

## HOUSE DIVIDED: EXPLORING THE CONTRADICTIONS OF FAMILY LIFE

*Rachael A. Peltz*

Mark Poster, *Critical Theory of the Family*, New York: Seabury Press, 1973.

Mark Poster has written his *Critical Theory of the Family* at a time when contradictions between capitalism and the family present themselves in every aspect of daily life. The family is being examined intensively by conservative, liberal and leftist theorists because it assumes a position of centrality in capitalist society. It is the pivotal social unit in which the organization of consumption, production of labor power, socialization of children, and regulation of social control — as well as the fulfillment of psychic and emotional needs — are presumably located. Yet the forces of capitalism essentially render family life impossible. As long as capitalism persists the family will remain in a constant state of imbalance. Furthermore, capitalist ideology will continue to mask the realities which lie at the root of the family's immization.<sup>1</sup>

As Juliet Mitchell observes:

Part of the function of the ideology of the family under capitalism is to preserve this unity (of the family) in the face of its essential breakup. However in doing this it ties itself in knots. The social nature of work under capitalism fragments the unitary family, thereby it enforces the social nature of the family itself.<sup>2</sup>

Mitchell's complex quote offers a glimpse of the contradictory character of the family under capitalism. On the one hand family life appears to be disintegrating under the impact of its subjection to disruptive and destabilizing forces. On the other hand, the family manifests a surprising resilience — organizing and re-organizing itself in the face of these economic, social and political forces. Otherwise stated: As the family is increasingly undercut by the various sectors of daily life it nevertheless remains as the last symbol of social control, emotional fulfillment and personal (unalienated) productivity — the last "haven in a heartless world."<sup>3</sup>

## HOUSE DIVIDED

The obvious question that presents itself is the meaning of the family's persistence. How do the contradictions we observe within the family reflect the contradictions within capitalism itself? And how are the needs of family members fulfilled (or unfulfilled) by the family under capitalism?

Poster's book is written at a time when such questions are foremost in our minds, and his answer is to propose a critical theory of the family — precisely what is needed. Poster's goal is to strip past theories of their "ideological nature" in favor of the formation of a "critical" theory for future use. He does this by examining major psychological, sociological, critical and structural theorists, and offering a critique of their underlying conceptions of the family. This critique is based largely on Poster's notion that a "critical" theory must contain within it both historical and social elements; otherwise it falls into the category of the "ideological". He then proposes what he calls the "elements of a critical theory of the family" followed by a historical analysis of four models of family structure. In the final analysis his actual examination of previous theorizing represents a facile critique that ultimately strips the theories of their essences, and produces an idealist non-theory rather than the critical theory we need.

There are a number of ways in which Poster undermines his efforts to offer a critical theory of the family. First, he fails to distinguish between historically specific manifestations and trans-historical structures within or relating to the family. Hence, the instances in which he identifies ideological presumptions become just cause for the dismissal of an entire theory. The most obvious example of this is Poster's treatment of Freud. Poster dismisses as ideological Freud's major theoretical formulations — the Oedipus complex, the castration complex, penis envy and Freud's delineation of the structure of the unconscious:

The consequence of [Freud's] theory is to present the bourgeois psyche as the human psyche, bourgeois complexes as human complexes, to mask the determinate social practices that maintain this psyche, even while penetrating the structure and mechanisms of this psyche as no one before. Freud is then, the Adam Smith of the family.<sup>4</sup>

Poster has clearly misconstrued Freud, and reduced the essence of his theory to an ideological statement about the 19th-century family. While it is true Freud's theory reflects the ideology of his time and does lack historical formulation of the family per se, it is still extremely useful. The psychic structures posited by Freud (conscious/unconscious, Oedipus complex and attendant components) occur in every society, but take on different manifestations depending on the historically specific social relations.

## RACHAEL A. PELTZ

Compare Juliet Mitchell's interpretation of Freud as illustrated in her discussion of the Oedipus complex:

The Oedipus complex is the repressed ideas that appertain to the family drama of *any primary constellation of figures* within which the child must find its place. It is not the *actual* family situation or the conscious desires it evokes.<sup>5</sup>

Instead of recognizing this distinction between the bourgeois family and the psychic structure which ultimately provides the entry of the individual subject into culture via its kinship structure,<sup>6</sup> Poster dismisses the theory altogether.

The second difficulty within Poster's analysis is the tendency to fall into a form of relativism which defeats the capacity to theorize at all. The roots of this relativism lie in his adamant attack on vulgar Marxism and Freudianism. In his effort to avoid the pitfalls of either individual or economic reductionism he fails to perceive *any* determining relationships beyond the vague notion that the forces which bear on society and the family are many and complex. This hardly constitutes the material of theory.

In his section on the elements of a critical theory Poster concludes, "family history should be conceived in the plural, as the history of distinct structures of age and sex hierarchies. The changes from one structure to another will require different exploratory strategies, each suited to its own case."<sup>7</sup> We are left here with a statement devoid of any theoretical postulates which would account for either the family as the agent of psychic constitution, or the *meaning* of its historical manifestations. Poster's struggle against this reductionism of vulgar Marxism and Freudianism hardly necessitates the reduction of theory to relativistic "explanatory strategies"; rather, it calls for a closer examination of the complex interface between psychic and social structures. Such an examination requires a theory of the subject that takes into account the "process through which *any* human subject is constituted in determinate ways."<sup>8</sup>

The strength of Poster's endeavor is his effort to demystify the patriarchal, nuclear family by: 1) revealing the manner in which its ideology<sup>9</sup> is reinforced by bourgeois social theory and, 2) attempting to generate a definition of the family which encompasses its social nature. The history of bourgeois social theory reveals two basic approaches to the understanding of the family: the internal approach which studies the family's inner structure and dynamics; and the external approach which views the role of the family in society by emphasizing it as the agent of reproduction and socialization. Both perspectives have historically accepted the patriarchal nuclear family as the inevitable — and desirable — form of the family.<sup>10</sup> And both perspectives

## HOUSE DIVIDED

assume the family as a distinct social unit, separate from, but functioning within, society. Thus a false dichotomy is posed between "family" on the one hand and "society" on the other — a dichotomy which, when taken further, has cemented a particular conception of the family into the ideological constructs of our time. As Poster recognizes, this perspective creates an abstract idealization — the isolate "family" — and thus contributes to, in both theory and practice, a false experience of the family's social meaning.

Poster's solution to this reified and biased conceptualization of the family is to propose a definition of the family "which is broad and loose enough to encompass the varying family configurations of the pre-industrial and industrial periods."<sup>11</sup> With this in mind he defines the family as "the place where psychic structure is formed\* and where experience is characterized in the first instance by emotional patterns."<sup>12</sup> He then opposes economic determinist conceptions which view the family exclusively through its functions in the economy. These theories are countered with a statement of the "partial autonomy" of the family.

Poster's definition of the family does eliminate the ideological biases implicit in bourgeois family theory. But in its broadness it implies that the family can take on virtually any form. In the absence of the essential psychic determinations Poster is forced to substitute vague notions of "love," "authority," and "hierarchies of age and sex" which perhaps enable one to describe the family but hardly permit an understanding of it. He provides no theoretical tools for grasping why the family manifests its particular form, or the particular contradiction to which it is subject in capitalist culture.

Poster suggests that the reader should consider certain categories as central for locating the daily routines of family life within society. They include among others: composition of households, material structure, marriage and courtship customs, and regulation of sexuality. The problem with these categories is that they are essentially descriptive and static. The categories again facilitate an ethno-methodological description of different family types but leave many of the key questions unanswered, questions which are central to the dynamics of family life: what is the meaning of the family's "emotional patterns"?; what is the relationship of the family to the economic and social structures?; how does the family assume a position of "partial autonomy"?; what are the implications of the family as a social formation for the psychic structures of its members?

---

\*It is unclear what Poster means here since he earlier opposed any notion of determinate psychic structures. Further it is difficult to ascertain a distinction between psychic structures as the term is normally understood (e.g. in psychoanalytic theory) and the mere internalization of social norms.

## RACHAEL A. PELTZ

The unanswered questions that emerge as a consequence of Poster's book can begin to be illuminated by examining some of the recent efforts of theorists who are attempting to synthesize elements of psychoanalysis, Marxism and structuralism. These theorists, whose works are explicated elsewhere in this section, focus on the individual subject. But the family too can be seen in a wholly new light if, as I suggest, we employ similar concepts to understand the position of the family as a social formation, and in a relation to other such formations. Thus the family also is "de-centered"; i.e., its most private intimacies are determined elsewhere — by the ideological, political and (ultimately) economic structures of capitalist societies.<sup>13</sup> It is also the case that — as with other social formations — a relative autonomy exists. In the words of Juliet Mitchell:

The dominant ideological formation is not separable from the dominant economic one, but while linked it does have a degree of autonomy and its own laws. The ideology of the family can remain: individualism, freedom and equality (at home, you're yourself), while the social and economic reality can be very much at odds with such a concept.<sup>14</sup>

The family's relative autonomy is a consequence of the unintended and unconscious dynamic set into motion by the interaction of psychic and social determinants, but never fully reducible to either of them. For example, the structure and function of the family is clearly dominated by the character of the means of production. But this domination is limited by the dialectic this sets into motion, where independent affective components take on a life of their own. Thus the current chaos into which the family has been thrown by economic and social factors may be quite compatible with late capitalist development, but the emotional fissures thereby created may well serve to undermine social control — by creating a culture of borderline characters or dissolving the psychological basis of authority. Therefore the contradiction between the emotions and the economy is ultimately located within the social formation of the family under capitalism — the outcome of which cannot be predicted.

A closer examination of the economic, political and ideological structures will illustrate this contradiction further. The position of the family has shifted drastically from that period when it functioned as a unit of production. Industrialism set into motion the family's gradual breakdown and separation from other social spheres. This movement both accentuated the (nuclear) family's importance for emotional purposes while simultaneously creating a fragmented realm of personal life where the disparities among family,

## HOUSE DIVIDED

production and social existence increased.<sup>15</sup> As a social formation the family recapitulated the anarchy of production witnessed by its unpredictable response to economic and political conditions — increased child abuse, divorce rate, etc. Yet it resisted ultimate demise by reconstituting itself in new alternative forms.

The alienation of the family from production was accompanied by the gradual breakdown of attendant institutions such that it no longer performed social functions within a network of integrated institutional structures. Whereas in the past the family, production, religion, education and recreation operated within the same sphere of relations, the later stages of capitalism dictated the creation of separated, fragmented spheres.

The current state of the family is yet more perplexing. In some ways one could deduce it has increased its function in the economic realm due to inflation. Presently two incomes are necessary to maintain the same standard of living previously maintained by one.<sup>16</sup> Consequently families with two incomes fare significantly better than single income families, especially single mother families. Therefore where economic forces once served to fragment it, the family now imposes an ersatz unity if only to insure temporarily the capacity to provide for basics — food, clothing, shelter, transportation. Although the family does not function exclusively in response to economic pressures, this example highlights the de-stabilizing and destructive forces of the economy on the family's structure and emotional life.

The social breakdown occurring during the middle stage of capitalist development led to an emotional crisis within the family, which in turn spawned the intervention of the *political* apparatus. In response to this crisis increased public policy was initiated to attempt to bolster the family's position and restore it to its previous state. Whether these interventions actually usurped the family's functions or authority, as suggested by Lasch and Keniston, rather than responding to the already evident breakdown of the family and social structures indigenous to its functioning, is open for discussion. Regardless, these efforts have failed.

The crisis of the family persists, accentuated by a public policy designed to alleviate it. A stage of acknowledgement and denial has now been reached when ideology — beginning to lose its hold on implicit lived experience — must pronounce itself explicitly.

The desperate effort on the part of the state to somehow preserve the integrity of the family illustrates the function of the third structure — *ideology*. At this point ideology assumes a dominant position within the complex relations affecting the family. Because capitalism has destroyed the structures capable of fulfilling the emotional needs of its subjects, it relies on ideology. As objective conditions increasingly stretch family life in opposing directions, ideology is unwittingly accepted as a substitute for a reality too

## RACHAEL A. PELTZ

painful to bear. It is at this point that Althusser's theory of the subject can be applied to the family: the ethic of the homogeneous family, as well as the free individual, prevents the perception of those social forces which belie these misrecognitions.

Just as capitalist ideology obscures the realization of the forces of domination in the individual subject, so does it mask the meaning of the family's chaos and misery. Individuals separately experience their "personal failures" as marriages break up. Parents increasingly look *inward* for the answers to why their kids are acting "out of control." For the family, ideology provides the myths that substitute for lost realities. But ideological mystification alone cannot repair the damages nor substitute for the necessary social structures to circumvent further decomposition of the family and its members.

\* \* \*

I will briefly interject a clinical example of the contradiction by offering some material received in the context of my work as a therapist. I work at an agency where family therapy is employed as prevention for status offender youths from entering the juvenile justice system. A status offense is one which, for an adult, would not constitute breaking the law: e.g., running away, truancy, curfew violations, and "incurability." The scenario that typically unfolds includes a youth between nine and eighteen years who has ceased to attend school regularly, gets bad grades, maintains erratic hours, dabbles in minor drugs, is sexually active, associates with the "wrong" crowd and needs prodding to accomplish household responsibilities. The parents are either married, separated, divorced, and living either singly, with a lover, or with a spouse. They generally feel helpless in the face of their child's behavior, incompetent and guilty as parents, protective of the sanctity of the family, disillusioned with the state apparatuses (e.g., schools, police probation, juvenile laws), frustrated with their primary relationship or lonely for lack of one, and desperate for a solution from the therapist.

This recurrent scene epitomizes the most common emotional crisis of contemporary family life. Further, it offers a lucid illustration of the breakdown of authority within the family contributed to by other social structures, and the simultaneous reaffirmation of faith in its ideology derived from the unfulfilled needs of its members as the result of this breakdown.

The contradiction is apparent in this example in two ways: as a result of the forces of capitalism the family is largely isolated from any network of kinship, community or institutional relations. Psychically this generates an intensified "Oedipalization" within the internal family dynamic. By this I mean children's Oedipal attachments are narrowly and exclusively focused on parental

## HOUSE DIVIDED

figures, with few, if any other, significant relationships being formed. But the same forces which thus intensify Oedipal conflict likewise impede its resolution: neither family nor culture is prepared to gratify the intense, and often pathological, demands placed on them by their offspring. Hence with the onset of adolescence, which marks the re-emergence of childhood — Oedipal — themes, we witness countless teenagers who appear “out of control” — a euphemism employed by parents to express their own powerlessness. Confronted with so many other shattered dreams, parents cling to the one dream they have been promised will come true — that of home and family. Tragically, in many instances they can neither afford the home nor control the family.

Thus the family under capitalism functions as the locus of contradiction between economic and emotional life. It is forced into a state of persistent chaos — responding to contradictory demands which dictate a stable unit of consumption, socialization and maintenance of control; while simultaneously fragmenting and unbalancing this unit. To the extent that the individual's needs cannot be satisfied within *or* external to the family, tensions gradually mount. These tensions can be temporarily relieved by acting them out regressively, as exemplified by the increasing wave of crimes and cults. Or they can lead to the realization of the roots of ideological mystification and the development of progressive alternatives to the tension-generating conditions. Since the family is characterized by its contradictory existence in capitalist society its individual members reflect these contradictions by being potentially positioned in the role of radical social agents. Indeed it would be paradoxical if the ideological stronghold of early capitalism, the patriarchal nuclear family, ultimately provided the foundation for the critique of capitalist society.

The Wright Institute  
Berkeley, California

### Notes

1. The notion of the “new immizeration” of family life is borrowed from a forthcoming article entitled; “The New Immizeration — The Economics and Politics of the Fading American Dream” by, Elliott Currie, Robert Dunn, and David Fogarty.
2. Juliet Mitchell, *Women's Estate*, New York: Vintage Books, 1973, p. 156.
3. Christopher Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World*, New York: Basic Books, 1977.
4. Mark Poster, *Critical Theory of the Family*, New York: Seabury Press, 1973, p. 24.
5. Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, New York: Pantheon Press, 1974 (first emphasis mine).
6. See Mitchell, *ibid.*, p. 377, for a discussion of the role of the Oedipus Complex in culture.

RACHAEL A. PELTZ

7. Poster, p. 164.
8. Diana Adlam et al., "Psychology, Ideology, and the Human Subject," *Ideology and Consciousness*, Volume #1, May 1977, p. 24.
9. I am referring to ideology in the manner explicated by Schiller, Sekoff and Goldberg, as the combination of "lived experience" and hegemonic ideas.
10. While the patriarchal, nuclear family has ideologically represented the family of preference, alternative forms of family life have begun to gain legitimacy among bourgeois theorists as well. This phenomenon illustrates the contradictory nature of the family under capitalism: the family can neither be contained nor controlled.
11. Poster, p. 142.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 143.
13. See particularly, Gregor McLennon et al., *On Ideology*, London: Hutchinson, 1978.
14. Mitchell, *Women's Estate*, p. 156.
15. Eli Zaretsky, *Capitalism, the Family and Personal Life*, Harper Colophon Books, New
16. Elliott Currie et al., "The New Immization . . . ."