CHILD ABUSE, GENDER, AND THE MYTH OF FAMILY INDEPENDENCE: THOUGHTS ON THE HISTORY OF FAMILY VIOLENCE AND ITS SOCIAL CONTROL 1880-1920*

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Child abuse was "discovered" in the United States about 110 years ago. Of course, cruel treatment of children had existed previously and it had even been dealt with by the application of community sanctions against parents. Not until the 1870's, however, was the crime defined as a widespread social problem and responded to by the creation of private groups such as the Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (SPCCs). So rapid was the spread of concern that by 1880 there were already thirty-three such societies in the United States and fifteen in other countries.

The following remarks come from a study of the practice of one such agency, the Massachusetts SPCC, established in 1878, and two other Boston child welfare agencies that also handled "family violence"[1] cases, the Boston Children's Service Association and the Judge Baker Guidance Center. For our research we took a random sample of cases from 1880 to 1960. In this discussion, however, I will be focusing particularly on the experience of the Massachusetts SPCC (MSPCC) and its clients in the first fifty years of its existence, up to about 1930. The reader should be aware in evaluating these remarks that the MSPCC during this period was an upper-class, Protestant charity while its clientele were predominantly poor, immigrant Catholics.

I want to focus on two themes. The first is the question of state or professional intervention[2] into the family and specifically, some of the ways

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1. "Family violence" is a neologism. In the 19th and early 20th centuries the problem these social agencies took on was "cruelty to children." However, other forms of intrafamily violence (e.g., wife beating) presented themselves so forcefully as problems affecting children that many agencies were forced to deal with them, as we discuss later in the paper.

2. There are important differences between governmental and private intervention of this type, of course, and the MSPCC was a private agency without any public funding. However from early in its existence, in 1882, the MSPCC obtained legislatively rather extraordinary powers to assume immediate custody and/or guardianship for children suspected of being neglected. In practice, furthermore, police and courts deferred to the MSPCC in disputes with parents regarding custody of children. Thus, for the purpose of this paper, I have chosen to ignore the state-private distinction. Here the more important distinction will be that between informal intervention by relatives or neighbors and formal, bureaucratic intervention by strangers with class or professional credentials.

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in which this "intervention" has been conceptualized. The second theme is the way in which gender, not only within the family but also within the entire social division of labor, affects the problem of child abuse and how assumptions about gender have inhered in social work policies towards child abuse.

I

Child Abuse and the Reconstruction of Patriarchy

It may serve as an effective introduction to these themes to begin with a question. Why was child abuse—or cruelty to children—singled out among forms of family violence for attention in the late nineteenth century? Wife beating was also a widespread and cruel social problem, yet there was never a Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Women. It is revealing that action against cruelty to animals preceded child protection by several decades. It is not that people cared more about animals than about children but that interference between a man and his animal was less threatening to the man's authority. The movement to specify and legalize limits to parental control of children was in important ways an attack on the patriarchal family. And historically, the campaign against parent-child tyranny inherent in patriarchy preceded that against the man-woman tyranny.

A pause to look at the definition of patriarchy is necessary here. In the 1970's a new definition of that term came into use. For the feminist movement, patriarchy became a synonym for male supremacy, for "sexism." I use the term in its earlier, historical, and more specific sense, referring to a family form in which fathers had control over all other family members—children, women, and servants—a control which flowed from the fathers' monopolization of economic resources. The patriarchal family presupposed a family mode of production, as among peasants, artisans, or farmers, in which individuals did not work independently as wage laborers. That historical patriarchy defined a set of parent-child relations as much as it did relations between the sexes, for the children rarely had opportunities for economic independence except by inheriting the family property, trade, or craft.

The claim of an organization such as SPCC to speak on behalf of children's rights, its claim to the license to intervene in parental treatment of children, was an attack on patriarchal power. At the same time the new sensibility about children's rights and the concern about child abuse were symptoms of a weakening of patriarchal family expectations and realities that had already taken place. In this weakening of expectations, father-child relations had changed more than husband-wife relations. Children were gaining the power to arrange their own betrothals and marriages, and to embark on individual careers independent of their fathers' occupations (of course, children's options remained determined by the class and cultural privileges, or the lack of them, that they inherited from their fathers). In

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contrast, a wage labor system was actually making women more dependent on husbands for sustenance and thus less able to risk direct defiance of a husband's wishes. The best women could hope for was a benign husbandly authority. Although brutal men might be morally condemned, there were few enforcement procedures available to check marital violence in a family system in which women remained economic dependents. Some men were prosecuted for assault on wives, but a successful prosecution would leave a wife alone and unsupported, and many wives naturally drew back from pursuing criminal charges for this reason.

Yet early child protection work did not envision a general liberation of children from arbitrary parental control or from the responsibility of filial obedience. The inherent ideology and purpose of the SPCCs was as much to enforce a failing parental-paternal authority as to limit it. Indeed the SPCCs tended to view excessive physical violence against children as a symptom of inadequate parental authority. Assaults on children were often provoked by insubordination; disobedience and child abuse were mutually reinforcing, and SPCC cases frequently ended with *children* prosecuted under stubborn-child laws. Furthermore, then as now, the cases most commonly encountered by the Society involved neglect, not assault. From the Society's point of view, neglect cases reflected particularly the withdrawal, albeit not always conscious or deliberate, of parental support, supervision, and authority. Poverty was responsible for the great majority of neglect charges. Among the poor who formed the agency clientele there was a great deal of desertion by fathers. Even fathers who were present often did not provide adequately for their families. When mothers were the bad parents, as they were in half of the abuse and the majority of the neglect cases, their failure was part of the failure of a patriarchal family system, for the woman's mothering role was an essential part of that system.

In fact the SPCCs were part of a reconstruction of the family along lines that altered the old patriarchy, already economically unviable, and replaced it with a modern version of male supremacy. The SPCCs' rhetoric about children's rights did not extend to a parallel articulation of women's rights; their condemnation of wife-beating did not include endorsement of the kind of marriage later called "companionate," which implies equality between husband and wife. Specifically, the new family and child-raising norms that underlay the SPCCs' work included the following:

1. Children's respect for parents needed to be inculcated ideologically, moralistically, and psychologically, since it no longer rested on an economic dependance lasting beyond childhood.
2. The father, now as wage laborer rather than as slave, artisan, peasant, or entrepreneur, had single-handed responsibility for economic support of his family.
3. Women and children should not contribute to the family economy, at least not monetarily.

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4. Children instead should spend full time in learning cognitive things from professional teachers, and psychological and moral things from the full-time attention of a mother.
5. Women in turn should be entirely domestic and devote themselves full time to mothering.

Perhaps one can best appreciate the novelty of this family arrangement by imagining how it seemed to the Italian and Irish immigrants who formed, in the nineteenth century, the bulk of the MSPCC clients. For example, MSPCC agents found many cases in which cruelty to children was caused, in their view, by children's labor: girls doing housework and child care, often required to stay home from school by their parents; boys and girls working in shops, peddling on the streets; boys working for organ grinders, lying about their ages to enlist in the navy. In the pre-World War I era, the enemies of the truant officers were usually parents, not children; to these parents, immigrants from peasant backgrounds, it seemed irrational and blasphemous that adult women should work while able-bodied children should be idle. In another example of cultural disagreement, the MSPCC was opposed to common immigrant practices of leaving children unattended, and allowing them to play and wander in the streets. Both kinds of behavior violated the Society's norm of domesticity for women and children; proper middle-class children in those days did not—at least not in the cities—play outside without being attended. The style of mothering and fathering that was being imposed was a specific, historical construct: mothers were supposed to be tender, gentle, to protect their children above all from immoral influences; child savers considered yelling, rude language, or sexually explicit talk to be forms of cruelty to children. Fathers were to provide models of emotional containment, to be relatively uninvolved with children; their failure to provide economic stability was often interpreted as a character flaw, no matter what the evidence of widespread, structural unemployment.

The MSPCC's model of parenting was also culturally specific, and in practice as well as in rhetoric disdained the culture of non-White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant (WASP) nationalities. The exclusively WASP agents, for example, hated the garlic and olive-oil smells of Italian cooking, and considered this food unhealthy, overstimulating, aphrodisiac. They were unable to distinguish alcoholics and heavy drinkers from moderate wine and beer drinkers, and they believed that any woman who touched even a drop of spirits was a degenerate and an unfit parent. Many of these forms of depravity were specifically associated with Catholicism. Agents were convinced of the subnormal intelligence of most non-WASP, and especially non-English-speaking, clients. (The agents' comments and expectations in this early period could easily be transposed for similar views of blacks in the mid-twentieth century). Particularly, these child welfare specialists were

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befuddled by and disapproving of non-nuclear child-raising patterns: children raised by grandmothers, complex households composed of children from several different marriages (or worse, out-of-wedlock relationships), and children sent temporarily to other households. I will return to this theme later.

The peasant backgrounds of so many of the "hyphenated" Americans created a situation in which ethnic bias could not easily be separated from class bias. Class misunderstanding, moreover, took a form specific to urban capitalism: a failure to grasp the actual economic circumstances of this immigrant proletariat and subproletariat. Unemployment was not yet understood to be a structural characteristic of industrial capitalism. Nor were disease, overcrowding, crime, and above all dependence understood as part of the system, but rather were looked upon as personal failings.

One can see this victim blaming particularly vividly in cases involving single women. A hundred years ago, as today, single mothers were overrepresented in child neglect cases. These widows, deserted or separated women (the poor rarely obtained divorces), or never-married mothers of illegitimate children faced a limited set of options for survival. Ideally they would find relatives who could take them in but, in fact, urban living and employment conditions made that less likely than it had once been: family networks had been disrupted by immigration; the mothers' families were unlikely to have the kind of households, typically rural, that could expand to take in more members, and instead were usually living in small tenement flats on low and fixed incomes. Lacking extended family support, single mothers often had to choose between raising their children and earning a living. Attempting to do both made them ipso facto neglectful mothers because they left their children unsupervised, provided for them inadequately, or lived "in sin" with other men from whom they received financial help. Thus many single mothers were forced to give up their children to institutions. In order to avoid that outcome many mothers appealed to child welfare agencies for help. However, the agencies' response was often to force them to make that vicious choice again—either your children or a job but not both—and to urge placing out the children. Such agency behavior could be perceived as sexist by an observer from the late twentieth century, but that historical designation is unilluminating. In fact what was operating was a new conviction that only a "nuclear," male-headed family was a viable and healthy one for children. (An ironic conviction, given the minimal involvement in child rearing actually expected of fathers.)

Standards of adequate child-raising thus were, and are, inseparable from an overall ideology about proper family life. Child protection work functioned simultaneously to control and reform adult behavior, and particularly to enforce or reinforce a particular adult sexual division of labor.

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II

SOCIAL CONTROL

The early movement against child abuse was not simply a general form of social control, but also an attempt by one class and cultural group to impose its values on other groups and to prevent and stop disorder that might interfere with its domination. It is easy to see why the SPCCs arose at a time not only of rapid industrial development and capital accumulation, but also of large-scale immigration which changed the populations and the labor forces of large cities radically. It is clear, too, why Boston was one of the pioneer cities in the development of SPCCs. Its immigrant population grew larger, earlier, than many other cities, due to the Irish immigration of the late 1840's and 1850's. By 1850, immigrants already constituted one-third of the Boston population and forty-five percent of its labor force. The older WASP elite of Boston was using the issue of cruelty to children—not only using it, of course, but really feeling it— to attempt to retain its control and to defend the social order it found comfortable and manageable.[3]

I want to argue here, however, that such a critique is only part of the story. In doing so I want to present my view of the complexity of social work that deals with family violence and to criticize a general tendency to oversimplify the nature of social work and social control. Before I lay out my arguments, a summary of one case history may provide a sense of this complexity.[4]

An Italian immigrant family, let me call them the Amatos, were "clients" of the MSPCC from 1910 to 1916. They had five young children together, and Mrs. Amato had three from a previous marriage, two of them still in Italy and one daughter in Boston. Mrs. Amato kept that daughter at home to do housework and look after the younger children while she earned money doing home piece-rate sewing. This got the family into trouble with a truant officer.

They also encountered trouble in court where they were accused of lying to Associated Charities (a consortium of private relief agencies) by claiming that the father had deserted when he was in fact at home. Furthermore, while left alone, probably in the charge of a sibling, one of the younger children fell out a window and had to be hospitalized. Mrs. Amato went to many different agencies seeking help, starting with those of the Italian immigrant community and then reaching out to elite social work agencies, reporting that her husband was a drunkard, a gambler, a nonsupporter and a wife beater. The MSPCC agents at first doubted her claims

3. N. Huggins, Protestants Against Poverty: Boston's Charities, 1870-1900 (1971).

4. No case is typical, of course. True stories of families are always complicated, quirky, and one-of-a-kind. Still it seems fairer to the reader to offer one whole case story than to pick out aspects of many cases to illustrate my individual points.

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because Mr. Amato impressed them as a "good and sober man." They blamed the neglect of the children on his wife's incompetence in managing the wages he gave her.

The Society ultimately became convinced of her story because of her repeated appearances with severe bruises, and because of corroboration by the husband's father. Mr. Amato Sr. was intimately involved in the family troubles, and took responsibility for attempting to control his son. Once he came to the house and gave the father "a warning and a couple of slaps," after which the father improved for a while. Another time he extracted from his son a pledge not to beat his wife for two years. Mrs. Amato wanted none of this. She begged the MSPCC agent to help her get a divorce; later she claimed that she had not dared take this step because her husband's relatives threatened to beat her if she tried.

Then Mrs. Amato's daughter from her previous marriage took action. She went independently to the MSPCC and brought an agent to the house to help her mother. Mr. Amato was convicted of assault once and sentenced to six months. During that time Mrs. Amato survived by "a little work and . . . Italian friends have helped her." When her husband returned he was more violent than before: he went at her with an axe, beat the children so much on the head that their "eyes wabbled" [sic] permanently and supported his family so poorly that the children went out begging. This case closed, like so many, without a resolution. We will return to it later to draw what analytic lessons seem merited, but let me turn back now to my criticisms of the social-control model of social work.

First, the condemnation of agency intervention into the family, and the condemnation of social control itself as something automatically evil, usually carry with them the assumption that there was once such a thing as an autonomous family, or at least more autonomous than that of today. The view that intervention into the family has increased, and is a particular feature of modern society, was first articulated by Talcott Parsons in the late 1940's and 1950's. It became associated with the "transfer of functions" thesis; the notion that the family had certain functions that were gradually removed and taken over by professionals. The "functions" included education, child care, therapy, and medical care. Parsons' view was liberal and optimistic; he thought this professionalization was a step forward that left the family able to devote more of its time and energy to effective relations.[5] By the 1960's, however, a renewed radical movement produced a critique of this intervention. The New Left considered it social control, aimed at suppressing dissidence and producing conformity.[6] The 1970's brought two opposing reinterpretations of this same narrative. Femi-

5. T. Parsons & R. Bales, Family, Socialization and Interaction Process ch. 1 (1955).
6. See, e.g., F. Piven & R. Cloward, Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare ch. 1 (1971).

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nists saw intervention as imposing on women a constricting domesticity and a rigid subordination.[7] Antifeminists, such as Christopher Lasch, argued that it was feminists themselves, in league with professionals, who built the "helping professions" that destroyed family autonomy and thereby individual capacity for autonomy.[8]

I disagree with these interpretations for several reasons, but now I want to focus exclusively on my first point: they all assume a previously autonomous family, now "weakened" in its independence. In so doing they withdraw attention from the more important aspects of recent social-control developments. These controls tend now to be applied from a distance, from agencies outside a social network. The greater distance between controller and controlled means a greater reliance on punishment rather than on the sheer power of social pressure. No family relations have been immune from social regulation. Many sorts of formal and informal community pressures, punishments, jokes, rituals, and gossip have served to maintain boundaries of acceptable behavior. While it is true that in most pre-industrial economies making a living was a project that a family did together, these families were never dependent on larger constraining economic relationships such as those with landowners, merchants, and rulers. The Amatos' traditional pattern of turning to relatives, friends, and, when these could not help, to Italian-American organizations (no doubt the closest analogue to a "community"), was inadequate in the face of the urban problems they now met. Yet even the violent and defensive Mr. Amato did not question the right of his father, relatives, and friends to intervene forcefully, nor did Mrs. Amato appear shocked that her husband's relatives tried, perhaps successfully, to hold her forcibly in her marriage. Family autonomy was not an expectation of the Amatos.

Second, the social-control explanation of social work is also too simple because it sees the flow of initiative going in only one direction: from top to bottom, from professionals to clients, from elite to subordinate. The power of this interpretation of social work comes from the large proportion of truth it holds, and from the influence of social movements among the poor which have denounced attempts to mold and blame them. Among historians looking at social work the tenacity of the simple social-control explanation comes also from the fact that they have looked only at official statements by professionals about what they wanted to do, or thought they were doing. When one looks at case records which show, by contrast, what social workers actually did, one sees a more complicated picture. The clients were active, not passive, negotiators in a complex bargaining process. In fact, the

7. B. Ehrenreich & D. English, For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts' Advice to Women (1978).

8. C. Lasch, Haven in a Heartless World (1977); C. Lasch, The Culture of Narcissism (1979).

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clients were frequently the initiators of the agency intervention. Even in family violence cases, where the stakes were high—losing one's children, being prosecuted—many complaints came from parents or close relatives who believed that their own standards of child raising were being violated.

Third, one reason the active role of agency clients is often missed is that the family is conceived of as a homogenous unit. There is an intellectual reification here which expresses itself in sentence structure, particularly in academic language: "the family is in decline," "threats to the family," "the family responds to industrialization." Shorthand expressions attributing behavior to an aggregate such as the family would be harmless except that they often express particular cultural norms about what "the family" is and does, and mask intrafamily differences and conflicts of interest. Usually "the family" becomes a representation of the interests of the family head, if it is a man, and the term carries an assumption that all family members share his interests. (A female-headed family is, in the common usage, a broken, deformed, or incomplete family and thus does not qualify for these assumptions regarding unity.) The outrage over the intervention into the family was often an outrage over a territorial violation, a challenge to male authority. The interventions, as I have argued, were often in fact invitations by family members; but the inviters were most often the weaker members of a family power structure—women and children. These invitations were made despite the fact, well known to clients, that women and children usually had the most to lose (despite fathers' frequent outrage at their loss of face) from MSPCC intervention, since by far the most common outcome of agency action was not prosecution and jail sentences but the removal of children, an action dreaded least by fathers.

In the immigrant working-class neighborhoods of Boston the MSPCC became known as "the Cruelty," suggesting eloquently the recognition and fear of its function. Yet its alien power did not stop poor people from initiating contact with it. After the MSPCC had been in operation for ten years, sixty percent of the complaints of known origin (excluding, for example, anonymous accusatory letters) came from family members. The overwhelming majority of these were from women, with children following second. Very soon after the establishment of the MSPCC, women were expertly using this "outside agency" to support their side in family struggles.

I said earlier that there was no Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Women. In fact women like Mrs. Amato were actively trying to turn the SPCC into just that. A frequent tactic of beaten, deserted, or unsupported wives was to report their husbands as child abusers; even when investigations found no evidence of child abuse, social workers came into homes offering, at best, help in getting other things women wanted—such as support payments, separation and maintenance agreements, relief—and, at worst, moral support to the woman and threats against the men.

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Indeed, so widespread were these attempts to enmesh social workers in intrafamily feuds that they were responsible for a high proportion of the many unfounded complaints received by the MSPCC. Rejected men, then as now, often fought for the custody of children they did not really want as a means of hurting their wives. They brought complaints of cruel treatment of children; they charged wives with child neglect when their main desire was to force the women to live with them again. Embittered, deserted wives might arrange to have their husbands caught with other women.

A fourth problem with social-control explanations in their simple form is that they imply that the clients' problems are not real but are simply figments of social workers' biases. Social-control explanations are related to what sociologists have called labelling theory, which offers important insights. Richard Gelles, a contemporary sociologist studying child abuse, argues that child abuse is a type of social deviance, and that there is no objective "behavior we can automatically recognize as child abuse."[9] He relates his view of child abuse to the substantial scholarship on deviance that considers social problems as emerging in large part from the labelling as problematic of behaviors which to other perspectives and in other contexts might not be problematic.[10] In the practice of child-protection agencies, it is easy to find examples of such labelling, for in child raising, one culture's abuse may be another culture's norm. In the historical case records I have studied, for example, many immigrant families expected five-year-olds to care for babies and toddlers; to middle-class reformers, five-year-olds left alone were neglected. But awareness of labelling must not be allowed to occlude perception of real family problems.[11] In one case an immigrant father, who slept with and bathed his thirteen-year-old daughter, told a social worker that that was the way it was done in the old country. He was not only lying, but also trying to manipulate a social worker, perhaps one he had recognized as guilt-ridden over her privileged role, by using his own fictitious cultural relativism. His daughter's victimization by incest was not the result of professional labelling.

Let me repeat that the social-control critique of social work and human services bureaucracies is not wrong. It has identified many aspects of domination that arise both from definitions of social order, and from the inevitable deformations of honest attempts to "help" in a society of great inequality. The problem with the social-control critique is that when it is applied to

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9. R. Gelles, The Social Construction of Child Abuse, in Child Abuse and Violence 147, 145-57 (D. Gil ed. 1979).

10. On labelling theory see, e.g., H. Becker, Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance (1963); Perspectives on Deviance—The Other Side (H. Becker ed. 1964); Erickson, Notes on the Sociology of Deviance, 9 Soc. Probs. 307-14 (1962).

11. For a critique of labelling theory overlapping in some ways with my own see I. Taylor, P. Walton & J. Young, The New Criminology: For a Social Theory of Deviance (1974). See especially id. at ch. 5.

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personal, domestic, intrafamily problems it merely perpetuates the masking of another set of inequalities—those between men and women and between adults and children. Just as in diplomacy the enemy of one's enemy may be ipso facto a friend, in domestic emotional and physical spaces, the enemy of one's oppressor may be in a position to help.

In fact, social-control agencies such as the MSPCC *were* able to help at times. Publicly the MSPCC nourished popular support for a less punitive norm of child raising, and for condemnation of violence against children or women. Its threats against or prosecutions of child abusers rarely changed adult behavior in particular cases; it did however have an impact on the behavior of the victims. There has been so much (justified) suspicion of victim-blaming in family violence commentary that many concerned with the problem have been discouraged from examining how victimized women and children learn to resist attacks and/or leave violent situations. By contrast, activists in battered women's shelters know that women's self-transformation is their main, perhaps only, escape route. This is not because they have been responsible for their victimization but because only they, unlike their batterers, have the incentive to end the beatings. The MSPCC, despite its desire to punish abusers, often achieved its best results by giving encouragement and occasionally material aid to victims. Ironically, in doing so it sometimes contributed more to helping battered women, who were defined as outside its jurisdiction, than to helping abused children. Women had the emotional, physical, and intellectual potential to leave abusive men. Often a tiny bit of material help, even a mere hint as to how to "work" the relief agencies, could turn their aspirations for autonomy into reality. Children lacked this potential and could only be "saved" from abusive parents by being transferred to other, often equally abusive caretakers, institutions, or foster parents.

This analytic separation of the needs of women and children, however, distorts the actual reality. In fact almost all mothers, unlike fathers, resolutely tied their fates to their children's. Here is another example of the need for a gender analysis in all family problems. Mrs. Amato could not benefit from her own efforts to reject victimization precisely because she wanted to mother her children. Various agencies several times attempted to place out her children, thus allowing her freedom, but she was determined to stay with her children. She resisted several sneaky attempts to get her to agree to a temporary placement which could then be made permanent: for example, the MSPCC agent learned that an Associated Charities plan "to store the furniture was only to persuade mo [mother] to adopt the plan of giving up her chrn [children] and that they would expect her to dispose of the furniture later as they did not consider that she could take care of the chrn [children]."

The failure of these plans, and Mrs. Amato's cleverness at discovering their strategems, illustrates one of the major ironies of the male-dominated family for women: motherhood, women's crowning glory, that which repre-

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sented (and still does represent for most women) the most fulfilling, respected work they do, is at the same time the source of women's greatest vulnerability and lack of freedom. Indeed, the very virtue that the MSPCC held up as most important in women—maternalism—kept Mrs. Amato in her client status.

This irony should not be surprising. The MSPCC in its analysis of family violence made the same mistakes that critics of social control make today: it left out of its critique of cruelty to children a fundamental critique of the family. (It bears repeating that the Society also left out a critique of capitalism and class and race inequality.) The MSPCC was of course trying to shore up its own model of a modern, middle-class, male-headed nuclear family; agency workers viewed domestic violence as a product of the failure to achieve that model rather than as an inherent part of it. Thus it could hardly have been expected to envision alternative living arrangements as satisfactory for child raising. The MSPCC could sometimes help women because they were already affected by drastic social changes. For example, the wage labor system at least promised economic independence, and the women's rights movement made male dominance appear a changeable, man-made system, not a natural or heaven-made destiny. The work of social agencies such as the MSPCC gained motion and force only in tandem with social movements. A great deal depended upon whether those motions were headed in directions similar enough to travel the same roads for a time, or in opposite directions.

The awakened concern to stop cruelty to children was not only compatible with the women's rights movement but was even to some extent created by it. This compatibility extends both to the progressive and the oppressive aspects of the MSPCC program. In their glorification of motherhood, the well-to-do feminist organizers of the MSPCC were insensitive to the class dimensions of their definition of the problem, and assumed that child abuse was predominantly a cruelty of the poor. Yet the very imagining of a personal life free from violence came in large part from a feminist sensibility and critique of male domination.

This new imagination was by no means an upper-class monopoly. The women's rights movement was not exclusively a campaign for public and political rights spearheaded by elite women, but also a powerful if unsteady pressure for economic and domestic power in which poor and working-class women were very much participants. The MSPCC's clients were as much a part of that movement as its workers. The issues involved in an antifamily violence campaign were fundamental to poor women: the right to immunity from physical attack at home, the power to protect their children from abuse, the right to keep their children—not merely the legal right to custody but the actual power to support their children—and the power to provide a standard of care for those children which met their own standards and aspirations. The facts that family violence became a "social problem," and that charities and professional agencies were drawn into attempts to control

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it, were as much a product of the demands of those at the bottom as of those at the top.

III

Psychological Parenting Theory

I would like to close with a few words specifically directed to psychological parenting theory. It is usually discussed with historical context, as if it were timeless, or as if it represented an objectively "higher" stage of the understanding of children's needs than had previously been available. It may be obvious by now, however, from my historical remarks, that psychological parenting theory grew out of a new ideology of child raising that arose in the nineteenth century and underlay the work of agencies like the SPCCs, an ideology specific to a particular class and historical period.

Specifically, psychological parenting theory describes a view of children's needs that evolved out of the family division of labor created in the Victorian era, particularly full-time female mothering. In pre-industrial and early industrial societies children from different social classes were typically expected to spend many years living and working in other families, in formal and informal apprenticeships, beginning often as early as eight years of age. While the nuclear family dominated in patterns of inheritance, households typically included servants, both transient and permanent. Intimate social life included many non-nuclear relatives. In a seventeenth century family, for example, mothers worked at productive labor with men and viewed parenting as a peripheral activity. Furthermore, men were more integrated into this parenting work than they were a century later. The notion of the necessity of continuous and intense emotional bonding between parent and child was produced by a wage labor system that sent men out of their households to become wage earners while women remained at home, and by an industrial production system that took productive work out of the home into factories and large commercial enterprises. The result of these developments was the redefinition of women's labor as housework and child care. It should be no surprise that, under those circumstances, women (and male interpreters of women's lives) began to intensify the emotional importance of housework and child raising. Mirroring the changed vision of women's calling was a drastic revision of previous notions of what children were like, making them highly sensitive, malleable, and vulnerable animals; thus skilled, intense mothering was seen to be a response to children's needs. They also began to mystify the family itself, as a space of escape, supposedly removed from the world of production and instrumental relations. A cult of romantic love emerged pertaining not only to heterosexual adult relations but also to parent-child relations. Economic conflicts of interest between father and child—for example, children anxious for their father's death to bring them an inheritance and a chance to marry, so frankly recognized and discussed in pre-industrial times—were

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now considered shameful and were denied and/or suppressed. The family was supposed to be unaffected by the social relations outside it and to be conflict-free. It followed that the nature of intrafamily bonding should be qualitatively different from any possible bonds outside the family.

These norms of mothering, fathering, and family bonds not only arose out of a particular historical circumstance, but were also specific to a certain class and cultural experience. Full-time mothering and male breadwinning were characteristic of urban, business, and professional families. The norms were simply not achievable, even had they been desirable, for rural and proletarian families. For example, in the United States one of the mystifying myths, closely associated with the denial of class differences, was that of the "family wage"—the notion that on average working men could expect a wage that would allow them each to support a family without their children or wives having to earn. In fact, the majority of working men in this country never earned a family wage; put another way, family wages did not prevail in most industries. (There was never even a pretense of working women being able to earn a family wage.) Average working-class women and children had to contribute to the support of their families, at the same time confronting the norms that true women ought to be full-time mothers, and that children with working mothers were underprivileged. Historically one of the implications of psychological parenting theory is that peasant and working-class children were by definition unloved, and inadequately parented.

I am not arguing that psychological parenting theory is wrong, that children do not need continuing bonds with particular people. In emphasizing its historical roots, I am calling attention to the social conditions and class perspective that gave rise to this view of children's needs. I am suggesting the possibility that different historical conditions and social groups might produce different views of their needs, and calling for a bit more humility regarding the certainty and universality of this contemporary psychological theory.

Finally, I want to return to my original theme—gender—and to call attention to another striking inadequacy, even falsehood, implicit in psychological parenting theory—its lack of a gender analysis. One response to the recent feminist critique of men's lack of involvement in parenting has been to pretend that it is not true, to rewrite laws, parenting manuals, and psychological theories as if both men and women were equally active in child rearing. In fact, women continue to do most of the work and bear even more of the responsibility for bringing up children, often because the sexual order of the economy—who can get better paying jobs—and of the society—who feels confident on the streets—ordain it. There is reason for optimism about changing these arrangements in the future. But meanwhile, by failing to identify the gender of the parent we are talking about we only obscure the real problems of parenting.

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Psychological parenting theory is a theory about women's work, not about child raising in some gender-neutral way. Furthermore, it is a prescriptive theory disguised as a description. (Those who work with children usually acknowledge how difficult it is to predict any particular adult personality on the basis of any particular form of child raising.) It is a prescription about how women with children should spend their time, and one with roots in a nineteenth-century elite vision of family life. It seems to me that a better parenting theory would require, first, a reconsideration of how women of different classes and cultural groups are organizing their lives in the late twentieth century, in terms of the balance between their aspirations and the social-economic constraints with which they live. Second, it would require a reconsideration of what it means to be a child when all parents are likely to work outside the home, when many children live for long periods with only one parent, when commercial and peer group pressures are strong, when a strongly internalized work ethic is no guarantee of success, and when, for the majority, professional and creative vocational aspirations are so economically unrealistic that they are hardly conceivable.

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