

Class and the New Family in the Wake of the Housing Collapse

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Over the last several decades some significant shifts in family have transformed the traditional forms of family and shaped what is now generally called the “new family.” The most essential feature of the “new” family is that it is “post-nuclear” in that it is a loose configuration of sex/gender/sexual/cultural/generational relations. The emergence of “post-nuclear” family has been the “giving way” of the nuclear family centered on the heterosexual married couple of male breadwinner/female homemaker both as a demographic norm and a cultural norm. Not only is the nuclear family now the minority family configuration demographically, but it is also no longer the uncontested cultural norm. What has become evident with the emergence of the post-nuclear family is that the nuclear family form – that is, its dominance – was underpinned by an interlocking matrix of assumptions that, together, constituted an ideology of this family form as “natural” when it was, in actuality, a specific cultural and historical form that emerged in the West in the 19th and, especially, 20th century. These assumptions linked a specific sex/gender/sexuality/procreation relation and understood these as natural and transhistorical. In other words, nuclear family assumed sex equals gender and that heterosexual sex is the only way to reproduce as a family and as a society when in fact, as theorists such as Judith Butler have effectively demonstrated, one’s sex does not determine one’s gender does not determine one’s sexuality does not determine one’s desire to or ability to (socially) reproduce.

As others in anthropology and feminist family studies have argued, the norm of the nuclear family was a construct that was nationalistic and racially exclusionary as well as well as exclusionary of “other” sexualities. So, what we see in the “new” family is, in part, the loosening up of the links between sex/gender/sexuality/race/nationality and family. As result, as Judith Stacey has argued: “No longer is there a single culturally dominant family pattern” (*In the Name* 7). New families are diverse in their configurations in terms of biological sex, gender and other differences – sexuality, race, ethnicity, nationality, etc. They include gay families, transethnic families, transnational

families, single-parent families and so on. The new family is also a changing or “flexible” family. Rather than a set of permanent relations “until death do us part,” the new family often adjusts its configuration over time – for example couples cohabit, marry, divorce, remarry, . . . forming not only “step” but “divorce-extended” families.

At the same time that changes in the internal structure of the family have been developing, the material conditions of the majority of families in the United States and beyond have been at best stagnating and, as a result, families face a number of daunting problems. These problems include struggles to access affordable housing, healthcare, and childcare. Rising debt is another serious problem that has emerged, largely the result (at least until recently) of inequalities rather than the absolute immiseration of families. Of course the problems aren’t only financial. The number of hours of wage-work of families has increased, largely due to increase in women’s labor market participation, and while this has meant, overall, a positive historical change in gender relations, it has also brought a host of problems such as “time crunch” and pressure to “multi-task” which have left many women and men either sleep-deprived or feeling constantly “harried” if not harassed. In addition to financial problems and issues of lack of time and energy (and/or peace of mind), contemporary families are confronting growing health problems from obesity and its related effects to what appears to be a growing mental health crisis. And these are the problems that were mounting prior to the housing collapse, which is greatly exacerbating them (e.g., lack of access to affordable housing becomes homelessness).

These changes in the contemporary family alongside the deteriorating material conditions of the family give great urgency to the question I will address in this essay: How should we understand the “new” family and why?

My analysis of the new family, which works to bring materialist feminist theory into the global age in order to understand new family as one of its cultural institutions, differs from most analyses today both in terms of the status of the “new” of the new family and in terms of where it locates the source of changes in family life and family relations. Most recent analyses focus on surface changes of the family such as changing identities of its members and shifts in its internal power relations, and on this basis declare that, for instance, the gay family or the transnational family or, more recently, the “posthuman” or “green” family, represent radical departures from the family forms of

earlier nationalist periods in capitalism. In particular, the dominant understanding of the “new” family in contemporary family studies and literary and cultural studies posits family relations as primarily, if not solely, based on “affect” – whether this affect is called “desire” in earlier theories (see, for instance, Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*) or “love” in more recent theories (see Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: from Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage*). Implied if not stated in this view is that the new family is no longer a relation of need, which is to say, it is no longer an economic unit charged, first and foremost, with providing the necessities of life for its members.

Crucial to the dominant understandings of the new family, as I discuss below, is that they have actively participated – if not always explicitly then clearly in the structure of their assumptions – in the “rethinking” of class in cultural theory, a rethinking that has argued that class in the Marxist sense of exploitation is passé and that what can and must remain instead is class in the Weberian sense of status/power. This “rethinking” of class has been tied to the notion of the emergence of a “post-industrial” society wherein value no longer comes from labor in the traditional sense of labor of production but from “knowledge” and/or “affective” (service) labor. These ideas, which are also tied up in the notion of finance/financial services as the leading sector of the economy and which have led to a false sense of economic prosperity and endless potential within capitalist relations, are largely responsible for the sense of “shock” that has emerged culturally since the collapse of the US housing market (i.e., bubble), the unraveling of “Wall Street” finance and the “credit market,” and the subsequent economic recession that is centered in the United States but is radiating globally (if somewhat differentially depending on such factors as dependence on export markets). It is my contention that what is necessary now in literary and cultural theory is a rethinking of the rethinking of class and a new thinking on class in the global age. This essay, which focuses on class and the new family, is a contribution to such a rethinking.

In contrast to the dominant analysis of new family as affect, I argue that the new family is (still) an economic unit and that, like the old, nuclear family, it is an economic unit that works on the one hand (for the owning class) to define the boundaries of inheritance of private property and on the other (for the class of workers, including

“middle” and “working” class) to define the boundaries of social responsibility for care. As such, the new family, like the old, works to reproduce class relations. The new family, in other words, does not represent the end of exploitation of members of the working class, which is the implication of understanding the family as an affective, post-economic space. In fact, because of the increase in women’s participation in the wage labor force, the new family represents a deepening of this exploitation as members of working families labor more hours for the same if not lower real wages. This does not, it is important to add, take away from the historical advance that this family form represents. This is important to add because otherwise one falls into the position of those “traditionalists” who do not critique the limits of but dismiss the new, “flexible” family as “unstable” and thus “bad” for children rather than contradictory in both its roots and effects. The exclusion of women from wage labor and therefore exploitation did not, does not, and will not bring them or their children freedom; rather such exclusion adds a second burden to their lives and also works to reproduce divisions within the increasingly global working class that can only weaken it in its class struggles.

But the new family, in its dominant representations, is also an ideological construct that deflects attention away from the deteriorating material conditions for working and living in global capitalism and blocks investigation into the cause of these material conditions. This is why the materialist approach to literary and cultural studies of the family is both productive and necessary, today more than ever. Materialist theory explains the “new-ness” of the new family *not* as a break from the old (privatized family of capitalism as an economic unit) but as a development of this privatized family.

An exemplary ideological representation of the “new” family is the film *Under the Tuscan Sun*. The film traces the emergence of a multicultural, polysexual and multirelational family in contemporary Tuscany that has as its core a heterosexual American woman who purchases a run-down villa while on vacation with a gay tour. The very fact that this single heterosexual woman is vacationing on a gay tour is of course itself a sign of the shifts in the “common sense” and the “acceptable” that the film will portray. The main character, who is recently divorced, starts out alone and in a more “traditional” and “familiar” context, but by the end of the film she is hosting a wedding and surrounded by her new family. The family includes a Polish immigrant worker who

has been part of a team of Polish workers who have been refurbishing her villa, his new (Italian) wife and her family, the main character's Asian-American lesbian friend and her newborn baby, and the new American lover of the main character. At the end of the film the main character remarks that she had dreamt of a wedding and babies in her villa and that (although not quite in the form she had expected) she has gotten all the things about which she dreamt. Though she is still "straight," we are meant to understand that she has "learned" that (old) "dreams" (of children, weddings, etc.) can come in different (new) forms, and that they should all be embraced.

Yet, to briefly take one characteristic blind spot of dominant representations of the new family, one of the telling unsaids of the film's portrayal of the new polysexual, transnational family is the material conditions of labor that have forced millions of people from the former Soviet bloc to migrate to the West to find work since the fall of the communist regime in 1989. In Poland, the homeland of the migrants in the film, the post-Soviet period has led to an increase in the number of working-class people who are forced to migrate to other countries as a result of deteriorating social and economic conditions brought about by capitalism. In "Migration Movements from and into Poland in the Light of East-West European Migration" Krystyna Iglicka writes, for instance, that "emigration has slowly become a domain of blue-collar workers unable to adapt to market requirements" (6). The so-called "inability to adapt" here is a euphemism for the devastation that capitalism has brought on to workers in the East since 1989, devastation which has also led to an alarmingly widespread traffic for the global sex trade.

How, then, does the film depict the Polish workers? The film suggests that it is the Polish immigrant's individual "love" and "desire" for his wife-to-be as well as his ("pure") love of Italy that compel him to assimilate into Italian culture, including its family culture. In doing so, it completely erases the material conditions of Poland and leaves out entirely the way in which such assimilation is underpinned by global economic relations of need. That is to say, it turns the economic relations which force people to move to places with higher wages and better working and living conditions, into personal relations of subjective desire. All of the film's relations become relations of "choice." The film uncritically celebrates the "new" family and in doing so it covers over the contradictions of contemporary capitalism such as the inequalities and hardships that both

lead to and are (if in new forms) perpetuated by migration.

The film's uncritical celebration of the new family is symptomatic of what I theorize in this essay as "affective" theories of the new family. Affective theory sees the "new" family as a series of singular families which are the product of the desires of individuals. Family forms, on these terms, "elect" to engage in various practices and relations. Families and family members, in other words, are not seen as situated in the broader context of material relations within which they work to survive – instead they make choices which, while "constrained" to varying degrees, are ultimately individual choices that exceed such structures as class.

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In affective cultural theory of the family, which includes the work of Judith Stacey, Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, Jennifer Hirsch, Harriet Fraad, Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff, Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh, Nicole Constable, Kath Weston, and, in her recent work, Stephanie Coontz, the contemporary family is seen as either transformed or in the process of transformation. The family has changed, in this view, because it is now a voluntary choice of affective relations not an economic compulsion. In her recent book, *Marriage, a History: from Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage*, Stephanie Coontz makes this affective logic explicit when she argues that what we see today in marriage is the realization of a "revolutionary new marriage system" which she calls "loved-based marriage" (5). As a result of this affective basis, the family's internal power relations have been changed into (more) egalitarian relations and it is now a space of freedom from restrictive norms. Either implicitly or explicitly, these theories take the position that insofar as there are inequalities in the contemporary family that can be and need to be resolved, these stem from culture and politics, not economics. As such, the family in this view is an affective institution de-linked from the material base of private property relations. Perhaps the most influential of the affective family theorists is Judith Stacey. Stacey's writings – including her study of two families living and working in the Silicon Valley, *Brave New Families: Stories of Domestic Upheaval in Late Twentieth Century America*, as well as *In the Name of the Family: Rethinking Family Values in the Postmodern Age*, which develops her initial

theorization of the “postmodern” family and answers the critics of *Brave New Families* – are exemplary of affective cultural studies’ understanding of the “new” family, including its affirmation of this family as a family of equality in its internal power and in its freedom from norms. While Stacey focuses especially on the question of “norms,” it is clear that her theory is an “affective” theory of the family when she writes:

Voting with their hearts and deeds rather than their words and creeds, the vast majority of Americans have been actively remaking their family lives, and their expectations about family life as well. For example, by a ratio of three to one, people surveyed in a 1990 *Newsweek* poll defined the family as “a group of people who love and care for each other” (quite a postmodern definition), rather than the legalistic definition of “a group of people related by blood, marriage, or adoption.” (9)

This logic of the family as an “affective” space becomes more explicit in Stacey’s more recent work based on a study of the gay community in Los Angeles. She writes: “Forging families without cultural blueprints, gay men experience in heightened form what Anthony Giddens (1992) terms the pure relationship of modernity – the pursuit of a relationship for the sake of intimacy alone” (“The Families of Man: Gay Male Intimacy and Kinship in a Global Metropolis” 1914).

Stacey’s early work on the family is more critical in that it works to explain the relation between family and its broader social context. For instance, in her 1978 essay, “Social Biology, Family Studies, and Antifeminist Backlash,” written with Wini Breines and Margaret Cerullo, Stacey argues that “The gap between the promise and the reality of family life was [our feminist] object of criticism. . . . By exposing this gap, our criticism of the modern family became immediately an attack on a society that makes family ideals impossible to realize” (62). In contrast, in her later work, such as *In the Name of the Family*, Stacey merely (at points) marks the changing socio-economic context of families in the United States. She writes, for instance, that “the middle classes are shrinking and the economic circumstances of Americans polarizing” (32). In this later work she does not raise any questions about whether the subjective understanding of the “postmodern” family as a matter of “pure relationships” tells the whole story. In other words, exemplary

of affective family theories, Stacey's recent work marks a shift to a localist, Weberian reading of the relation between family changes and the broader political-economic context of these changes. For instance, *In the Name of the Family* she writes:

No longer is there a single culturally dominant family pattern, like the "modern" one, to which a majority of citizens conform and most of the rest aspire. Instead, postindustrial conditions have compelled and encouraged us to craft a wide array of family arrangements which we inhabit uneasily and reconstitute frequently as our occupational and personal circumstances shift. (7)

Here, while Stacey emphasizes the postmodern family as a space free of cultural norms, she also marks that the shifts in family are tied to "our occupational" as well as personal circumstances. This raises the question of why she does not question the subjective understanding of the postmodern family as fundamentally transformed into a family based (solely) on "love and care" and not, that is, on economic and financial considerations.

In order to understand this apparent contradiction within Stacey's argument, it is necessary to step back and look at the argument and its presuppositions more carefully. Analyzing the passage I have quoted above, we can see two of Stacey's key presuppositions. One is that she understands the current economic conditions as "postindustrial." She posits a break in history that is marked by the "post" of postindustrial, and it is this break in history that is responsible for the emerging "postmodern" family. According to Stacey, like other "affective" family theorists, while the family was once structurally determined by the economy as a matter of productive labor relations, it is no longer so determined even if individual families and family members "choices" may be "constrained" by their "occupational and personal circumstances." This is because, from this "postindustrial" view, the economy itself has become "culturalized": it is now knowledge and affect, and not labor, that creates value. Underlying this culturalizing of the economy is the second presupposition that Stacey marks in the passage cited above, that class is a matter of "occupations." In other words, she is taking up a Weberian, cultural theory of class as a matter of status and power, or a

matter of the distribution of opportunities for improving one's life chances, rather than a structural theory of class as a matter of exploitation of one class by another. However, power/distribution is an effect of class as a structure of exploitation. Those who are given power (privilege) in capitalism, such as managers, are those who enable profit-making. In other words, when Stacey refers to "class" issues, she is in actuality referring to the surfaces, or effects of class.

Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim is even clearer in her understanding of the "new" family as a post-(structural) class, and ultimately post-(structurally) economic space. For Beck-Gernsheim, the history of what she calls the "post-familial family" is part of the history of progressive "individualization" where each person has her own relation to the labor market. She writes of "life under conditions of individualization":

To put it simply, whereas people used to be born into a number of social givens (such as class or religion), they now have to *do* something, to make an effort of their own – for example, by maintaining their position on the labour market, or by applying for housing benefit and giving reasons why they should receive it. Here it is necessary to know how to assert oneself, to prevail in the competition for scarce resources. (*Reinventing* 44)

For Beck-Gernsheim differences come down to differences in power, or knowing/not knowing how to "assert oneself." Here, we see the way in which a Weberian theory of class in which class is a matter of competition on the market ultimately becomes a post-class theory of "individualization." What Beck-Gernsheim (and Stacey) cannot explain from this position is why resources are scarce – that is, scarce for some – at the same time that there is such enormous wealth and potential to produce wealth in the world. In fact, Beck-Gernsheim ends up occluding the question (of scarce resources) she herself raises when she theorizes the family as a post-economic space, which is what is at stake when she argues that the "post-familial" or "negotiated" family is no longer "a community of need" but rather "elective affinities" that are based on "choice and personal inclination" ("On the Way" 66).

Here, it is important to stress the historical context of Stacey's and Beck-

Gernsheim's arguments, which were published in 2000, 1998 and 2002. From 1979 to 1995, there was a long period of stagnation, if not decline, in wages for the majority. Mishel, Bernstein and Boushey write, for instance that "[w]ages were stagnant or fell for the bottom 70% of wage earners over the 1979-95 period" (127). At the same time, the class of owners was increasing its wealth. For instance, while the average real income of American taxpayers fell 7 percent between 1973 and 2000, the income of the top 1 percent increased by 148 percent and the income of the top .1 percent increased by 342 percent. This has meant a rapidly widening income inequality (Krugman 16). The division of wealth is even more uneven. For instance, in 1998 the average wealth of the top 1 percent of households was \$10.2 million, while the poorest 20 percent of households had a negative net worth of -\$8,900 (Mishel, Bernstein and Boushey 282). What, then, does Stacey argue is at the root of the inequalities of the "postmodern" family condition and what are the prospects to remedy these inequalities? Stacey argues that the root problem underlying the inequalities between postmodern families is conservative discourses and policies, or what she calls "the moralistic ideology of the family" (*In The Name* 11) and "conservative family rhetoric and policies" (12). Here we see, exemplary of affective theories of the family, that insofar as she recognizes inequalities, she sees these as rooted in culture and politics. By ideology Stacey means a set of ideas or "rhetoric" (language) that discursively imposes a norm; conservative ideology says that the modern, nuclear family, or an "intact nuclear unit inhabited by a male breadwinner, his full-time homemaker wife, and their dependent children," is the only family form that can meet society's needs (6).

Stacey critiques conservative ideas about the family and the policies that these ideas promote and justify. This critique has its effectivity in showing that the relations in the family are cultural relations which change over time, not natural relations which can and should remain the same. This historicization works to combat conservative discourses which naturalize one form of the family (the modern nuclear family) and thus privilege it over all other family forms.

However, there are significant limits to Stacey's critique of "family values" rhetoric. These limits are marked by the way in which her argument falls into contradictions, even within her own terms. For instance, while this argument "for" the

postmodern family is, as she frames it, an argument “against” “norms,” at the same time, she does not argue against all norms, but rather only argues against the “old” norm. In other words, such a position, which is exemplary of the affective cultural theory of the family, argues against the “rigidity” of the modern family, but at the same time affirms the “new” “norm” of “diversity” and “flexibility,” or adjustment to the (“postindustrial”) conditions of what Stacey calls “endemic instability and uncertainty” (9). The affirmation of this new norm is what is at stake when Stacey argues for the postmodern family on the basis of its prospects for extending “equality, democracy and choice.” Beck-Gernsheim, who also theorizes the “new” families as irreducible (they are, in her view, a series of “finely differentiated lifestyles”), falls into the same contradiction when she argues that the future of the family is “the ‘normalization of fragility’” (*Reinventing* 3; 18).

According to Stephanie Coontz, the family’s apparently now permanent state of fragility is the natural result of the revolution of marriage to “love-based marriage,” although she never explains why love is naturally unstable (5). In other words, these texts work to affirm a new cultural norm of family relations *within the exploitative and oppressive relations of capitalism*. As such, they are, in the end, an ideological call for adjustment of the (old) relations for new “postindustrial” circumstances.

Here, I am drawing on István Mészáros’s theory of ideology in *The Power of Ideology*. In this text, Mészáros theorizes that there are two forms of bourgeois ideology. The first, he writes, “supports the given order with uncritical attitude, adopting and glorifying the immediacy of the dominant system – no matter how problematical or full of contradictions” (13). Conservative theories of the family such as Newt Gingrich’s ideas about the family represent this kind of ideology. For instance, when Gingrich sees families that are poor and struggling, rather than attempting to design policies to help these families, he suggests sending their children to orphanages and calls this “family values.” However, according to Mészáros there is a second kind of ideology which is exemplified by radical thinkers like Rousseau which “succeeds to a significant extent in exposing the irrationalities of the specific form of a rather anachronistic class society which it rejects from a new vantage point. But its critique is vitiated by the contradictions of its own – equally class-determined, even if historically more advanced – social position” (13). Stacey’s theory of the “postmodern” family is such an ideology. It

critiques the irrationalities of the modern, nuclear family, arguing that this family represents an oppressive set of “family values” that underpin an oppressive gender order. However, she falls into contradictions when she advocates taking up “new” values such as “flexibility” that, as I discuss below, are the values necessary now for the maintenance of an exploitative and oppressive economic order.

In addition to Judith Stacey and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim’s theories of the “postmodern” and the “post-familial” families, I have included Harriet Fraad, Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff’s theory of the “modern communist” family within affective theories of the family. To be clear, I am very much in solidarity with the aim of these theorists, which is to develop a theory of family in relation to the question of class as well as gender. However, the theory of the family that Fraad, Resnick and Wolff put forward is problematic and ultimately aligns with affective cultural theory of the family.

At the crux of Fraad, Resnick and Wolff’s theory of the family is their theory of class which was developed by Resnick and Wolff in their earlier book, *Knowledge and Class: A Marxian Critique of Political Economy*. In this text, they put forward a Weberian theory of the social in which the social is seen as a series of spheres, none of which is determining. The term they use to express the mutual determination of this set of spheres, which they name as “natural, economic, political and cultural” processes (19), is “overdetermination” which, as they indicate, they have “borrowed from Freud, Lukacs, and Althusser” (2). This understanding of the social is central to the claim that this theory is “opposed to any form of reductionism or essentialism” (2) including “the economic determinism that has figured so prominently in the Marxian tradition” (4). However, like Weber, they understand the economic and class as a matter of distribution and thus – despite their references to production and exploitation – reduce the social to the realm of consumption or reproduction. We can see this in the way that Resnick and Wolff theorize class as “class process.” Significantly, the fundamental “class process” in this view is not exploitation (the extraction of surplus labor from one class by another). Resnick and Wolff theorize the “class process” which they separate from “other economic processes” such as “commodity exchange, borrowing/lending, saving money, etc.” as follows:

It is defined as the process of producing and appropriating surplus labor. Laborers are understood to do a certain amount of labor sufficient to produce the goods and services their current standard of living requires. Marx calls this “necessary labor.” However, laborers in all societies perform more than necessary labor. They do what Marx calls “surplus labor.” This surplus may be retained by the laborers, individually or collectively. Alternatively it may be appropriated directly and immediately by nonlaborers. The latter case is Marx’s precise definition of exploitation: when the class process involves nonlaborers appropriating the surplus labor of laborers. (20)

Here Resnick and Wolff radically rewrite Marx’s conceptualization of “class,” de-linking it from any necessary relation to exploitation. From the Marxist perspective, when the process of production involves “exploitation” – as the extraction of surplus labor from one class by another – then and only then is it a “class process.” By indicating that laborers in all societies perform surplus labor, Resnick and Wolff conflate what Marx understands to be a “class process” with production in general, or the production of use-values. In doing so, they represent exploitation as a function of distribution; since surplus labor is always performed, the “difference” becomes only a matter of distribution of the extra wealth, or use-values.

In their rewriting of “class” as “class process” not only do Resnick and Wolff conflate class society with all societies, they also erase the distinction that Marx clearly makes between capitalism and other class societies. That is, by arguing that an “exploitative” class process is “when the class process involves nonlaborers appropriating the surplus labor of laborers,” Resnick and Wolff in effect de-historicize capitalist exploitation which is not simply the appropriation of surplus labor, but the extraction of surplus labor in the form of surplus value for the sake of accumulation of surplus value in the form of profit. In other words, by equating capitalist exploitation with all exploitation, Resnick and Wolff work to obscure the historical specificity of capitalism as a mode of production. They work to obscure the fact that, as Marx argues, what defines capitalism as a mode of production is that it is a mode of production within which exchange-value, and ultimately the potential for producing and accumulating profit, is taken into account

and determines production of use-values and in which, consequently, a “boundless thirst” for surplus labor is structurally embedded within its production relations. In other words, Resnick and Wolff obscure the way in which capitalist relations of production structurally prioritize production for profit versus need. It is this aporia which then opens onto the possibility of positing redistribution of wealth (or “use-values”) as a resolution of the contradictions of capitalism; it follows from this that the transformation of production relations is not necessary.

We can see the consequences of this theory of class for the theory of the family in the way in which Fraad, Resnick and Wolff theorize “households” in *Bringing It All Back Home: Class, Gender and Power in the Modern Household*. For these theorists, the household is a site of “class processes.” Again, this is a Weberian theory of spheres because it breaks up the social into various sites of distinct class processes, none of which is determining. For instance, they argue that the family in the United States has been a site of “feudal” class processes. In the “feudal households,” which is their concept for the nuclear family with a male breadwinner and full-time homemaker wife, the wife performs surplus domestic or reproductive labor that is appropriated by the husband. In other words, she does not only work “cooking, cleaning, preparing food, and so on” for herself (either to use or sell) but for her husband – he also uses the services or products she produces and/or gets money from the sale of surplus products or services such as sweaters or pies or child care (8). Since the husband “appropriates” “surplus labor” from the wife, Fraad, Resnick and Wolff understand this to be a form of exploitation. However, they argue that the feudal household is in crisis and that there has been a significant development of nonfeudal households, including the emergence of the “modern communist” household. Even on their own terms, this is a problematic formulation because if the husband exploits the housewife because he appropriates her surplus domestic labor, then the wife must exploit the surplus labor of the husband when she appropriates some of his wages. However, exploitation is not a reciprocal relation of co-exploitation, but one where one class exploits another, particularly on the basis of its ownership of means of production. In this theorization of feudal households, Fraad, Resnick and Wolff have worked to conflate oppressive gender relations with relations of exploitation. In addition, by theorizing gender oppression as a matter of a “distinct” class

process, they are positing power relations as autonomous from the exploitative social relations of production. In other words, the family becomes a site of autonomous power relations.

It is this understanding of the family as autonomous power relations that leads Fraad, Resnick and Wolff to conclude that the emergence of “modern communist” households “marks a revolutionary class transformation in households” (35). A modern communist household in this view is a family in which the family not only aims at meeting the “old family ideal,” but succeeds in meeting it (38). Fraad, Resnick and Wolff describe this ideal when they write:

For example, couples therapies increasingly encourage the equal sharing of the performance, management, and fruits of domestic labor and all household decision-making. The broad goal is to share wealth, work, power, and emotional intimacy, substituting what, in our terms, approaches communism for the relations of economic exploitation and sexual and emotional subordination that characterize feudal households. (38).

Significantly, they are saying here that not only is the “new,” communist family a site of equality between the sexes, but it is also a space where family members’ needs, particularly their needs for emotional intimacy, are met. This is evident because Fraad, Resnick and Woolf are not simply saying that the communist family is an ideal to strive for. Instead, they argue that at the time they write this text (1994), “[a]pproximately 20 per cent of two-adult households in the United States may be characterized now as comprising communist class processes” (38). In fact, in her essay “Exploitation in the Labor of Love,” which was published in 2000, Fraad suggests that as long as working families’ basic needs are met, then “[c]ommunal allocations of familial emotional work are remarkably achievable” for them (80). This is to suggest that in the new times the family has become a site for resolving the contradictions of class which, as I discuss below, do not leave the majority of families enough time and energy after a grueling working day to meet needs such as needs for emotional intimacy, no matter how the “work” of meeting these needs is distributed. This is an updating of the notion of the

family as a “haven in a heartless world.”

In fact, they take their affirmation of the “new,” “communist” family a step further when they write: “Such a crisis [of the feudal/nuclear family] would represent a possibly transitional conjuncture – to nonfeudal households – the ramifications of which could transform the entire society, including its gender processes and the class processes at all other sites” (25). Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim makes a similar claim when she argues that the “post-familial” family could be the site of subversion that “burst[s] the ‘iron cage of serfdom’” (*Reinventing* 138). Here, it is necessary to unpack the implications of Fraad, Resnick, and Wolff’s affirmations of the new family. They are arguing that the family is potentially the site whose transformation could set in motion – that is, determine – a total social transformation. This means that things could go one of two ways. If in fact the “new” family cannot produce a total social transformation, then, as I have said, it will still function as a space of equality and for meeting emotional needs, in other words, it will be a haven in heartless and inequitable world.

On the other hand, if the “new” family can produce a transformation of the “entire society,” then the family itself is so powerful that its “transformation” could set off a transformation of the totality of the cultural, political and economic relations. Here, we see a contradiction in this theory on its own terms. That is, if the family produces a total transformation, then it is not the case that the social is “overdetermined” as Fraad, Resnick and Wolff claim, but rather determined by the family as a site of reproductive labor. Reproduction determines and ultimately negates production in this view. As I discuss below, such a view of family as a space to transcend the limits of the existing material relations has serious consequences for families that are struggling under very difficult material conditions, conditions in which, for instance, “the middle classes have been shrinking and the economic circumstances of Americans polarizing” (Stacey, *In the Name* 32).

Two

From the perspective of materialist cultural studies of the family, a fundamental limit of the affective theory of the family in/of difference is that it takes as a core conceptual starting point the so-called unity of the “modern” family and it obscures, in

particular, the difference of class (as relations of exploitation) as it divides this family form. For instance, Judith Stacey's definition of the "modern" (or what, as she points out, is commonly known as the "traditional") family as "an intact nuclear unit inhabited by a male breadwinner, his full-time homemaker wife, and their dependent children" (6) leaves out entirely that for the working class, the "bread" (means of subsistence) is earned through the sale of (one or more) family members' labor, whereas for the ruling class the "bread" is revenue taken out of the surplus value extracted from workers. In other words, as Marx and Engels argue in *The Communist Manifesto* (a point which is elaborated in Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*), the foundation (material basis) of (not the "modern" but) the "bourgeois" family is private property in the form of capital.

In *The Social Origins of Private Life: A History of American Families 1600-1900*, which is, significantly, some of her early work on family, Stephanie Coontz elaborates the materialist theory of the family, drawing on the work of Engels in particular. Coontz theorizes the modern family as a form of the "bounded family" of class society (10). Coontz theorizes the (bounded, or "class") family as "a subdivision of relationships set up by kinship or location" which "determines the rights and obligations of its members in terms of inheritance, use of the prevailing set of resources, and initial 'social placement' into the social configuration of labor and rewards" (11). Within the family as a subdivision of social relations, in other words, there is implied a reciprocity and/or internal distribution (itself not always equal – children, for instance, for at least some period of time, only "take") wherein family members have "rights" as well as "obligations." However, in class society, such (family) "rights" and "obligations" are fundamentally divided across the classes. For the exploited class in capitalism, all an individual ultimately "owns" is his or her labor power. Thus, the "right" that one family member has in relation to another is a legally and/or socially sanctioned right to or claim over (a portion of) other family members' labor power (in the form of wages and/or domestic labor), and the family "obligation" is just the reverse of this – the obligation to forgo a portion of one's labor power to family members. However, within the exploiting class the "right" that family members claim is the right to ownership (through inheritance) of the means of production in the form of "capital" which, as Marx and

Engels argue, is a social force which is privately appropriated (*The Communist* 68).

In other words, as Stephanie Coontz puts it, in capitalism, “birth into a particular family,” bourgeois or proletariat, “determines whether one will work for a living or control the labor of others” (*In The Name* 11) and it is this difference “between” (class) families that is obscured by the affective theory of the family when it posits the “modern” family as monolithic and the “postmodern” family as merely “different” or plural(ist) versus class contradictory. Put another way, the family in capitalism is an economic unit, or a form of the “bounded” or “privatized” family in/of class society. As Coontz marks, this means that this “privatized” family defines the parameters of inheritance of property as well as the parameters of obligations for “care.” While the family is an economic unit, in capitalism its relations are superstructural relations in that they function not to produce value but to reproduce the existing relations of production.

Thus, in opposition to affective cultural studies of the family which posits the family as autonomous “power” relations, materialist cultural theory of the family understands the contemporary family as an articulation of the social relations of production. As such, materialist cultural studies puts forward a “labor theory” of the contemporary family. In this view, the “new” family is a function of historical changes within these existing private property relations. In other words, the fundamentally exploitative relations between wage labor and capital remain in “postindustrialism” (i.e., global capitalism) but there have been shifts in the way that exploitation, as the extraction of surplus value, is accomplished, and a deepening of this exploitation. It is these shifts in the way that surplus value is being extracted – such as, in the US, a shift to a “service” economy and increased labor market participation of women – that are compelling changes in the family. Moreover, from this view it is (deepening) exploitation that is the root cause of the contradictions of the contemporary family. At the same time, the forces of production have been developed to such an extent that it is possible to meet all families’ basic and historically developed needs. For instance, the forces of production are such that it is possible to produce enough food to feed all the world’s families. However, the private property relations of wage labor and capital and the way the profit motive is embedded within them dictate that this possibility cannot be fulfilled. Thus, from this view the emergence of the “new” family and its contradictions does not mark a

fundamental social transformation, but rather the possibility and necessity of such a transformation.

As in all ideologies, the idea put forward by affective cultural theory of the family that the “new” family is a post-economic space is not simply an invention. There is a historical basis for the idea that there has been a break in the family, though that break occurred with industrialization. That is, the family in industrial society is no longer a unit of production. However, the concept of the family as an economic unit must not be conflated with the idea of the family as a productive unit, or site of production. This is because as family becomes less and less a site of production (as in family farms), family members are more and more reliant on wage-labor in order to obtain the means of subsistence. This means that as long as family is an economic unit – which is to say that each “family,” however it arranges internal/power relations, is responsible for providing the means of subsistence for its family members – then this unit is subject to capitalist relations of wage-labor and capital and the profit motive embedded in these relations.

In order to truly understand the connection between capitalism as a for-profit structure of relations and the shaping of contemporary family, it is necessary to understand Marx’s concept of the working day. The extraction of surplus labor, the source of profit, is the point of struggle between bourgeoisie and proletariat. The working day is an embodiment of this class antagonism. By the working day, Marx means the working day of members of the proletariat within capitalist enterprises. In other words, it refers to the way in which, and more specifically the aims to which, the laborers’ labor power is put to use or consumed by capital in the course of a working day.

The working day is divided into two parts – the necessary working time and the surplus working time, or necessary labor and surplus labor. On the one hand, the working day includes the necessary working time required to reproduce the value of wages. However, the capitalist does not purchase labor power because it reproduces its own value. It purchases labor power because it is the one commodity that is capable of producing “a value greater than its own” (*Capital* 1: 242). It is this surplus value (which is embodied in commodities the capitalist sells on the market) that forms the basis of profits. Producing profits is of course the requirement of capitalist production, thus “[o]n the basis of capitalist production . . . th[e] necessary labor can form a part only o[f] the

working day” (240). In other words, in order to produce surplus value, the worker has to work beyond the necessary working time and work a surplus working time. The labor performed during the surplus working time is labor for which the worker is not paid. Thus, it is in the workers’ interest to limit this portion of the working day whereas it is in the capitalists’ interest to expand this portion of the working day.

What, then, does the structure of the working day have to do with the contemporary family, and particularly with contemporary working family? A key point here is that the resources available to working families to meet their needs and wants are limited by the working day and the way that it is structured by the profit motive and thus by (the rate of) exploitation. This means, firstly, that because part of the working day is unpaid surplus labor, the income of workers is limited in relation to the wealth they produce. Therefore their access to socially produced wealth in the form of goods and services such as food, housing, (formal) education, paid child care, health care, and recreational equipment and opportunities is limited by exploitation. For instance, families’ access to education for their children, even public education, is limited by their wages, or income, which is inversely proportional to the profits of the capitalist. It is limited because the best public schools are located in areas where housing is quite expensive and thus affordable only for the bourgeoisie and the most privileged strata of workers. In fact, in *The Two-Income Trap: Why Middle-Class Mothers and Fathers Are Going Broke* Elizabeth Warren and Amelia Warren Tyagi write in 2003, prior to the collapse of the housing market, that since the 1980s there has been “a 255 percent increase in the foreclosure rate, a 430 percent increase in the bankruptcy rolls, and a 570 percent increase in credit card debt” (20). They argue that a key reason why “middle-class” families are getting into so much financial trouble is that they are buying houses they cannot afford in order to gain access to safe neighborhoods and good schools for their children – the good schools being good because they have access to more resources through their tax base (20-32). The point here, to be clear, is not simply that workers’ wealth is limited. Wealth is always limited by the level of development of the forces of production as well as the availability of raw materials. The point, rather, is that this wealth is also limited by the social relations of production – it is limited in relation to the wealth that is produced within the society and, especially, in relation to the capacity to

produce wealth given the development of the forces of production. Thus working families are, even in the “best of times,” in a state of relative poverty, or inequality, particularly in relation to the wealth of the owning class which can, for instance, not only afford to send its children to the best public schools, but can also send them to expensive private schools.

Secondly, the structure of the working day limits the family’s resources in the form of time and energy that can be devoted to meeting family needs. This limiting is due to the lengthening of the working day so that surplus labor is performed as well as necessary labor. It is also due to the way in which labor is intensified – for instance, through the introduction of new machinery or through “speed-ups” or through forcing one worker to do the work of two – in order to increase the rate of exploitation.

In referring to needs that are met that require time and energy from family members, and especially adult family members and older children, I am referring in part to the unpaid “domestic labor” that is performed in the home such as cooking, cleaning, (non-wage) child care, (non-wage) care of the sick and elderly, maintenance of house or apartment and any vehicles, and planning, cooking for, and cleaning up after family holidays and recreational activities. I am also referring to needs such as the needs for emotional intimacy, emotional education of children, and socialization of children. Of course the meeting of these sorts of “reproductive” needs is becoming increasingly commodified through such means as prepared and processed foods, paid child care, cleaning services, and counseling services, though access to these commodities of reproduction is limited in turn by the level of wages.

In light of this discussion of the contemporary family from a materialist perspective, it is now possible to return to some of the issues raised by the affective theories of the family in order to provide a more sustained critique of these issues. Take, for instance, the way in which Fraad, Resnick and Wolff posit the “communist” family as a site for the meeting of all family members’ affective needs, or their updating of the ideology of the (modern) family as a “haven in a heartless world.” If we turn to the material conditions of living and working for the majority of families in the contemporary moment, it becomes quite clear that this affirmative view of the “new” family is in stark conflict with the actuality of the vast majority of the contemporary

working families. Take, for instance, the statistics on the length of the work week. For women who are now performing wage work (and thus have left the nuclear family role of “housewife”), there has been an increase in total work hours of between 14 and 25 hours. And from 1989 to 1998, “the combined number of hours worked annually by middle-income mothers and fathers in two-parent families with children at home went up by 246 hours” (Gore and Gore 169). To say that the “postmodern” family is a site for meeting the affective needs of the many is to posit a quite idealist notion that affective needs do not, like all other needs, require time and resources to meet.

In contrast, a materialist cultural studies of the family provides concepts such as the concept of the “working day” that are both necessary and effective for explaining why as well as how it is that the conditions of global capitalism, and the family forms it gives rise to, do not and cannot meet the affective needs of the majority – needs which themselves are growing in part because of the stressors of the intensifying of exploitation (both in terms of the duration of the work day and the “speed ups” or increasing intensity of this work day). The effects of exploitation in the workplace have also been compounded by the increasing privatization of reproductive labor that is represented by the dismantling of the welfare state and with it all public services aimed at providing public resources for helping families with the burden of reproducing the workforce (i.e., raising children) such as public child care. In effect, this privatization of reproductive labor, alongside the drawing of women into the wage labor force has meant the extension of the “total working day” of workers through the adjunct of a reproductive or “family” labor day (or evening) added to (rather than replacing) the wage-working day.

To take an instance of the “concrete material reality” of new family, take one of the families that Al and Tipper Gore highlight (as exemplary) in their book *Joined at the Heart: The Transformation of the American Family*. This family is the Lys, who are featured in Gore and Gore’s chapter on “Work.” The Lys are part of a growing number of “split-shift” families. These are two-parent families where the parents have “chosen” (in the absence, that is, of affordable and high quality child care) to work two different shifts so that they can both support their children and themselves financially and also have one parent available for child care at all times. This is a family whose “total working day,” in order, that is, to accommodate the needs of capital for surplus labor which extends the

wage-working day well after the necessary labor represented by wages is complete, and which requires a second working day in order to perform the necessary reproductive labor, has become a 24-hour working day.

Such a family represents the epitome of the “flexibility” in work and family relations that capital wants, as evidenced by the Gores’ celebration of this family and its “highly disciplined” and “heroic” efforts (181). In other words, when Judith Stacey writes about the “postmodern family” as a flexible family which “we inhabit uneasily and reconstitute frequently as our occupational and personal circumstances shift” (*In The Name* 7), she is really talking about a family that is highly exploited – one which has had to adjust and re-adjust its daily schedule around the demands of the capitalist working day as well as its privatization of reproductive labor. As such, by arguing that we need to learn to “value” the postmodern, “flexible” family – which is what is at stake in her affirmation of the new family norms as markers of “democracy” and “equality” – as opposed to the “rigid” modern family, Stacey works to translate what is of economic value to capital in the “postmodern” moment into an issue of cultural “values,” at the expense of providing an analysis that enables understanding the political economy of the changing family that could enable its material conditions to be transformed.

Meeting the affective needs of the parents in particular under such circumstances as the Lys face becomes impossible. Not surprisingly, the Lys report marital problems and conflict “because they almost never ha[ve] any time together as a couple.” In fact, when Mrs. Ly is asked what she and her husband do for enjoyment, “she [i]s at a loss for words” (184). Such a situation, where there is no possibility of meeting the affective needs of parents (which in turn has an impact on children) including the need for intimacy because of a 24-hour working day within the family, is, it should be noted, increasingly the norm for contemporary families. For example, Gore and Gore also report that there has been such an increase in “split-shift” families that there is now a company that puts out a specially designed calendar for such families so that they can keep track of one another’s schedules. Moreover, what this example marks is that the meeting/not meeting of affective needs such as intimacy is a class issue. The kind of intimacy one has depends on the work one does, if one is employed, the hours of this work, how tired one is, etc.

In addition, from a materialist perspective one can see that the consequence of the ideological view of the family, a view which sees the family as a “haven” and thus as a site for resolving the contradictions of contemporary society, is to add an additional layer to the strain on workers. That is, to construct the “new family” as a site for meeting the affective needs of workers (as a “haven” in a heartless world) works to turn workers inward towards the family and interpersonal relations in order to solve the contradictions that are produced by the exploitative production practices of capitalism. In doing so, this ideology not only blocks workers from knowledge of the actual cause of these contradictions in exploitation rooted in the social relations of production, but also posits interpersonal relations as the “cause” of these contradictions. After all, if family is the place for resolving these contradictions and meeting these needs and these needs are not actually met, then the problem must be in these interpersonal relations. The ideological solution to the contradictions of capital, which in effect offers “the family” as compensation for the exploitation of workers in production, in other words, not only sets up unrealistic expectations of family relations and what they can “do” for workers, but also contributes to family violence (including self-violence) because it encourages family members to understand the “cause” of their problems to be “family.” This ideology of the family, while quite dangerous for workers, particularly in terms of the way it promotes intra-class violence, is quite useful to capital because it produces the individualist, localist subjectivity it requires. That is, it provides the kind of subject who will continue to search for solutions to global problems in local solutions (such as the “split-shift” family) which constitute, in actuality, an increase in exploitation. This increase in exploitation, in turn, satisfies, at least momentarily, capital’s “boundless thirst” for profits.

As I have marked in my discussions of the two-wage family, one of the ways that the family has changed between the height of the “modern” family in the post-World War Two era until now is that more women, including married women with children, have been drawn into the wage labor force. In 1950 33.9 percent of women participated in the labor force whereas 60 percent participated in 1998 (Council of Economic Advisers 618). According to the United States Department of Labor, in 2003, 78 percent of women with school-aged children, 63 percent of women with children under the age of six and 54 percent of women with infants worked for pay (United States Dept. of Labor,

“Employment Characteristics of Families,” Tables 5, 6). One of the reasons women have entered the wage labor force and are working more hours is that men’s real wages have been declining. Thus, the increased hours of women working for wages have been necessary to buoy the living standards of workers, which have been under attack.

The political economy of women’s wage labor force participation must also be seen in relation to the development of productivity. That is, as commodities of reproduction such as prepared meals become less expensive, women can add more to the family’s standard of living by working outside the home. At the same time, as women enter the wage labor force, the need for such commodities of reproduction increase. In addition, as the costs of goods and services such as advanced education for children increase, women are forced into wage labor in order to enable the family to purchase these goods, which most mothers cannot produce in the home (Coontz, *The Way We Really* 59). This does not mean that women do not want to be working in the wage labor force. In fact, women “consistently tell interviewers they like the social respect, self-esteem, and friendship networks they gain from the job, despite the stress they may face finding acceptable child care and negotiating household chores with their husbands” (Coontz, *The Way We Really* 58). It does mean that for the majority, women’s wants in term of whether, how much, and under what conditions they labor for wages cannot be seen outside of the political economy of the wage. Moreover, in order to understand the problems of the contemporary dual-earner family, it is necessary to understand the political economy of this family form.

Today, the working family is wage-working a greater number of hours per working day (and per work week and per work year) than it did in the recent past. Thus, the “family working day,” or the length of the working days of all family members combined, has been prolonged. At the same time, as I have indicated, real wages have, on the whole, been stagnating. In addition, the median male wage was still below its 1979 level in 2000 (Mishel, Bernstein and Boushey 115) This means that the family is working more hours for the same or only a little more pay. And this is despite the fact that in 2000 productivity was 44.5 percent higher than in 1979 (115). In other words, the duration of the family’s surplus labor time has greatly increased. This means that the family is exploited at a deeper level. In *Value, Price and Profit* Marx discusses such a mode of

increasing the rate of exploitation. He writes:

Your middle-class statisticians will tell you, for instance, that the average wages of factory families in Lancashire has risen. They forget that instead of the labour of the man, the head of the family, his wife and perhaps three or four children are now thrown under the Juggernaut wheels of capital, and that the rise of the aggregate wages does not correspond to the aggregate surplus labour extracted from the family. (54)

Here, Marx is talking about a situation in which the wages of the family have risen as more of its members enter the wage labor force. Nevertheless, the increase in surplus labor extraction is greater than the increase in wages, thus the inequality between wage laborer and capital has increased at the same time that the family has given more of its time to wage labor and lost it for meeting reproductive needs, including the need for sleep and recreation. Such an increase in inequality has been, as I have indicated, certainly a condition of family life in the U.S. and beyond at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century. It is this deepening of inequality over the last several decades that has not only meant that the recent economic crisis is devastating to workers who, as a class, have accumulated massive debt, but that this deepening class divide has set the stage for the current crisis. That is because capital needs workers to maintain high consumption in order to realize profits by selling goods produced during the surplus portion of the working day as well as the necessary portion of the working day at the same time it needs to keep exploitation (the ratio of surplus labor to necessary labor) high and thus relative wages low. Capital thus requires both high consumption and makes it impossible for workers to maintain high consumption. "Credit," as we have seen in the recent crisis, only forestalls the conflict within capitalism over these two compelling needs. The point being these aren't capital's only needs. Capital has various needs which themselves are compelled by the tendency of the profit rate to fall.

In other words, women have moved into the wage work force under the economic compulsion of capital and the way in which it drives down the (relative if not absolute) value of labor (in the form of wages). Thus the "new" family forms that have resulted from this movement and the subsequent shift in gender relations it enabled are

themselves part of an attempt, on the part of families, to mitigate the effects of capitalist exploitation by accessing increased resources through greater direct participation of its members in the relations of wage labor. However, what this movement of women into the wage labor force and the new families which have been produced by this movement represent is the increased exploitation of these women and these families. Thus, whatever gains (some) women have made in terms of their power relations with men due to their increased participation in wage labor, these gains have, within the system of exploitation, brought with them new problems and contradictions.

In sum, the “new family” is, on the part of workers, an attempt to mitigate the effects of exploitation and the way it works to drive down the value of labor (wages); however, this individualized, local attempt to mitigate the effects of exploitation is in actuality a deepening of exploitation – and hence, whatever its immediate, individual results, works to deepen the effects of exploitation in the end. The “new” family is thus symptomatic of the way in which commodified, or “alienated” labor comes to be a power over the laborers themselves. It does not and cannot intervene in this commodification but rather perpetuates and extends this commodification and its effects. In order to create a truly new family, it will be necessary to transform the labor relations that underpin family relations and family life within capitalism. As cultural theorists, it is necessary to rethink the “rethinking” of class that can only help perpetuate these exploitative labor relations.

Part of this essay appeared in an earlier form in “Why is the New Family So Familiar?” The Red Critique, 11 Winter/Spring 2006.

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