the accumulated heritage of our humanity, our wisdom, our loving, and our passions. Because it is critical to the lives of most of us (even those who do not see themselves as currently in a “family” often spend much of their psychic energy trying to resolve issues that were raised in their families of origin), we cannot simply abandon this terrain to the right and its cynical attempts to manipulate the issue for their own partisan gain.

Our concern about the family comes from an understanding that it is an important part of our humanity, and that the attachment that most people feel to it is based in part on their hopes for the future, their vision of what a good life could be, and their commitment to giving to their children the best that they can. Our interest in families is not merely instrumental in terms of dealing with the mass psychology of the right, but also flows from a deep understanding of the pivotal role that families play in the transmission of values and vision to the next generations. Because of this stewardship for the future, we have to fight for the best and most liberatory vision of what family life can be, and to fight for those changes in the society that could make that vision actual.

Within the ambit of the general discussion on the topic, Margo Moore, Judy Mundey and Joyce Stevens in “Changing the Family, Changing our Politics” present a somewhat different point of view to that expressed in “Bringing It All Back Home”.

Changing the Family, Changing our Politics

by Margo Moore, Judy Mundey and Joyce Stevens

Australia is in the process of an economic restructuring which is throwing up tremendous problems and dislocations in people’s lives. The present rate of unemployment, homelessness, high rents and interest rates, and the threat of a severe depression, the lack of amenities and social services in the new boom towns are just some of these problems. Politically, government is supporting the new capitalist development and withdrawing what little social support there is. Ideologically, the withdrawal of social support systems is being justified by blaming the breakdown of the traditional family for such problems as violence, homelessness, inability to get work and emotional instability.

Since the breakdown of the family is said to be the cause of such problems, obviously the capitalist solution must lie in reconstituting and strengthening family structures so that private profit can be maximised and social responsibility in such areas as education, health, child care, care of the aged and disabled, transport, etc., can be shifted back into the family at the expense, mainly, of women.

While the economy is not the final determinant of changes in personal and family relationships, these two structures intersect and help to shape one another. Powerful vested interests in the hierarchies of churches and the political right have long been the moral guardians and defendants of
the traditional family and they become more virulent and combative at times when economic and social dislocation might lead people to search for more radical solutions to difficulties in the public and private spheres of life.

In 1931, with rapidly expanding unemployment and a sharp decline in fertility rates, the Sane Democracy League called for the Australian public to "put on all the armour of God to wage the fight in defence of religion, home and family against the communist menace". Today's Right to Life, Festival of Light and Santamarias use, as a central pivot in their struggle against the left, a similar call to defend the family. Because of the inroads made by feminism and fertility control, they add to their crusade the defence of "the unborn child".

While most people on the left can perceive the reactionery politics of Santamaria's general analysis, it is still easy to be tempted to view the right's pro-family politics as the expression of the real needs of people based on their discontent with the dehumanising and degrading aspects of daily life. There is a desire for security and warmth in personal relationships and it is all too easy to think that this is realisable within the traditional family.

Any analysis of the relationship between men and women, the structure of the family and the ideological practices which take place within it in advanced capitalist countries, must quickly come up against the fundamental inequalities which exist between men and women, and the oppressive power relationships which stem from them and which are reflected in all aspects of our lives. No structure, including the family, can provide for positive human needs and values unless this oppression is attacked and overcome.

The oppression of women is an essential element in the structure of the traditional family and contributes to the needs of capital at work as well as at home. Any socialist transformation of society, then, must involve a fundamental change in the nature of the family as we currently understand it.

In this article we are attempting to look at some of the ideological practices in the family which help to produce and support prevailing sex, race and class practices, particularly as they relate to attempts at economic restructuring, and at some of the suggestions about how the left might respond to the fears and crises that are evident today in family and personal life.

Family and class

The family does not, of course, exist independently of other social relations but it is beyond the scope of this article to address in detail the effects of class on family structures and practices. It is also difficult to present a clear picture of what the "ideal" Australian family looks like. If we could rely on the media and advertising it would consist of a man and woman with two children, living in their own home in the suburbs, with the woman giving at least a part of her life to fulltime housework and child care. Yet, even in the 1950s, when a "home in the suburbs" became a reality for large numbers of working class people, the house and accompanying commodities were only made accessible by the involvement of increasing numbers of married women in the paid workforce.

By 1975-76, two-parent families where a mother stayed home fulltime with dependent children represented only 20 percent of all Australian families, and less than half of all families with dependent children. In over 50 percent of Australian families there were no dependent children, and there were more two-income families than single ones. (Australian Bureau of Statistics)

The changed economic status of many women inside and outside the family that this reflects has also been accompanied by some loosening of patriarchal structures in the family, particularly in those where women's educational and economic status are more viable. The right focusses on these factors and the small measure of control that women have gained in the areas of reproduction and sexuality to assert that these are the basic causes of disruption and dissatisfaction in the family and personal life.
They choose to ignore the fact that the “ideal” family is not accessible to most without the involvement of women in paid work, that past sources of “individual satisfaction” within the family have been founded on a sexual division of labour which still informs family practices and comes into sharp contradiction with women’s participation in paid work. This division of labour is a base, and a powerful source of dissatisfaction and disunity in personal relations as well as in the arena of public activity and politics.

The sexual division of labour and sexism in the family

Historically, the roles of men and women within the family have been linked with the part women play in reproduction, though this fact alone does not explain why men’s work in the outside world has come to be more highly valued than that of women in child rearing, housework and nurturing. The division of labour in the family, however, now seems to many people to be founded on some natural urge on the part of women to nurture and be mothers, and for men to go into the wilderness and perform valiant feats. These ideas have given rise to a view of what constitutes maleness and femaleness that pervades everyday practices, culture and ideology.

Men, therefore, are supposedly strong, competitive, aggressive, born adventurers and explorers, rational and unemotional and fitted for work in the outside world. In striving to fulfil their preordained destiny most men fit neatly into the competitive, acquisitive roles in production and consumption that help to keep capitalism functioning, even at times when it is being torn apart by its own contradictions. Work becomes an essential part of maleness so that unemployment is not only a financial disaster for many, but an emotional and psychic crisis which hinders political and social solutions to this problem. While unemployment grows, many men will work long hours for high pay, sometimes at the behest of high mortgage rates and other repayments, but always, ostensibly, in the interests of “the family”.

In fact, these practices cast women and children into a world of their own, or one where contact with father or husband is mediated by the mateship of work, sport and alcohol. Thus, struggles for a shorter work week are not seen as a way to help overcome unemployment or expand personal life, but as an opening to more overtime. Where militant delegates, eg, in the Pilbara, agitate for shorter hours, and it appears to threaten this “work ethic”, they suffer defeat, while personal life becomes more and more restricted, violent and in crisis.

The focusing of men’s lives into the arena of public life and away from effective contact with nurturing and child care expands men’s potential for violence and aggression. While economic and other social factors contribute to violence in our society, the separation of male socialisation from nurturing and child care (which appear to be the most effective areas at present for developing practices of concern for the welfare of others) increases male violence and rape, particularly within the family.

Women, on the other hand, are supposedly weak, submissive, inward looking and caring, born mothers, irrational and emotional and fitted for work in the family circle. If they go outside to paid work this is also related to
their functions in the family so that the sexual division of labour is extended into paid work.

For the nearly 43 percent of married women who are in the paid workforce, this means two jobs and, for most women, a lifetime of caring for others at home and at work who, in return, are often violent, sexually aggressive, and emotionally unsupportive. While “motherhood” is extolled as the foundation of civilisation, women are expected, and many accept, that they will be the “power behind the throne” rather than actor centre stage. So that, even when women enter paid work, many continue to see themselves as mainly responsible for personal relations and unable to act in public life, and part-time work is seen as an increasingly appropriate resolution of their difficulties. This is reinforced by a labor movement and political parties which refuse to acknowledge the direct connections between the problems in public and personal life, and part-time work is seen as an increasingly appropriate resolution of their difficulties. This is reinforced by a labor movement and political parties which refuse to acknowledge the direct connections between the problems in public and personal life, and part-time work is seen as an increasingly appropriate resolution of their difficulties.

Those who extol traditional family life are often the same people who blame women for family breakdowns and the social consequences. Yet big changes have taken place in socialisation which make it impossible for the individual family to provide the living skills necessary for a modern world. Child-care centres, schools and peer groups have made enormous changes in family relations. Today’s electronic media — TV, radio and records — exert an influence and occupy more time than most family interactions. They enjoy a large space in child-rearing and are new avenues for the promotion of values which support capitalism and patriarchy.

While many women go into paid work because of economic difficulties, and some would prefer to stay at home, changes in the family have made fulltime family life an even more unrewarding and damaging experience for many women and children. These difficulties won’t be resolved unless policies are advanced that strike at the basis of the unequal sexual relations inside and outside the traditional family.

Individualism

Most psychological theories view people as primarily egocentric, and focus on the development of individual egos. In such a theory the relationship of mother to child in the formation of a new individual is of paramount importance. There is little emphasis on the examination of people as social animals who are subjected to a complex cultural structure within which they have a clearly defined place. There is much emphasis on such instinctual drives as “bonding”, “maternal attachment”, etc.

The isolation of children in the family, often alone with their mothers for the first 3-5 years of life, severely restricts their ability to form close social ties with a number of people. It forms a basis for the isolation and separateness many people feel in society while at the same time providing the only theoretical model for overcoming such isolation.

On the surface, then, the family may be seen as a collective response to individual loneliness in dealing with the world.

It is seen, not only as a retreat from the harsh realities of the outside world, but also as a place where people can have control over their lives, unlike at work. In reality, the authoritarian nature of relationships in the family and the sexual oppression of women by men mean that control in the family (as in the workplace) is enjoyed mainly by the most powerful. This has produced enormous conflicts between people in those relationships, so that their dreams of security and self-realisation cannot be achieved. The increasing frustration thus produced means that the family, rather than being a retreat, helps to produce personal violence, especially against women and children.

The forms of control within the family from
The "romantics" of the eighteenth century advocated "love" and "equality" between women and men as the foundation of marriage at a time when a sharper division between public and private life was taking place. While this had progressive aspects, its success rested on an idealised concept of motherhood and the possibilities for personal and sexual fulfilment within monogamous marriage. It gave rise to ideas such as "somewhere there is the right person for you", that man and woman as individuals are incomplete until joined together and that "somehow things will work out".

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father to mother to children also stress the individual and authoritarian rather than the collective and co-operative. The privatisation of personal relationships and institutions.... my wife, my children, my house.... provides a distorted mirror image to the private ownership of the means of production.

The myth of the family as a private domain where real choices and decisions can be made supports the arguments that public money should not be spent on such things as child care or health, and make it difficult for people to fight for these things as their right.

**Romantic love**

The notion of marriage based on romantic love is a relatively modern concept, appearing in British history in the middle of the eighteenth century. Up till then, marriage had been based on the widely-held view that any two people of similar class and cultural background might form lasting personal relationships.

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The "success" of romantic love in marriage in fact rested on sexual double standards and the giving over of women to the domain of domesticity as their fulltime occupation, though this has never been fully realised in all working-class families. The romanticising of love has obscured the difficulties and potential that exist in all freely chosen personal relationships if they are formed between equals free of economic and sexual coercion.
Political Responses to the Family

It also blurs the fact that fulfilment in personal life depends, to a large extent, on other economic and social factors such as the possibilities for personal enjoyment in paid work and leisure. The failures in personal life that come from economic and social discrimination, authoritarianism and alienation at work can thus be made to look as though they are the failures of "romance" and "love", ie, individual failings.

Romance and love are also seen as women's payment for child-rearing and the nurturing of men. Motherhood is romanticised so that many women see it as their life's purpose while this expectation in today's shifting world moves further and further from real experiences.

The media exploits and reinforces these ideas in passive fantasies such as the Marlboro Man, Star Wars and the images of women in advertising. This not only affects the way we behave in our personal life, but contributes to passivity in public life and romanticised solutions such as "when the time is right a great leader will appear".

Sexuality

As we are not born with a formed sexuality but have it shaped in the family and in interaction with social practices outside the family, sexuality reflects the ideas of individualism, romanticism and sexism.

The effect of this is that the dominant ideas about sexuality and eroticism are directed towards male-defined pleasure and reproduction, long past the time when birth control could make it independent, and when knowledge about women's sexuality has established that their sexual pleasure is not necessarily connected to penis penetration. The sexual objectification of women, their exclusion from male networks, sexual harassment and the threat of rape form effective barriers to equal participation in public and private life.

The recognition of homosexuality, and particularly lesbianism, challenges traditional attitudes to men's control of sexuality. Shared knowledge about female sexuality also provides the possibilities for political struggle inside heterosexual relationships.

Because, however, of unrecognised and unresolved conflicts in people's sexual lives, sexuality is promoted in an unrealistic way which divorces it from other social relationships. Thus, many people's expectations founder on a search for a sexual and personal life that is perpetually orgasmic and "exciting".

While the development of more reliable (if still not safe) contraceptives has produced the promise of an extended eroticism in the lives of women and men, this comes into conflict with the "boredom" many experience in ongoing monogamous relationships. The commercialisation and sale of sex and eroticism as commodities, however, provides no acceptable alternative for most women and many men who strive for sexual relationships that have some ongoing and permanent component. Pornography and violent sex, which dehumanises women and sexuality, is offered to a mainly male audience while romanticised love in marriage (Mills and Boon et al) to a mainly female one. While these ideas play a large part in structuring people's relationships, personal life for many will remain in crisis.

These contradictions within the family do not mean that there can be no place where personal relationships might be developed or where children could be nurtured in a supportive framework. Many people feel understandably terrified at the idea that life might promise little else but the workplace (or dole cheques) and personal loneliness. A significant minority have already moved out of the traditional family structures into child and job sharing, communal living, house sharing and homosexual households, while many more continue the struggle to reshape relations within the traditional family. Perhaps the historical tenacity of the family in its many forms is not only an expression of the need for satisfying personal relationships and nurturing, but also suggests that it may be an essential venue for the struggle to resolve contradictions between the needs of the
individual and those of the wider community. However, solutions which leave untouched, or shore up, the economic and sexual oppression of women, and the division of labour in public and private life, will be at best temporary and, in the long-run, create even greater conflicts even though the shapes that familial relationships may take in the future are far from clear.

It is, however, constructive to note that the current rightwing offensive is an attempt (too often effective) to make up ground lost to them during the 1960s and '70s. During these years there were big changes in attitudes towards a wide range of social practices. Forms of control were not only challenged in the family, but also in the school, at the workplace, in the community at large and in relations with the environment. For a short while, the attention of the Whitlam government to schemes such as the Australian Assistance Plan reflected demands for decentralised forms of control which also tackled grassroots problems. Such changes in traditional forms of authority and control are not made without dislocation and always bring forth sharp reactions from the right.

Yet "dislocation" and "disruption" — workers’ participation and control of industry, student and parent involvement in non-authoritarian public education, the challenge to traditional practices within the family, and a control of the environment not designed for gross exploitation by multinationals — are all part of the struggle for a socialist alternative and changed priorities in the economic sphere. If the right is able to extend conservatism and authoritarianism as a way out of the present social and personal difficulties, then the socialist movement will be further weakened.

The left and labor movement are vulnerable on these questions because many of their policies remain pious words on paper, and because many of the men who could help change the priorities benefit from the labour of women at home, in union offices, and in segregated areas of the paid workforce.

The right plays on this vulnerability by trying to separate the practice of traditional authority in the family from practices in other areas. But they realise only too well that the ideology which supports control there extends into other areas of political practice. The resolution of contradictions that today tear personal relationships apart depends on a strong and active women’s movement, and the left showing, in practice, their concern for problems in personal life. Campaigns for shorter work hours need to be accompanied by demands for shared housework and child care. Lack of employment for women in developing areas, alongside of unlimited overtime for men, can be attacked as detrimental to all forms of personal relationships. Attacks by the right on women’s access to safe contraception and abortion is a priority issue and the recent defeat of a pro-abortion policy in the ACOA a defeat for the whole left.

Community programs directed towards the problems of child care, the aged, the handicapped, with shared community control can also challenge traditional forms of control while tackling everyday problems. The linking of demands for control at the workplace with control over community activities, consumer involvement in health and education programs can all form a constructive response to rightwing attacks and point towards a socialist alternative for Australia.