A Family Quarrel

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There's no end to discussion about the "crisis of the family." From *Reader's Digest* to obscure academic journals, in the halls of Congress and in countless homes, the crisis of the family is portrayed, analyzed, debated, or lived out. This discussion has become the litany of a society in crisis. This is so, as Jean Bethke Elshtain tells us, because the crisis of the family "is a crisis of meaning and it goes to the heart of our self-understandings and our social existence." [1]

So central a preoccupation is the crisis of the family that some academic (non-) observers, whose business is to legitimize the ubiquitous intrusion of the state in human affairs, have tried to explain away the whole matter as the figment of overwrought imaginations unwilling to accept the inevitable statification of society. Elshtain's quote is from her response to Richard Busacca and Mary Ryan's article "Beyond the Family Crisis," which appeared in the Fall 1982 issue of the journal *Democracy*. The authors contend that a "new social reproduction system" has replaced the family, and that our current fixation on the plight of the family is "a smokescreen for a fundamental crisis in the organization of social reproduction." Busacca and Ryan consider as a fait accompli "the central role of the state in organizing, regulating, and subsidizing social reproduction…and the politicization of the once private universe of personal and family life." In her letter of response to Busacca and Ryan, Elshtain argues that we should not acquiesce in the family's demise. This letter follows her recent evaluation of the crisis of the family in an article entitled "Feminism, Family and Community." [2] In what follows I will assess the strengths and weaknesses of Elshtain's article in an attempt to provide my own assessment of the crisis of the family.

Elshtain's essay can be linked to a body of work by social critics on the left who have begun to critically appraise the radicalism of the 1960s. A major conclusion of these writers has been that much of the radical left, far from opposing capitalism, have unwittingly reinforced it by pursuing changes that capitalism has either already accomplished or which were on the immediate agenda. In common with these writers, Elshtain casts new light on Enlightenment notions of "historic progress," suggesting that much has been lost in the forward march of history.

Elshtain considers attacks on the family by radicals and feminists to be based on the unexamined premise that family and community ties are "precisely what we all need to be 'liberated' from." Calls for "smashing" or radically transforming the family are the unthinking slogans of a political and cultural left that has accommodated itself to capitalism by adopting a stance which emphasizes the unquestionable value of individual autonomy and the pursuit of one's desires; a stance which is virtually indistinguishable from that "possessive individualism" (a free-market model of human behavior in which the individual adopts a standard based on entrepreneurial activities and mores) embedded in capitalist culture. This stance is particularly apparent in the widely-shared "ideal of non-binding commitments" advocated by "the upper-middle class, the mobile, and the well-educated…The overall effect of all this 'actualizing' of selves is supposed to be a wider good, for modes of radical—protest indebted to classical liberalism implicitly embrace a notion of an 'invisible hand,' operating to transform self-interest and personal freedom into a social benefit. But this will not do, finally, for there is no way to make a community out of 'possessive individuals.'"

Ordinary People Uphold the Family

Meanwhile a lot of ordinary people, Elshtain contends, continue to uphold the family, their traditions, and their communities, which are under siege from all directions. The left's insensitivity to ordinary people's struggles—its assumption that families and communities uphold "reactionary" values—has enabled the right to portray itself as the defender of the family, even as the corporate system it represents is systematically undermining all fixed standards and values. Elshtain would like the radical left to rethink its position on the family and contribute to building a politics of the family that would support and strengthen the family and the community.

Elshtain's vision of a politics of the family is inspired by "the image of a strong woman, my grandmother," whose roots are in the German peasantry. "For my grandmother, the 'I' of self was always a 'we,' located within a dense web of human ties." According to Elshtain, "the tradition that ties [her grandmother's people] to the land also makes them profoundly suspicious of the 'progressive' force represented by capitalism." The contemporary family, Elshtain is convinced, keeps alive, at least as a potential, values antithetical to those of "predatory corporate culture." Where so-called "autonomy" and "choice" are sanctioned as absolute values, true radicalism consists in recognizing the emptiness of the untrammeled expression of these impulses—the damage done in undermining the possibility of expressing love, commitment, and community. "The family," Elshtain writes in her letter to Democracy, "remains the locus of the deepest and most resonant human ties, the most enduring hopes, the most intractable conflicts, the most poignant tragedies, and the sweetest triumphs…"

It takes considerable courage and insight to swim against the current in a raging river that threatens to overflow its banks. Mainstream feminists, whose highest aspiration is to become equally as exploited as men in the workplace, are sure to find Elshtain's argument objectionable. Likewise, the so-called radical left will undoubtedly take exception to her attack on progressivism, an unshakable article of their faith. Yet at the risk of being confused with such unworthy opponents, I will argue that Elshtain's faith in the family's current potential is extremely optimistic, her measures for strengthening it grossly inadequate, and both of these problems based on an incoherent formulation of the problem.

Elshtain's politics is based on an assumption that deserves careful scrutiny: that the family is a potential force of resistance to capitalism. But the actual condition of the family, I will argue, precludes such optimism, suggesting the need for a radical struggle for family and community. This struggle would not entail "liberation" from the family into the void of an empty autonomy; but neither would it entail the simple revitalization of the contemporary family.

R.D. Laing is considered by Elshtain to be a major exemplar of cultural radicalism's hostility to the family. "Familial love and parental concern got redescribed by Laing as devious forms of violence," she writes. "Mocking the efforts of parents to provide security for their children…Laing denounced parental action as a debased 'protection racket.'…Much of this criticism [by cultural radicals] has the air of 'hit and run' and is made by radicals who refused to acknowledge any of the legitimate human needs for intimacy and security embedded and answered, however imperfectly, within the traditional family."

The force of these sentences rests on the accuracy of the words "mocking" and "however imperfectly." If Laing's observations of the family are valid, "however imperfectly" becomes "not at all," and Laing's mockery can be seen as a serious appraisal of the violence embedded in the contemporary family. One need not accept Laing's message of liberation from the family to consider the accuracy of his descriptions of the family, and the possibility that they call into question its ability any longer to provide for intimacy and security. It seems to me that Elshtain is killing the messenger who bears bad tidings: by portraying Laing as ideologically biased against the family, she can ignore the import of his analysis.

Laing's error is not, as Elshtain would have it, that he sees the family as the site of emotional violence masked as love. Rather, it is the fact that while he "designat(es) the family as a mediating agency between society and the individual, in the main it is accepted as the cause of social oppression and not also its victim." (Russell Jacoby, *Social Amnesia*) According to Jacoby, this is merely the bourgeois error of "mistaking the phenomenon specific to one historical era as universal and invariant. In brief [Laing takes] the human relations that prevail in late capitalist society as human relations as such."

Laing's Analysis Enlightening

Laing's advocacy of a spurious, one-dimensional notion of liberation—liberation from the ties of families—follows directly from this error. In this sense, he is one with his historical period. The point, however, is to avoid throwing out the baby with the bathwater: we can salvage much from Laing if we relativize his universal categories, and if we incorporate Jacoby's insight that the violence in families is shaped by the violence of the social structure.

Anyone concerned with the status of the contemporary family can learn from Laing's analysis of "ontological insecurity"—the emotional status of modern individuals. Placed in the context of a massively unstable and constantly changing environment—the environment of capitalism—Laing's descriptions of family members manipulating and destroying each other's emotional lives in a desperate attempt to maintain psychic stability, tells us a lot about the psychological toll imposed by "progress."

In fact, Laing's categories are considerably more enlightening than Elshtain's muddy concept of "possessive individualism." This term brings to mind selfish entrepreneurs pursuing their fortunes in the marketplace, and Elshtain goes no further than the usage of economic terminology to explain the behavior of possessive individualists: "each is the sole 'proprietor of self;" "the only acceptable relations are those calculated to yield maximum utility," she writes. Laing's more precise psychological categories allow us to see that "possessive individualism" is no mere act of calculated greed, but is more deeply anchored in irrational domains of the psyche, being an act of desperation on the part of a besieged self. This fact has important implications for Elshtain's approach, calling into question both her optimism about the family's potential and her proposed political solution. Laing enables us to see that the family and the individual share the same fate: capitalism's destruction of the communal matrix has weakened the family and the individual alike.

Part of Elshtain's confusion is attributable to an unstated assumption on her part, namely that her grandmother's family and the present family are essentially the same. As I stated before, Elshtain believes that the contemporary family keeps alive communal values and creates emotionally strong individuals. Laing, on the other hand, provides a much different picture drawn from his personal experience as a child in a working-class family in Glasgow, Scotland—a picture of family life riddled by violence and emotional repression. Laing's experience can be located somewhere between the rural community of Elshtain's grandmother and the "narcissist" culture of contemporary America—but probably much closer to us. His experiences took place in a society formed from capitalism's destruction of rural and village communities. We might surmise that Elshtain's grandmother's community, having been less penetrated by capitalism, was able to produce more emotionally resilient individuals than Laing's community, which like all industrial communities must bear the emotional scars of the disruption of traditional ways of life and the repressive organization of social life to provide wage slaves for the industrial machine.

Statistics on the divorce rate in the United States, on the growth of single parent households, on the huge numbers of single people, on the prevalence of wife and child abuse, on the desire of working women to continue working even when given the option not to, on the sense of relief many women feel when their children leave home, etc., are readily available; [3] I won't quote them here. Sociologist Lillian B. Rubin provides a personal dimension to these statistics in her interviews with women, many from working-class families, who aspire to lives beyond what has traditionally been allotted to them as wives and mothers. [4] Yet Elshtain never comes to grips with the implications of women's changing attitudes about marriage and work for her proposed rejuvenation of family life. Where is Elshtain's constituency, aside from the minority who support the new right? The depth and breadth of this phenomenon likewise call into question Elshtain's assumption that the left is significantly responsible for these changes—the left seems more an early and highly visible expression of attitudes about to sweep over society at large. Even Elshtain's assumption that the new right holds a monopoly on the family question is belied by Daniel Yankelovich's massive survey of shifting cultural attitudes and values [5] which indicates that the value changes of the 1960s and 1970s are firmly rooted in the popular culture. In many respects, Elshtain has maintained the consistency of her argument at the cost of misunderstanding this most significant of cultural changes.

In the concluding section of her essay, Elshtain calls for "a revitalized form of family life and community as one way to break the destructive hold of market images on feminist protest." As an alternative to mainstream feminism, Elshtain proposes a "social feminism" that "make[s] contact with women's traditional sphere. Women's world arose on a template of concern and care for others. Any viable human community must have, in its ranks,

an important segment devoted to the protection of vulnerable human life. That, historically, has been the history of women. The pity is not that women reflect an ethic of social responsibility but that the public world has, for the most part, repudiated such an ethic. Rather than denying women the meaning their traditional world provided, even under conditions of male domination, feminists should move to challenge a society that downgrades female-created and -sustained values." By invoking the importance of tradition, Elshtain reminds us that the theory that sees revolutionary consciousness as an "abstract universalism" is inadequate: "anti-capitalist struggles have been waged by human beings determined to defend their particular historic identities, not by 'homeless masses'..."

Elshtain Criticizes Liberal Feminists

Elshtain's invocation of tradition is directed equally at liberal feminists like Betty Friedan, whom she criticizes for envisioning as a solution to the family crisis "dual career professionals on flexitime" with hired help in the home, and for the vast majority of the population "more day care, more reliance on social-engineering experts..." The continuance of this standard liberal agenda, Elshtain argues, is tantamount to "defining [the family] out of existence," since it "defines the family simply as the place 'you come home to,' " instead of as the center of social and emotional life.

Contrary to the agenda of liberals and radicals, Elshtain's social feminism would "challenge irresponsible corporate power and a politics of group self-interest, for both run roughshod over the needs of families. It indicts an economic system that denies families a living, family wage and that forces both partners into the labor force, often against the will of the woman who would prefer to be with her children but must, instead, work at a low-pay, dead-end job to make 'ends meet.' The solution to this dilemma is not to join Friedan's chorus for more day care, which implicitly accepts an economic system that cannot provide decently for its families, but to challenge that system. Nor is this an argument against day care; it is a refusal to embrace the standard liberal agenda of more provision of social services to ameliorate the destructive effects of a socially irresponsible corporate culture."

Again it is necessary to insist that Elshtain has underestimated the enormity of the changes in cultural attitudes. While it is certainly true that some women would prefer to stay at home with their children, it is simply myopic to assume that this is the predominant attitude, and that women who work do so only because they have been forced into the workforce because of declining male wages.

One can clearly see the problem with Elshtain's position by considering the paradoxical relationship she maintains with the feminist movement. At the risk of oversimplifying, I would argue that the most recent wave of feminism since the 1950s is rooted in an immense dissatisfaction by women with their status as housewives, [6] as Betty Friedan chronicled in *The Feminine Mystique*. Elshtain, for her part, considers herself a feminist, and acknowledges the need for equality between men and women. Yet the demand for this equality comes precisely from women who perceived their position in the family to be one of inequality, and for reasons much more profound than men's refusal to share housework. Women's dissatisfaction with home life is, as we shall see, rooted in structural changes in society that have made home life, and women's social role, increasingly insignificant, subordinate, and mentally and emotionally debilitating. Without explicitly calling into question these profound changes, Elshtain leaves herself open to the charge that she would have women embrace the same unsatisfying role that has fueled, and continues to inform, women's rebellion. That this rebellion has in large measure become a dead end does not diminish the severity of the conditions that engendered that rebellion in the first place. Elshtain's appeal to the vitality of the traditional family sets her against the desires of millions of women to overturn that tradition and (no matter how poorly formed their vision of change has been thus far) to conceive new relationships between men and women, and between women and society.

War Against Subsistence

Ivan Illich's recent book *Shadow Work* provides the theoretical orientation for understanding the historic shift in women's status in society since the onset of capitalist society. Shadow work, for which housework provides a key

example, is the "unpaid work which industrial society demands as a necessary complement to the production of goods and services." Utilizing the research of historians of women's work, Illich argues that "the activity for which the modern housewife is the prototype has no parallel outside of industrial society; that this activity is fundamental for the existence of such a society; that contemporary wage labor could come into existence only thanks to the simultaneous structuring of this new kind of activity."

Illich sees the modern age as "an unrelenting 500-year war waged to destroy the environmental conditions for subsistence and to replace them by commodities produced within the frame of the new nation state." In order to understand the status of women in modern society, we must understand that the "bifurcation between 'work' and 'shadow work' " upon which capitalism was founded entailed "two distinct degradations: an unprecedented degradation of women, and an unprecedented degradation of work." The reduction of women and men's shared activities in the "subsistence household" to the twin degradations of work and housework is at the source of the "sexual apartheid" which encloses the woman in the transformed household as the "burdensome" ward of the "productive" man.

When Elshtain writes that the home is "women's traditional sphere," and that "women's world arose on a template of concern and care for others," she is proffering a truism that courts the danger of perpetuating a lie. Without clarification, this truism could easily imply that men's and women's spheres have been eternally separate; but as Illich points out, this is only the case with the emergence of industrial capitalism, and the redefinition of women "as the ambulant, full-time matrix of society. Philosophers and physicians combined to enlighten society about the true nature of woman's body and soul. This new conception of her 'nature' destined her for activities in a kind of home which discriminated against her wage labor as effectively as it precluded any real contribution to the household's subsistence. In practice, the labor theory of value made man's work into the catalyst of gold, and degraded the homebody into a housewife economically dependent and, as never before, unproductive. [7] She was now man's beautiful property and faithful support needing the shelter of home for her labor of love."

What must be emphasized is the fact that Elshtain's notion of the family, and women's role in it, comes dangerously close to obscuring the incredible reduction of both women's and men's lives which industrialism brought about. That Elshtain has not thought clearly about this question is evident in her complaint that capitalism has not provided families with a living, family wage. Elshtain would apparently fight for a society where women were free to stay at home with the children while men were out earning their family wage, it should be obvious that this would do nothing to restore women to their rightful place as full members of the community.

Elshtain would like to begin the fight to reclaim the family from the hands of the state; what she does not realize is that the family she would like to rescue resembles the family in its historically vital forms only by virtue of the common name. Like the state socialists who reduce revolution to the seizure of state power, Elshtain reduces family and community to the most narrowly defined terms. It simply won't do to hearken back to a previous stage of capitalist alienation.

The way out, however, is not "forward" to universal wage labor and a world of complete monads, lacking any bonds of love or reciprocity. The way out is back, following that river called Progress to its source; that river on which Elshtain, despite her willingness to swim against the current, remains lost.

Footnotes

1. Jean Bethke Elshtain, "On 'The Family Crisis'," *Democracy* 3 (Winter 1983): 137,39.

2. *Dissent* 29 (Fall 1982): 442–49.

3. One source of statistics on the decline of the family can be found in Andrew Hacker, "Farewell to the Family?" *New York Review of Books* 29 (March 18, 1982): 37–44. In this article Hacker reviews ten recent books on the family. Based on the evidence presented in these books, Hacker concludes: "What we call a 'strong family' requires a degree of dedication that most of today's adults and children can no longer give…We are simply not the kinds of people our grandparents were, and we live in a world that is vastly different from theirs."

4. *Women of a Certain Age: The Midlife Search for Self* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 202–08.

5. *New Rules: The Search for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down* (New York: Random House, 1981).

6. I do not want to imply that women were solely responsible for the decline of the family. As Barbara Ehrenreich notes, men too have changed, and in a way that directly threatens the traditional family centered on the male breadwinner. In the last three decades, men have come to see themselves less and less as breadwinners, and have ceased to measure their masculinity through their success as husbands and providers…[What] we could call the 'male revolt began well before the revival of feminism, and stemmed from dissatisfactions every bit as deep, if not as idealistically expressed, as those that motivated the 'second wave' feminists." Barbara Ehrenreich, "After the Breadwinner Vanishes," *The Nation* 236 (February, 26, 1983): 239–42.

7. This is not the place to begin a critique of Illich. But such a critique would focus on the ambiguities in his concept of "human needs," on the limitations of using "productivity" and "counterproductivity" as axial criteria for criticizing industrial society, and on his overall tendency to envision community in economistic terms. In one sense, Illich can be read as an (anti-) capitalist "efficiency expert." This, however, does not detract from the import of his description of "shadow work." For a detailed unraveling of the concepts of need, production, and labor, which "reflect all of Western metaphysics," see Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production* (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1975).

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