ALL QUIET ON THE HOME FRONT? The Contradictions of Family Life

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The New Right’s economic and industrial policies have attracted far more attention in the Australian media than their social and family policies. Lower taxes will, however, require lower state expenditure on social welfare programs. The burden of the “reduced” state expenditure on welfare will fall on people with lower incomes. Women, Aboriginal people, recent migrants, people with disabilities, and what can be called multiple minority groups, will be hardest hit as the “family” is asked to replace the state as the chief source of welfare.

Following the example of conservative governments overseas, Australian politicians have begun to use the slogan “community care” as the code for welfare cuts. The family is the institution that has absorbed the shocks of these cuts as real wages fall, the social wage is cut and unemployment continues at a high level. In December 1986, the Liberal Party announced its family policy with loud concern for single-income, two-parent families. The Nationals have always promoted themselves as the party of family and nation. Joh Bjelke-Petersen combines a patriarchal style with sentimental appeals to the value of the family for the nation.

Labor has been quick to assert family values, especially in NSW where Premier Unsworth hopes that a return to the values of the 1950s will solve a multitude of social problems. He remembers them as family-centred; others remember other aspects of the
'50s — racism, the cold war, the invisibility and isolation of women, illegal abortion, hard-to-get contraception, the repression of homosexuals, and the general suppression of non-conformity. The left needs to mount a coherent challenge to the sentimental appeal to the family which is being used to justify a range of service cuts.

The debate about the social role of the family is an old one, given new focus by the feminist analysis of the oppression of women. Their challenge to the sexual division of labour in the household as the “cornerstone of society” was viewed by many as an attack on the collectivist values of family life and as a support for the worst excesses of economic individualism in the market. Since few social critics seem to imagine that production relations can be changed, they fear that changes in family relations will destroy the values of personal loyalty, mutual sharing, spontaneous emotion and nurturance.

Despite the changing material conditions of family life — married women in the workforce, fathers assuming some domestic responsibilities, reliable fertility control, increasing divorce rates — the left has not developed an analysis with sufficient power to challenge the call to save the family and thus civilisation as we know it. Traditional left (particularly marxist) theory and activism have accepted the same division of life into the separate spheres of public and private as the bourgeois liberalism that it opposes.

When socialists attacked the economic and public politics of capitalism they pulled back from an equally strong challenge to the power relations of sex and age in private life. In Australia, the call to “save the family” is not yet as shrill as in the United States, nor used as blatantly to cut social services as in the United Kingdom, but it exists. Both Labor and non-Labor politicians and parties assert the importance of the family in ways that are socially conservative.

The sexual division of labour in the “ideal” family makes the power relations in ordinary families seem “natural” and hence outside the realm of political struggle. Yet as closer look at the reality of family life reveals many contradictions, not only between the ideal and the lived experience, but between the ideal and the conditions which are supposed to make it possible. It is through an exploration of the contradictions that the power of the family as an ideological weapon in class struggle is most clearly revealed. Further consideration of the contradictions can form the basis of the analysis needed to confront the call to “save the family” with an acceptable range of ways to live that support human relationships without supporting capitalist or patriarchal power relations.

There are at least six separate contradictions which combine in various ways in individual lives.

* The “ideal” family is assumed to be the goal or experience of everyone, but this is demonstrably not the case.
* The family is the site of both the protection and the oppression of individuals.
* Private life is supposed to enhance individuality, but it is structured to produce conformity.
* Parenthood is both fulfilling and limiting.
* In liberal democratic states all citizens are free, but male homosexuals and women, whether straight or lesbian, are not to exercise that freedom with their bodies.
* The family is in the realm of private life yet the state intervenes regularly to maintain a particular family form.

Ideologues of the family have used the positive values expressed in the first half of these contradictions to enforce the power relations revealed by the second half. At the same time, they use a variety of social controls, including repressive morality, to deny the existence of any contradiction at all. Activists and writers within the left and sexual liberation movements have tended to emphasise the negative half of the statements and ignore the positive half. Meanwhile, whoever is in government tries to assert the values of the first half while developing policies to cope with the worst abuses of the second half.

One problem with the development of policies to deal with families is the lack of a precise definition of “family”. It is used in political speeches more for emotional effect than with a specific meaning (Indeed, the very vagueness of definition is the reason for the strength of “family” as a symbol.) It can be used to represent a range of desirable and positive human experiences. It also represents a set of social relationships based on biology which seem to locate an individual in society, to form the foundation of personal identity. It is a concept that is both abstract and concrete, “the” family and “my” family. In these various contradictions
the meaning of the concept slips between those two poles of meaning. The inability of individuals to live the ideal is blamed on the individuals by the right and on the ideal by the left. Both are partially correct, both are wrong.

Individuals do not live up to the ideal because they cannot; lived experience is not abstract, but particular, continually reconstructed by individual desire; social structures that order relations of race, class and gender; accidents of health and illness; personal ties of love and duty. The ideal, while impossible, is nevertheless a widely recognised expression of the human desire for intimacy, reliable support, a sense of belonging in the world, the opportunity for power and control in some aspect of life, the possibility of reciprocal relationships. Political rhetoric depends on the way meaning can slip from one level to another, but political analysis should not.

In contrast to the alienation of industrial production relations, the family has long been recognised as a reliable support for individual people, but with different effects on women and men. The family as a haven from the harsher aspects of the workforce for men relies on the domestic labour of women. The increased visibility of women in the paid workforce is making this division of labour untenable. For a variety of reasons, few women, even those with young children, remain totally outside the paid workforce for a significant amount of time.

Part-time and casual work fulfil needs for money and adult company and, at the same time, the demand that family life be conducted as if women are at home the entire time. Such work also maintains the other important aspect of the prevailing ideology of the family — it allows the woman to make less money than the man. The woman and children then remain financially dependent on the man, and he can use the greater financial contribution to justify a lesser contribution to domestic labour.

In the mother-at-home-father-at-work model of family life, women and men are held together by the apparently complementary roles they play. The woman provides the pleasant environment for the children and man. It is her skill at mothering which produces well-socialised, hardworking citizens. The model does not include the needs of the mother for adult companionship and ongoing emotional support. While men are not expected to either provide that support for women or to relinquish their needs for the companionship of other adults when they become fathers, they are under considerable pressure to be “good providers”. One piece of popular “wisdom” these days accounts for the high rate of marriage breakdown as a result of the inability of young married couples to manage the financial obligations implied by the model of family life that depends on male breadwinning and female emotional support. It seems as if the oppressive demands of the model are contrary to the conditions necessary for the protection of individuals.

The expression of individuality in private life is the repeated message of advertising. The exclusion of government or other outside forces from the family home is a compelling demand of the political right. The experience of sexuality produces the tension between demands for privacy and individual self-expression and the expectations of conformity to a recognised social pattern more acutely than most other aspects of human life.

Sexuality is held out as the most individual expression of the self by a variety of popular commentators in diverse media. Still, the practices that can be loosely categorised as procreative heterosexuality remain the basis for the model of acceptable sexuality. Married or committed, adult, child-rearing, monogamous, male-female couples engage in sexual activity with the goal of male ejaculation with his penis enclosed in her (preferably orgasmic) vagina.

While few outside the socially conservative part of the political right require all of these characteristics for acceptable sex, elements remain in the thinking of many people. Consider the writing about AIDS and other STDS that suggests monogamy as the only reliable form of “safe sex” and implies that illness is in some way deserved. Think of the failure of imagination of those who wonder how lesbians “do it”. Then there is the repeated advice to “finish her off” after the man’s orgasm.

While the definitions of acceptable sexual practices narrow the range of possible forms of self expression, so does the social organisation of daily life. A couple
living in a small suburban house with young children or an ageing parent has little time or privacy for extended sexual exploration. Teenagers living with their parents are often unable to have their sexual experiences at home in their own beds; they may not have their own rooms, so even masturbation may be limited. The patterns of work and transport to work further reduce an individual's opportunity (and energy) for sexual activities. Personal happiness and self discovery are held out as the rewards of private, as opposed to public, life but the conditions of personal experience are often socially rather than individually determined.

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Given the current organisation of economic and political activity, there are few opportunities for adults to be responsible for the supervision of an exciting project. Being a parent is a project which seems open to all. There is real pleasure in watching a child grow; the growth is testimony to the success of the parent in providing for the needs of the child. Many experts have seized on these pleasures and on the uncertainty of many parents about the needs of children to set up models for “proper” parenting. It is not only the moral right which provides these models; the state and assorted welfare and health experts are deeply implicated in the social structuring of parenthood.

The foundations of these various models are the same, though those of progressive welfare workers usually admit of more variations. The basis is a father at work and a mother at home, an individual family home, a collection of consumer durables in each house, and the sacrifice of certain parental dreams and ambitions for the sake of the children. The model then takes on a moral imperative with the suggestion that the only “good”parent is the one who conforms to the particulars of the current variation on the basic model, thus limiting further the lives of people caring for dependent children.

Some limitations of parenthood are immediately clear — less time and money for personal use, a day patterned by the needs of the child — and most people accept them as part of parenting. But other limitations fall unequally on women and men. The ideology of motherhood seems to require maternal, not parental, responsibility for every action of the child from toilet training to drug use. Women often feel they must accept the role of social police imposed by some experts; it may also be the only way they can exercise social power. Fathers may find that their duty to provide financial support is in conflict with the risks involved in changing their working conditions, whether by changing jobs or by taking industrial action. Women in paid work face similar conflicts and the continued burden imposed by the ideology of motherhood.

In addition, political activity, particularly radical activity, becomes more difficult for women and men when they have children. Not only are there child care and transport problems, but the popular notions of “good parenthood” work against active political participation. The mother is not so likely to be leading demonstrations for abortion services or gay rights; the charge of “bad mother” could follow. The father might be able to spend several nights a week at meetings; it is less likely that she could. Far too many people on the left share aspects of this definition of parenthood that precludes radical political activism, and far too few develop analyses or campaigns that address the experience of adults as mothers and fathers as well as workers.

One of the basic tenets of liberal democracy is that the individual possesses his body in the same way he possesses property. The use of “he” is intentional because women do not have possession of their bodies under any legal code in Australia. Abortion is a crime except in South Australia where, by law, two doctors must certify the necessity of the operation. The practice is somewhat different. Contraceptives cannot be openly advertised in most states. This seems to be changing with the rehabilitation of the condom as a public health measure. (Spermicides also seem to offer some protection against sexually transmitted diseases — maybe they will be rehabilitated, too!) Poor women are still pressured to undergo sterilisation, regardless of their desire for children.

This repression of women is justified by the moral right on the grounds that it saves the family. It “saves” the family by compulsion, by reinforcing male authority over women, whether by husbands, fathers, or the male-dominated medical profession. In recent years, the Right to Life Movement has used the notion of democratic rights to argue for the preservation of every foetus with little regard for the consequences for the pregnant woman. It is instructive to observe the politics which continue to deny women possession of their bodies.

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Homosexual men are likewise denied the right to determine their sexual practices in most states of Australia. The moral right argues that legalised homosexuality is also a threat to the family. The family would seem to be a very fragile “cornerstone” if it is put at risk when some men do not form reproductive sexual partnerships. The AIDS scare has served to justify attacks on gay men in the name of “public health” as well as “morality”. The melodramatic representations of the “threat” locate gay men outside of families, but capable of infecting them. This denies the obvious fact that men who
participate in homosexual acts are sons and brothers and may also be husbands and fathers. The location of the “threat” outside the family allows the ideal of family life to remain unexamined.

The right, both old and new, is certain that the family has important rights and duties: personal care of infants and children, sex education of young people, care for disabled people, protection of women, among other things. The more liberal vision of the family sees it as a place for individual expression and supportive care. Meanwhile, the government policies reveal an interest in enforcing a particular family form through the distribution of welfare benefits.

Social Security officers spend a lot of time checking on recipients’ domestic arrangements, not just their financial status. Do two old age pensioners of the opposite sex live together and each receive a “single” pension? Does a supporting mother have a regular male lover? Is an unemployed woman married? The policies which provide answers to these questions do not recognise the principle of financial independence for women, and thus support the ideology of female dependence in a maleheaded family. Homosexuals pose a problem because there is no ideology to say who in a relationship should be dependent and who should pay.

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The regulation of relations between parents and children is similarly informed by familial ideology. It is assumed that parents financially support children. Young girls can be institutionalised for being “at risk”, “in moral danger” or “uncontrollable” (sexually active), but welfare workers sometimes resist intervening in cases of incest because it might “break up the family”. Campaigns against domestic violence still encounter resistance because of the supposed privacy of the family. Dramatic cases of child abuse which seem isolated and deviant are front-page news for a few days while years of lesser abuse continues unnoticed.

In dramatic cases, state intervention can be used to separate parents and children, but services that might reduce the intensity of relations between parents and children before the need for such total intervention are subject to funding cuts. Child care, casual care for disabled children, homecare, community health services, housing and public transport are among the array of underfunded services. The ideology of the ideal, capable and caring family is behind the assumption that these services can be provided by families or bought in the private sector during times of financial stringency.

There is no declared family policy in Australia, but a vision of the family does inform government policy and practices. In this vision, individuals are responsible for the health and welfare of themselves and their dependents. It will be difficult to mount an effective challenge to policies that attribute poverty and ill-health to moral failure because those most in need will not have the resources to organise a political campaign either. A political focus on the structural relations in society which lead to personal problems often means that the immediate needs of individuals become secondary in campaigns to change the social structure.

During the late ’60s and early ’70s, the Women’s Liberation Movement used the slogan “the personal is political” to develop a politics that opened the power relations of personal life to public scrutiny. Feminist activists used what they discovered about their personal but common experiences to challenge the social structure. A range of issues have been taken up by mainstream political parties as a result of that analysis — rape, domestic violence, women’s health and sexual harassment, for example. Many politicians and policymakers have redefined the issues into individual failures or bad actions instead of the logical outcome of recognised social inequalities between men and women. Even as some of the issues have been addressed the more radical potential of the slogan has been diluted.

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At the same time, there has been a tendency to reduce “personal politics” to a form of dogmatic and sometimes sectarian “alternative lifestyles”. The everyday life of compromises and tensions lived by most people on the left has disappeared from analysis except in the agonised sharing of confidences and the whisper of constant gossip. The continuing development of a fragile network of support among those who do not live “ideal” family lives is overlooked and thus underestimated. The links of that network, ties of love and duty, have been formed during a shared past of political and social activity.

They are chosen social relationships, not accidental biological ones. Of course, they are overburdened with the vocabulary of idealised family relationships: the “sisterhood” of the women’s movement; the “brotherhood” of the labour movement; the notion of family in shared households. There does not seem to be another vocabulary for expressing close, reliable friendship, but the analogy with kinship poses some problems in its unconscious reversion to the assertion of the ideological family in the new relationships.

A range of human needs and desires is expressed in domestic life. The knowledge of a political analysis of domestic social relations does not eliminate those emotional needs and desires any more than an analysis of the exploitations of capitalism does not eliminate material needs. It will be
hard work to develop a politics that seeks to meet emotional as well as material needs, but also recognises the diversity of those needs. It may take a re-examination of the notion of "material" to include, or at least not automatically exclude, emotions. Certainly, it will mean the development of an overt political practice that fits between the level of abstraction in which individual pain disappears, and the level of gossip that traffics in that pain.

One tool that already exists for this politics is the process of consciousness-raising in which people recount their personal lives in an attempt to understand similarities and differences of experience. Obviously, there is the danger that the exercise will not be transformed into political action. The act of self-revelation, however, may be the only way to discover the issues for further action. Before group discussions, many women felt alone and isolated by their experiences of rape, domestic violence, sexual harassment, abortion and hatred of their bodies. The articulation of similar experiences and feelings by many women transformed individual pain into some of the central campaigns of the Women's Liberation Movement.

Self-revelation itself will be more difficult today than it was fifteen years ago because it has become so identified with various "personal growth" programs and a disavowal of politics. Yet, some level of self-revelation will be necessary to counter the conservative politics based on an "ideal" biological family. It will be necessary to refute the insulting and oppressive assumption that everyone shares the same goals and experiences regardless of class, ethnic origin, gender, age or health. It will also be necessary to demonstrate that politics is shaped by, and transforms, personal experience. Most importantly, self-revelation will be necessary to examine the contradictions of personal life as a step towards their resolution.

Another potential tool for the development of a left politics of the personal is the self-help group. There are many groups, especially around health problems, in which members mutually offer support, promote public education and sometimes engage in overt political activity. Professional helpers too often have their own agendas and are unable to provide for the immediate needs of group members as well as someone who has similar experiences. In self-help groups, meeting the emotional needs of members is a central aim. The danger is, of course, that this can be co-opted by cost-saving bureaucrats or political opportunists in the name of "privatisation" or "deinstitutionalisation". Whether formal or informal, such groups help to empower people in the times of crisis when family members and institutional helpers fail, and so are worth the political risks.

The Unsworth vision of 'fifties values cannot remain intact; too much is at stake. That vision is also the other side of the New Right's economic program. Individuals, families and households cannot bear the burden of welfare cuts, nor can the voluntary welfare sector. The idea that domestic life is separate from economic life must be challenged and politics changed in a way that develops that challenge.

A different vocabulary, more self-revelation, and political groupings based on shared personal experiences seem like an inadequate basis for a new politics that recognises the problems that most people face in their lives. I agree that they are small steps, but important. A new vocabulary itself will help us break away from the agenda set by the right by changing the terms of the debate. Self-revelation will demonstrate the diverse and contradictory ways we live our lives. Groups based on shared experience will contribute to a new political agenda that meets people's needs without imposing a uniform and impossible moral ideal. The personal is still political.

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