

Feminism AND Families



Edited and with an Introduction by
Hilde Lindemann Nelson

Feminism and Families

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Feminism and Families

Edited and with an Introduction

by Hilde Lindemann Nelson

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Introduction

Hilde Lindemann Nelson

An upsurge of interest in families has appeared recently in the popular highbrow press, much of it neoconservative, but some of it apparently motivated by the Left's growing resistance to libertarian individualism. This renewed interest has been accompanied by a new political and legal focus on families, of which the Family Leave Act, children seeking the court's permission to disown their birthparents, judicial affirmation of the rights of biological parents over children who have been adopted, and the push to rethink no-fault divorce law are only a few instances.

A great deal of the attention has been fueled by the suspicion that families are "breaking down." The Right has been busy reaffirming "family values" and seeing in the divorce rate (now holding steady at just under 50 percent) a threat to the foundation of society. In the psychotherapeutic community, on the other hand, the suspicion has been that the "traditional" family is dysfunctional, a view underscored of late by the controversy surrounding retrieved childhood memories of sexual abuse. The health care system exacts from patients' families increasingly large sacrifices of care and money at the same time as it also is inclined to suspect families of abuse. The U.S. Senate became so concerned over increasing reports of domestic violence that it held hearings on the topic in 1991. A strong subtheme of the history of families—namely, that they are not to be trusted—has once more become a major motif. There seems to be an increasing dissatisfaction with contemporary familial arrangements, a generalized feeling that things ought to change.

The little attention feminist theorists have devoted to families up to now has been well repaid. Barrie Thorne and Marilyn Yalom, eds., *Rethinking the Family: Some Feminist Questions*, first published by Longman's in 1982 and revised in 1992, is a good interdisciplinary anthology that challenges widely entrenched assumptions about families as it raises questions about family gender roles and family boundaries, among other things. Two recent monograph-length feminist analyses of the family—Linda J. Nicholson's *Gender and History: The Limits of Social Theory in the Age of the Family* (1988), which explores the connection between evolving conceptions of the family and modern political theory as a way of understanding dilemmas generated within feminism, and Susan Moller Okin's *Gender, Justice, and the Family* (1989), which shows how and why theories of justice need to be applicable to families if women are to have anything like their fair share of influence on politics and society—are required reading for anyone who is interested in theorizing families. And *Hypatia* devoted its Winter 1996 issue to the topic as well.

By and large, however, feminist philosophers have taken little notice of families—at least professionally. From its inception until 1996 *Hypatia* had published only three essays having to do with families, and *Signs* had published none. The issue of *Ethics* devoted to feminism and political theory (January 1989) does not address the family at all. *Explorations in Feminist Ethics*, ed. Eve Browning Cole and Susan Coultrap-McQuin (1992), is likewise silent on this topic, as is (with the exception of Christina Hoff Sommers's "Filial Morality") *Women and Moral Theory*, ed. Eva Feder Kittay and Diana T. Meyers (1987). *Feminist Ethics*, ed. Claudia Card (1991), contains nothing on the philosophy of the family, nor does *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (1990). The reader *Living with Contradictions: Controversies in Feminist Social Ethics*, ed. Alison M. Jaggar (1994), contains a short section called "Family Values," but half the excerpts in it have to do with assisted reproduction. Sara Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking* (1989), like *Motherhood: A Feminist Perspective*, ed. Jane P. Knowles and Ellen Cole (1990), and Nancy Chodorow's *Reproduction of Mothering* (1978), focus on only one element of family life.

Feminists have fared no better in their indirect dealings with the subject. They have had a great deal to say about any number of issues that would seem to cry out for at least ancillary treatment of families, yet by and large this treatment has been oddly absent—as if there were white spaces on the page just at the places where careful thinking about families is needed. A case in point is Alison Jaggar's splendid work on patriarchy in *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (1983)—a work that is most insightful, for example, about the relationship of human birthgiving to the social connections that are central to human nature, but that confines its discussion of families to a rehearsal of the Marxist/feminist critique of them as an instrument of capitalist/patriarchal oppression. But if, as Jaggar argues, a crucial fact about human nature is the enlarged cranium that makes birth-

giving arduous and necessitates a prolonged infancy, and if the attendant vulnerability of this state in turn necessitates relationships of intimacy, then by not offering a positive feminist account of how such relationships ought to be configured, Jaggar has left a significant gap in her argument.

A similar white space is visible in the pages of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990). Butler argues that gender is performative, a disciplinary production of the fantasy of a binary opposition of masculine and feminine played out on the body through a series of exclusions and denials of other, more fluid possibilities. Gender is imposed by an unwritten law, namely the taboo against incest; because the incest taboo institutes the exogamy that allows a culture to reproduce itself, it presupposes a prohibition against homosexuality, at the same time that it requires one to be either male or female. Gender is thus not only the identification with one sex, but it also entails the direction of sexual desire toward the other sex. As a critique of hegemonic categories of identity this work is brilliant—brilliant too in its destabilization of those categories. Yet nowhere in her account of how children acquire the fantasy of “I” as female or male does Butler offer any analysis at all of the structures of intimacy within which this acquisition takes place. Nowhere, that is, does she acknowledge the significance of the fact that most young children live within families. This inattention to the situatedness of the process of engendering is really rather odd.

A final example. In Joan Tronto's admirably clearheaded *Moral Boundaries* (1993), the task is to accord the work of caring its full moral value. Tronto's strategy for doing that is to break down the moral boundaries that have confined caring to a domestic activity performed by women and redraw them so that the political nature of caring becomes visible. While she is surely right to widen the boundary in this way, it is nevertheless frustrating to come across that familiar white space on the page—the place where theorizing about the family as a context of care ought to take place but does not. The white space is understandable. The point of the book, after all, is to show that the ethic of care is more than kids and car pools and the domestic labor women engage in at home. But the fact remains that most of the unpaid caring labor most of us do is done on behalf of family members. Given Tronto's insistence that “we cannot understand an ethic of care until we place such an ethic in its full moral and political context,” the omission of any theorizing at all about the familial context cries out for comment.

Why have families suffered neglect at the hands of feminist philosophers? Well, the topic is an explosive one. Although the patriarchal structures of intimacy that serve as the hegemonic ideal of family are perhaps the structures among all others that have silenced and exploited women, they are also the structures—or something like the structures—of many feminists' families. To critique them may literally hit feminists where they live. Such criticism also hits other women where they live. Feminism alienated many women in the 1960s and '70s by being outspokenly critical of

families and so earning the epithet of antifamily, and this may be one reason why many of us now step around the topic. Although we do not, perhaps, take her advice at the level of practice, at the level of conversation many of us seem to be heeding Shulamith Firestone, whose considered opinion about families in a nutshell was: Shun them.

This advice will not do. Most of us were reared in families, and many of us went on as adults to form new families of our own. Some of us have tried to repudiate the institution altogether, but I note with interest that certain African-American feminists—Patricia Collins and bell hooks spring to mind—conceive of families as a rare safe space in a culture that is multiply oppressive. I also note that in most of the works whose lack of attention to families I just lamented, the acknowledgments and dedication pages thank the authors' and editors' family members. We value these people. We nurture our sons and daughters, look after our aging parents, marry, divorce, enter important lesbian and heterosexual relationships that we or others either do or do not think of as familial, wonder as adults about our responsibilities to our siblings. These activities and the institutional background against which they take place stand in sore need of sustained feminist philosophical reflection. Careful and imaginative theoretical work in this area is an essential basis for good public policy as well as for the ethical stance we adopt toward those with whom we live in intimacy. It is also, as I have tried to show, crucial for theorizing about human nature, about gender, about the ethic of care, and about other philosophical issues.

If theory about families is in sore need of forward movement, this collection aims to provide momentum. Its sixteen essays, representing a wide range of theoretical approaches, examine families from a number of diverse cultural, political, and religious perspectives. The contributors range in age from Mary Midgley at seventy-six to Elise Robinson at twenty-four. Some are bioethicists, some are political theorists, one writes on psychoanalytic feminism, another is a sociologist, others are epistemologists, still others do lesbian theory.

Here, then, a brief overview of the collection.

I. Histories

Susan Moller Okin examines the history of feminism in England and the U.S. for its contributions to the policy debates over practices (such as abortion and welfare reform) that have their greatest impact on families. She argues that feminists ought not to overreact to the recent debate about differences among women by losing sight of these important historical contributions. Much feminist concern about insufficient attention to differences among women and families is unfounded, she thinks, as the insights of second-wave feminism in particular—the challenge to the public/private distinction, for example, and the insistence that housework is

real work—are often useful in the very settings of difference they had been thought to neglect.

Linda Nicholson looks to the past for another purpose. She surveys the history of families in America and Europe to support her contention that “traditional” families aren’t very traditional. She argues that the distinction between “traditional” and “alternative” functions normatively, legitimating certain family types and unfairly stigmatizing others. Because the distinction gets in the way when we try to evaluate family types, she suggests we drop it and consider instead whether a particular type of family provides economic and emotional sustenance to its own—particularly its children. We can then, she argues, begin mobilizing the political power necessary to make our institutions conform more closely to our familial needs.

Naomi Zack undertakes a historical investigation for yet a third purpose. She examines the history of philosophy for its masked normative assumptions about families and how they relate to broader structures of social and political power. As her investigation reveals, philosophers have often written about “the family” as if a specific form of it were natural, universal, and good, and then used those assumptions to argue for a particular form of government that depends on and supports that specific form of the family. In exposing these assumptions to a radical critique, Zack also reconceptualizes “family” in a way that better acknowledges the diversity of both familial structures and family values.

II. The Breakdown of the Family

Mary Midgley and Judith Hughes survey the most common communitarian responses to the perceived “breakdown of the family”—namely, a denunciation of individualism and a demand for a return to “family values” and community spirit—and find them inadequate. They note that although politicians and social reformers expect families to be stable and self-supporting units, these are not the family values that matter most to individuals, who look to their families for loving and supportive relationships. Midgley and Hughes call for ways of making life more tolerable for families that do not fit conservative norms, by offering them the kind of neighborhood and social support that communitarians have largely reserved for “deserving” nuclear families.

Laura M. Purdy has a different approach to the breakdown of the family—she would like to see women deliberately break them down, at least temporarily. She suggests that if, for a while, women refused to bear children, the degree to which society depends on women’s unpaid caregiving labor to

assure the well-being of future generations would immediately become visible. Arguing that this burden of care is a serious impediment to women as they try to progress toward equality with men, she proposes a babystrike. Downing reproductive tools, she argues, would make it impossible for women to believe that producing babies is “naturally” their lot and solely their own choice, and force society to take more responsibility for the children it wants and needs.

Michele M. Moody-Adams notes that feminism has widely been perceived to be in fundamental opposition to family life (a perception perhaps fuelled by essays urging babystrikes). Moody-Adams observes that antifeminists have exploited the insecurities of many women by persuading them that to call themselves feminist is to reject their “essential” womanhood, along with the familial practices that are attached to it. On the contrary, she argues, feminism can often be indispensable to the stability and well-being of modern family life. She shows how, especially when families threaten to break down under economic pressures, women often cast off their familially assigned gender roles and get the education and jobs that are necessary to keep the family going. A woman’s commitment to preserving her family is thus often inseparable from an equally strong commitment to autonomy and equality for women.

Elise L.E. Robinson and James and Hilde Lindemann Nelson, who are all members of one family, criticize how Americans think about and make post-divorce child custody arrangements, arguing that parents and the courts wrongly attempt to reproduce certain features of the reigning ideal of family life. Replacing this “sentimental” ideal with a model of fluidity, they (we) argue, permits postdivorce families to affirm children’s sense of their own moral agency and to assure children that the benefits of family life go on even when the family’s structure changes. The proposed model also allows children to feel the advantages of living in two worlds and prepares them more adequately for the families they will form when they too become adults.

III. Intimate Knowings

John Hardwig begins his essay with an argument he made more than twenty years ago—that pluralistic communes are better suited than other familial arrangements to promote the kind of dialogue most conducive to self-knowledge. As he (now) goes on to argue, communes and the other, more usual, forms of families are important places where knowledge is situated; or, put another way, situated knowers are not only gendered, raced, and classed, but also familied. He calls for an epistemology of the family, invoking and blurring both the inside/outside and the public/private distinc-

tions to theorize communes as familial arrangements that contain “private publics” where certain kinds of knowledge—among them, self-knowledge—are produced.

Judith Bradford and Crispin Sartwell also see the need for an epistemology of families. They use recent developments in feminist epistemology as a way of understanding twelve-step programs and the popular self-help literature aimed at “healing” the “dysfunctional” family. The goal of such self-help, they suggest, is to return from deviant knowing as it is practiced in “fortress families” to the baseline of healthy knowing as this is supposedly practiced in the hegemonic ideal of family. But because, the authors argue, the ideal of family itself constrains what one can know, other epistemic communities may be needed to produce knowledge adequate to living. They close by offering criteria for evaluating such epistemic communities.

IV. Who’s In, Who’s Out?

Cheshire Calhoun reviews lesbian-feminist analyses of lesbians’ relation to the family, marriage, and mothering, showing how lesbians’ *difference* from heterosexual women is often not visible even to lesbian feminists themselves: the analyses mistakenly center on familial harms to heterosexual women, not lesbians. She suggests that lesbians’ distinctive (and problematic) relation to the family is better captured by attending to the social construction of gays and lesbians as family outlaws than by attending to the gender structure of families. She argues that in refusing the outlaw construction, lesbians and gay men rightly bid for the same privilege most heterosexuals enjoy—of claiming that, in spite of their deviations from norms governing the family, their families are nevertheless real.

Mary Romero explores the idea that domestic workers are “just like one of the family,” arguing that this construction not only papers over the physically hard work of domestic service, its low status, and its low pay, but also masks the impact this work has on the domestic worker’s own family. From interviews with seventeen people whose mothers worked as maids in private homes, she shows how domestic workers’ children too pay a price when women employers shift their burden of sexism onto women employees already burdened by injustices of class and race.

V. Families and Medicine

Françoise Baylis and Jocelyn Downie explore the quandary faced by Western health care providers who wish to respect cultural diversity but also must determine whether a child is being abused or neglected by family practices sanctioned in a minority culture. What should be the limits of deference to

various cultural beliefs or values? The authors develop a feminist approach to the problem of cross-cultural conflict that allows them to navigate between the extremes of cultural relativism and cultural imperialism: they ask a set of questions whose objective is to assess the claim that a familial practice is culturally sanctioned. If it is, they argue, it must be respected, but only if it does not also oppress a subgroup within the culture.

Sidney Callahan believes that although gay men and lesbians stand to benefit particularly from recent advances in reproductive technology, neither they nor heterosexual couples ought to have children by these means. She argues that the well-being of most children most of the time is best served when those who are genetically connected to a child fulfill their responsibility for rearing it. Viewing adoption as a response to an unforeseen crisis, she fears that intentionally separating the strands of parenting through the use of alternate reproductive technologies will have negative social and symbolic consequences.

VI. Images We Don't Need

Sara Ruddick suggested in *Maternal Thinking* that we reject the ideal of a distinctive fatherhood and instead support the concept of male-inclusive motherhood. Here she examines three defining paternal functions—provision, protection, and authority—and explains why they should not be used to support fatherhood as a regulative ideal. She is, however, more hesitant now about erasing the sexual difference between mothers and fathers, as a denial of sexual difference could affirm children's fantasies of their own sex being the only good one, while denying fathers' distinctive experience of their bodies as procreative. And as most of the world distinguishes between mothers and fathers, she calls for an *ethics* of sexual difference—one that acknowledges different parental genders without falling into old habits of domination and oppression.

Bat-Ami Bar On thinks there is another ideal we don't need: that of Zionism. She argues that in Israel, where the patriarchal family has been one of the cornerstones of the Zionist nation-building project, lesbians and gay men are in danger of losing the social acceptance they have begun to enjoy, unless the Zionist project changes. She uses the film *Machboim* to show that to participate in the Zionist project, a man must be toughly masculine and strictly heterosexual, while a woman's duty is to rear children and to mother soldiers for the state. As Jewish-Israeli lesbians refuse women's traditional role in their personal and national families, they see themselves as rupturing the social order. Yet Bar On cautions them to resist the offer of integration into a "new" Jewish-Israeli society, as this society will not redress their alienation and requires the continued exclusion of Palestinians to support its Zionist project.

And finally, *Diana Tietjens Meyers* urges us to discard a certain Freudian figuration. In the current controversy over recovered memory, the question has been whether women accusing their fathers of having sexually abused them when they were young are telling the truth. As this question is often unanswerable, Meyers suggests that we ask instead how the trope of sadistic incest—she dubs it the Freudian “family romance”—guides and shapes women’s self-definition. Like other culturally appropriated tropes, sadistic incest can be literalized as a way of explaining a woman’s unhappiness, but doing so does not seem likely to help women to lead more rewarding lives. Meyers offers a number of reasons for taking the family romance out of circulation and replacing it with figurations that support feminist emancipatory aims.

Here, then, are ideas that can be used to fill in the white spaces in books of feminist philosophy. Here is needed work on the relationship of families to theories of justice, political theory, duties to future generations, epistemology, queer theory, bioethics, theories of moral agency. Theory in these and other areas of philosophy is well served by adding families as a category of analysis, but it is also worthwhile to get better theory about families themselves, and several papers in this volume also contribute to that end. The collection thus supplies momentum on both fronts.

Feminism and Families owes its existence to Maureen MacGrogan, who suggested the project to me and has championed it enthusiastically at every stage. Linda J. Nicholson has provided savvy advice and warm encouragement, as has Diana Tietjens Meyers. To these three, many thanks. Thanks is also owed to the Department of Philosophy at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, for its friendly colleagues and essential infrastructure. And finally, in the long tradition of acknowledgments in books of feminist theory, I express heartfelt thanks to my family, particularly Jim and our children, not only for what they have done for me but for who they are.

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Part I

Histories

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Families and Feminist Theory: Some Past and Present Issues

Susan Moller Okin

Feminists have conducted a close scrutiny of the family in the last years and have seen how oppressive it can be for women. But undermining the family has costs, for women as well as men, in the form of isolation and the further deterioration of child raising, general unhappiness, social distrust, and solipsism; and sensitivity to these problems is also part of the feminist heritage.

—Linda Gordon, in Thorne and Yalom 1982, 1992

The family has long been regarded by feminists as an important location where sexual equality must be won. Through centuries of English and American feminism, marriage and family have been amongst the foremost institutions critiqued. Yet most feminist critics are ambivalent about families. Barrie Thorne writes of “an ambivalence embedded in feminism since the nineteenth century and strongly evident today . . . between values of individualism and equality, . . . values that women have historically been denied and are now claiming; and values of nurturance and collectivity, which are historically associated with the family” (Thorne, in Thorne and Yalom 1982, p. 2). In this essay, I trace some of the history of this ambivalence and examine its contemporary manifestations. I then move on to address two related questions: How has the recent focus within feminism on differences among women affected feminist perceptions of families and their problems? Has this focus to some extent diffused feminist energies and weakened feminist responses to some of the major political debates of

the late twentieth century, including the “family values” debate, the abortion debate, and the debate over welfare reform—debates to which past and present feminist analyses and critiques of families have much to contribute?

The reasons for feminist ambivalence about families are not difficult to discern. Feminists have found most forms of family prevalent in history and in the present to be destructive of women’s equality both within the home and in all other spheres of life, and sometimes of their basic well-being. Due to assumptions about the family, women’s child-rearing and other domestic labor and household management have been taken for granted and often not acknowledged to be work at all. Women’s allegedly “natural” role within the family has been used for centuries to justify their exclusion from civil and political rights, as well as from many occupations—in effect, to make them publicly invisible. And women’s economic dependence and subordinated position in the family have rendered them vulnerable to various forms of abuse—physical, sexual, and psychological. Thus, most feminists contend that women’s public and private inequalities are closely linked, and have questioned the tendency in Western thought to dichotomize the two spheres (Pateman, Olsen). However, at the same time as they have critiqued existing family forms and divisions of labor, most feminists also think that a greatly changed conception of family—less exclusionary, much more egalitarian, and decidedly less idealized—could have an important place in a better future. And they argue that the achievement of such families will depend on substantial changes in all spheres of life.

Ambivalence about Families in the Feminist Past

Ambivalence about families goes far back in feminist thought. Mary Wollstonecraft, writing in the late eighteenth century largely in response to Rousseau’s claims that women needed above all to be pleasing to men, criticized the unjust family relations she saw around her. She argued for greater equality within marriage, and for women’s education and access to paid work. At the same time, one of her primary purposes in advocating the optimal development of women’s reason was to make them better mothers and to strengthen families.

John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor, writing half a century later, denounced patriarchal power relations in families as Wollstonecraft had. They agreed with each other that women should have the right to vote and legal equality in marriage, as well as equal access to education and jobs. What they disagreed about was women’s role within the family, with Taylor advocating married women’s participation in the work force and Mill balking at this idea, preferring that wives and mothers devote their energies first and foremost to their families. Mill, however, was also one of the very earliest feminists to emphasize the potential of the family to be a school of moral development and to insist that without justice in families

and particularly between husbands and wives, there could be no hope for justice in the larger spheres of social and political life.

The early Marxists, and other socialists too, were ambivalent about families. Engels found private property and men's subsequent need for heirs to be the cause of women's subjugation and exploitation within the patriarchal monogamous nuclear family—calling the overthrow of “mother right” the “world-historic defeat of the female sex” (Engels, p. 736). He thought that socialization of the means of production, the communalization of housework, and the entry of all women into the labor force would liberate women. But although he and Marx both ridiculed the bourgeois notion of monogamy as a proprietorial farce, Engels seems to have thought that genuine monogamy, founded in romantic love, would replace it. Thus, though he wanted to see many of the existing functions of families transformed, Engels did not foresee a future without families.

Similarly, George Bernard Shaw, the English Fabian socialist, deplored the economic dependence and restricted role of married women, but did not conclude that families were beyond repair. Rather, he proposed to make women and children economically independent within them by nationalizing industry, requiring that all adults work, and then distributing the profits equally to every child, woman, and man. Only then, he thought, would family ties truly be consensual.

Continuing this tradition of ambivalence, in the 1930s Virginia Woolf indicted the patriarchal English household as a prototype of fascism. Woolf attributed the tyranny of fathers to their economically based powers over their wives and children. She exposed the unity of the family purse as a fiction, and contrasted the actual situations in many households with the idealized vision of fathers as wielding power only in benign ways because their interests were at one with those of their families. Like Mill and Taylor, Woolf thought that the characteristics of families and larger political societies were “inseparably connected. . . . [T]he tyrannies and servilities of the one are the tyrannies and servilities of the other” (Woolf, p. 142). Thus violence and the abuse of power could not be eliminated from the public sphere until they were eliminated from the private one. But Woolf did not conclude that families should be abolished. Rather, she advocated wages for mothers, to free them from economic tyranny—adding that she thought fathers, too, could benefit from this change, by having more time to spend with their children.

Ambivalence about Families in Early Second-Wave Feminism

Contemporary feminists have continued to critique existing family forms, though in most cases, like feminists of the past, not giving up on families altogether. Second-wave feminism began in the United States with liberal feminism. Betty Friedan urged educated middle-class women to reject the myth of the “happy housewife,” which, added to the actual tedium of most housework, was leading to frustration or neurosis in potentially creative

women. Instead, she urged married women to engage in professional careers or other “meaningful work.” She urged them to minimize, but not eschew, their family responsibilities. Subsequent early second-wave liberal feminism, less class-limited in its applicability, stressed the importance for women’s equality in and out of the family, reproductive choice, maternity leave, job training for women in poverty, and subsidized child care, as well as an end to sex discrimination in employment (“National Organization for Women Bill of Rights,” 1967, in Jaggar and Rothenberg, p. 159).

In England, Marxism was the predominant trend in early second-wave feminism. Juliet Mitchell and others extended the critique of the exploitation of workers under capitalism into a critique of the exploitative nature of the reproductive and household labor performed by women. They argued that women are doubly exploited under capitalism—for their paid labor in the workplace, and for their unpaid reproduction of the labor force in the family. But did women constitute a “class”? How might one account for the wives of capitalists, who seemed exploited as a sex even as they benefitted from class exploitation? Mitchell drew an analogy between their situation and that of the “rich peasants” in prerevolutionary China, since both groups were comparatively well-off members of a generally exploited class (Mitchell, p. 179). The family was clearly a major site of women’s exploitation from this twentieth-century Marxist feminist point of view, though, like earlier Marxists, its critics did not explicitly seek to abolish it altogether.

In the late 1960s, radical feminists in the United States launched the harshest and least ambivalent critiques of the family to date: the “biological family”—a concept little informed by history or anthropology—was at the root of the “sex class” that constitutes women’s oppression, and must be abolished. Some radical feminists, most notably Shulamith Firestone, viewed pregnancy and motherhood as in themselves oppressive, concluding that technological advances in reproduction would finally free women from the constraints of female biology. This was an unusual view. However, radical feminists frequently challenged the necessity of the family itself—not only its current structures and divisions of labor. Unlike Marxists, they saw patriarchy, rather than the relations of production, as the most fundamental of all oppressions. They found it in all societies, perpetuated by families, and at the root of other forms of oppression such as class and race. For many radical feminists, opting out of families and separatism from men were the only tolerable answers for women.

Socialist feminists synthesized the central approaches of Marxist feminism and radical feminism, also incorporating some of the insights of liberal feminism (Jaggar). They argued that both class analysis and an understanding of patriarchy were necessary for explaining the situation of women living in capitalist society. In developing explicitly socialist-feminist strategies for changing society, they addressed the intersecting and combined oppressions of capitalism and patriarchy, of which families and reproductive practices constituted a major part.

During the 1970s, some feminists approached the subject of the family from a psychoanalytic point of view. Both Nancy Chodorow and Dorothy Dinnerstein sought to understand inequality between the sexes, certain differences between the sexes, and misogyny as originating from prevailing child-rearing arrangements. Both argued, though in distinct ways, that the fact that women almost invariably raise small children deeply affects the psychological development of those children: girls can separate more gradually and less radically from the same-sex carer with whom they are initially psychologically fused, therefore developing less distinct ego-boundaries and a more relational sense of self; boys have to separate more distinctly, defining themselves as “not female,” therefore devaluing what is defined as feminine and developing a more individuated sense of self. The logical conclusion of both Chodorow’s and Dinnerstein’s theories is that, were early child-raising to be more equally shared between men and women, boys and girls would develop more similar psychologies, misogyny would decrease, and the sexes would be more equal in all aspects of our lives. This was a powerful addition to other feminist arguments for the more equal allocation of family labor and waged work between men and women. It also represents another example of the prevailing feminist view that families, being neither all bad nor all good, need to be critiqued and reformed, rather than discarded.

Family Resemblances

The lines just drawn between liberal, Marxist, radical, socialist, and psychoanalytic feminisms have become less distinct since about 1980. To some extent, this may be attributable to the growing salience of other crosscutting distinctions—such as that between feminists who accentuate similarities and those who accentuate differences between the sexes, or that between feminists who stress differences (for example, those of race, class, or religion) amongst women and those who stress what women have in common. Endorsing the initially radical slogan “the personal is political,” most current feminists are convinced of the multiple interconnections between women’s status, roles within families, and their inequality and segregation in the workplace and the political realm, and between their socialization in gendered families and the psychological aspects of their oppression. Feminism has challenged the tendency to dichotomize public and private in at least three ways.

First, as some earlier feminists were clearly aware, what happens in domestic and private life is not immune from the dynamic of *power*, which has often been seen as definitive of politics. Power within families—whether of husbands over wives or of parents over children—has often not been recognized as such, because it has been perceived as natural or benign. But the notion that power even in its crudest form, physical violence, is not a factor in family life is a myth that has been increasingly exposed during the last century and especially during the last two decades. Largely because of the efforts of feminists, violence and sexual abuse in the home

are now much less sanctioned or ignored as “private matters” than in the past; they are recognized as serious problems that society must act on. There is now no doubt that family violence and sexual abuse, as they affect both wives and children, are closely connected with differentials of power and dependency between the sexes. In addition, feminists have discerned and documented subtler, though no less important, modes of power that operate within families—such as spouses’ different amounts of influence over important decisions, including the division of labor between them, and spouses’ different anticipated costs in exiting the relationship. It is impossible to claim, in the light of current evidence, that families are nonpolitical in the sense that power is an insignificant factor in them.

Second, the very existence of a private sphere, its extent and limits, what is and is not acceptable behavior within it, and who can and cannot constitute a family have been and still are decided in the public sphere—directly in legislatures and courts, less directly in the workplace, media, and schools. Historically, the law defined marriage as a hierarchical as well as a heterosexual relationship, and excluded women not only from political rights but from most means of making a living wage. At present, public decisions—about the terms of marriage and divorce, about working hours, school hours, and the availability of child care, about wages, welfare payments, pensions, and taxes—all shape families and contribute to inequalities of private power. As Frances Olsen has written: “Because the state is deeply implicated in the formation and functioning of families, it is nonsense to talk about whether the state does or does not intervene in the family” (Olsen, p. 837). The question is not whether, but how it intervenes.

A third way in which the idea that public and private are autonomous realms breaks down is suggested in the psychoanalytic literature discussed above. Since domestic life is where most of our earliest and most formative socialization takes place, families are where, through gendered parenting, we *become* our gendered selves. Of course, this early gendering is reinforced in other social institutions, such as schools, workplaces, the media, and so on. In turn, the gendering of these other institutions helps to perpetuate and reinforce that within families: for example, women’s typically lower pay reinforces the “rationality,” in most two-parent families, of the mother’s being the primary child-rearer, which continues the cycle of gender inequality between the sexes. Once we acknowledge that significant differences between women and men are created by existing divisions of labor within families, it becomes increasingly obvious how political family life is.

Family Differences

Much of the early second-wave feminist critique of families focused predominantly, if not exclusively, on relatively well-off, two-parent, heterosexual, white families. Subsequent feminist analyses have been critical of these earlier depictions of “the family” as insufficiently representative of

the different forms that families take when class, race, and ethnicity, as well as sexual orientation, are considered seriously. African-American feminists, Latina and Asian feminists as well as those from other minority groups, lesbian feminists, those with a working-class perspective (as well as white, middle-class, heterosexual feminists writing in support of these perspectives) have pointed out that some of the problems found and some of the solutions arrived at in some earlier feminist discussions of "the family" do not apply in the case of all families.

Some aspects of earlier theories made them easy targets of such criticism. Most obviously, solutions to middle-class women's oppression, such as Friedan's in *The Feminine Mystique*, which rely on the employment of "help," cannot be solutions for those women whose race or class position makes them likely to constitute the "help" (hooks). Some other such critiques are equally telling: working-class and most Black mothers, for example, are unlikely to experience being a housewife as oppressive; rather, as mothers with no option but to work long double shifts—at work and at home—they may see it as an unattainable ideal. Black feminists are more likely to regard racism than men and sexism as Black women's foremost problem (hooks; Collins). Never-married mothers are far more likely to perceive poverty or time-poverty as pressing problems than to be directly concerned with the division of labor between the sexes (Zinn, in Thorne and Yalom 1992). Single mothers living in extended family situations may see the family more as a supportive than as an oppressive institution (Collins, in Thorne and Yalom 1992; Stack). Lesbians, who live in more egalitarian relationships than heterosexuals, are more obviously disadvantaged by the heterosexist norm of what constitutes a family than by the unequal division of labor between the sexes (Rich 1980; Weston).

Feminist work on families has been greatly affected by such critiques and the varied perspectives from which they are made. At the same time as we acknowledge this recognition of diversity as progress, though, it is important not to forget that some of the central insights of early second-wave feminism, in spite of its narrower initial focus of attention, still retain power in the context of more broadly focused attention. Some of its discoveries, arguments, and demands, even though they issued forth from a movement that was predominantly white, middle-class, and heterosexual, are extremely relevant to women (and sometimes to men) in very different life and family circumstances. It is therefore important that feminists not overreact to the challenge of differences among women by losing sight of their broadly relevant insights about families, their gendered division of labor, and its effect on sex inequality in all spheres of life. Unmasking the mythology of the public/private dichotomy, thereby challenging the division of labor between the sexes and the denial of women's domestic work as real work, seems not only, like Sisyphus with his rock, to be an unending struggle, it is a struggle that it is in many different women's and at least some men's interests to win.