THE FAMILY OF WOMAN

LESBIAN MOTHERS, THEIR CHILDREN, AND THE UNDOING OF GENDER

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For the women and children whose stories are in this book
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At the stroke of midnight on January 2003, a baby born to a lesbian couple in Washington, D.C., became, to great media fanfare, the capital’s first newborn of the year. At the time of her arrival the baby’s mothers were moving their residence to a district where the nonbiological mother could legally adopt the baby she had helped bring into the world, because she was prohibited from doing so in the place she and her partner worked and lived and called home. On June 26 of that same year, the United States Supreme Court overturned an antisodomy law on the books in the state of Texas, ruling, effectively, that the private sexual activity of consenting adults is none of the government’s business. And when, during the early summer of 2003, Canada became the third country in the world to recognize same-sex marriage at the national level, streams of gay and lesbian couples made their way to Toronto, Ottawa, and other metropolitan centers to be legally wed.

These three events do more than tell us about the state of social and political acceptance of the rights of same-sex couples in these two regions in North America. They point to social changes in the industrialized world that have been underway since at least the latter part of the twentieth century—changes in which sexuality and procreation have become uncoupled and baby making of all sorts, including the hi-tech and clinical kind, has increasingly occurred outside heterosexual marriage. Governments re-
spond in different ways to these new modes of family formation and intimacy. But the results of these changes must be understood as nothing less than novel kinship formations that depart radically from those of the past and from all convention.

New social formations themselves prompt innovations in other institutional arenas, including those that helped to produce the new formations in the first place. Social relations between women and men, sexuality, concepts of self and identity, knowledge, politics, and culture—all of these and more are affected by the new family formations appearing in North America and throughout the developed world. There is much to be learned from these families that break with convention, not the least of which is how they are doing and the ways they are transforming our culture. The theoretical, political, and social implications for Western society are potentially staggering, particularly the changes that may occur, for example, in the societal gender order, in which men remain dominant, controlling resources and wielding authority, while women gain snippets of status here and there but rarely “freedom” or “emancipation” on a collective level. What may we expect to see within and outside such a significant societal institution as “the family” when a major structural feature of it has been radically altered?

Historically, feminist analysts, from first-wave white, middle-class feminist writers and activists during the mid-nineteenth century in the United States and England to later second-wave radical thinkers (again mostly Euro-American and middle class), have trenchantly criticized what they have seen as a recurrent pattern within families for which heterosexual procreation and parenting supplied the basic familial context: women assume primary responsibility for child care and other unremunerated domestic labor while men develop relationships and maintain status in the extrafamilial public sphere of production, politics, and culture. With women doing more unpaid, socially necessary labor than men, the consequences for them as a subservient class have been predictable and enduring. Women and their children are dependent on unreliable male income providers or the state for their very survival. In the United States, the feminization of poverty, the growing number of children living in poverty, and, more recently, the increase of African American children living in extreme poverty illustrate the net material effect of generations of women doing unpaid domestic labor and low-paid wage labor while husbands and
male partners exercise the freedom to determine their own fate and theirs alone.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Charlotte Perkins Gilman conceptualized this situation as the “sexuo-economic relation,” whereby women, put simply, trade sex for their daily bread. Women’s bodies, reproductive capacity, sexuality, emotions, and labor are used by men, whose superior social capital has enabled them to own and control these female commodities. Seventy years later, Shulamith Firestone, in her second-wave radical feminist treatise *The Dialectic of Sex*, expressed the belief that the problem lay substantially in the fact that only women were biologically equipped and responsible for the reproduction of the species. As soon as reproductive technology eliminated physiologically based conception, gestation, and birth of new humans, she argued, women would no longer be disproportionately burdened with this task of population replacement and, more important, could no longer be exploited by men on account of it.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Western biomedical science is quickly approaching the Firestone moment. But the implementation of ever greater “advances” in reprogenetic technologies points out what other feminist observers have thought for some time: Firestone’s apparently “natural” unequal distribution of biological reproductive tasks between the sexes does not in itself give rise to gendered social relations, which merely reflect or accommodate the underlying biological division. Rather, gender conventions—enduring ideas about women’s and men’s appropriate roles, responsibilities, and conduct—constitute the ground on which men justify their exploitation and subordination of women and extract women’s “consent” to this state of affairs. Ideas and assumptions about biological reproduction, about what women’s and men’s sexed bodies mean, or even that bodies are sexed create the basis for our thinking that reproductive anatomy furnishes important natural clues as to how human society, and more specifically human primary groups such as families, ought to be organized.

Radical socialist contemporaries of Firestone, such as the French philosopher Monique Wittig, following de Beauvoir, along with authors of feminist utopian fiction, such as Marge Piercy and Ursula Le Guin, theorized (and fantasized) that the prospects for societal gender egalitarianism were promising where domestic experiments in conscious, equitable
child care and household labor were possible. But for Le Guin and Wittig, the categories of male and female, the “classes” of “women” and “men” themselves, first needed to be abolished. Thus Le Guin populated her utopian society in *Left Hand of Darkness* with androgynous beings, while Wittig emphasized that the categories of “male” and “female” construct the differences that are then attributed to biology and that consequently these metaphysical constructs must be eradicated.²

Short of androgyny as the ideal solution, social experiments in conscious sex equity within domestic arrangements seemed desirable to some second-wave feminists. For heterosexual-parent families, such experiments (whether based on communal or dual-parenting arrangements) would involve male partners actively and equally sharing in domestic work and child rearing, perhaps even forgoing occupational achievement and economic security in favor of more flexible jobs enabling them to uphold their egalitarian family practice. For heterosexual-parent families, this would be a solution to the gendered power men exercise over and against women, for in redistributing unremunerated domestic labor equally between adults, partners would discontinue the process whereby men vis-à-vis women accumulate economic advantage, or what the social theorist R. W. Connell calls the “patriarchal dividend.”³ Gilman’s sexuo-economic relation would be disabled.

Although some analysts documenting trends from the 1970s to the 1980s viewed changes in the economic and sexual independence of white, middle-class women as movement toward equality, second-wave feminists did not see their vision of equitable domestic arrangements materialize in the United States. Similar efforts to achieve this vision in many northwestern European countries produced few significant results.⁴ Although women’s aggregate labor force participation and educational opportunities steadily expanded, such ostensibly favorable societal trends actually did little to ameliorate women’s subordinated economic and social position. For, as feminist economic analysis points out, women’s level of labor force participation is in fact dictated by their family responsibilities, responsibilities that nowadays include not only child care and household work but care of elderly family members as well.⁵

Some second-wave feminist analysts and other women, both during the heady decades of their political writing and social experimentation and later, concluded that egalitarian heterosexual relations and families were
not possible. Several women who are the subjects of this book were in their twenties during the late 1960s and 1970s and were exclusively heterosexual then. Now they are coparents to children borne by younger women partners, and they describe poignantly, sometimes angrily, their earlier family situations with indifferent or willfully dominating male spouses and partners. One in particular saw her ex-husband’s abusively controlling behavior as stemming from his breadwinner role: at the time, it seemed to her that because her husband earned more money than she did, he could claim the prerogative of demanding her total compliance with his wishes. Others recall their observations over the years of heterosexual-parent families, including their own families of origin, in which the evidence of male domination and often violence so powerfully etched itself in their minds that they view the fatherless families they have now created and live in as blessings. But whether they see male domination within heterosexual-parent families in its brute expression as physical violence or psychological abuse or as a “rational” playing out of men’s advantaged economic position compared to women’s, women in this book as well as many critical feminist analysts doubt that gendered social power in families is a thing of the past. The institutionalization of the battered women’s movement and the feminization of poverty offer sufficient evidence for the persistence of male dominance in families.

More affirmatively, feminist and sociological analyses have indicated what would be needed for more egalitarian gender relations both within and outside families. For heterosexual-parent families, the proposition has mostly remained unchanged from the earlier analysis: heterosexual men must consciously resist, must continuously forego, their gender privilege, becoming real partners to their wives and lovers and involving themselves fully with their children as caregiving and not just recreational or breadwinning parents. For too many African American families, the denial of these basic family roles to incarcerated male kinfolk creates an impossible burden for women to bear alone—even with assistance from extended family. For black communities all throughout the United States, the institutionalized racism that has prevented scores of African American men from participating in family life more fully and constructively must be eradicated. There must be an ongoing abolition movement to end the slavery of prison and the unjust incarceration of African Americans everywhere—not just those with celebrity status.
Since the possibility of full male participation in family life has yet to be realized on any substantial collective level—a situation that clearly reflects powerful social structural, ideological, and psychological resistance—it is important that we may now have a viable alternative family type from which to learn whether and how gender equality might be achieved. For with the emergence of lesbian- and gay-parent families in recent years comes the promising opportunity to explore how their practices, in principle free of historically produced, socially enforced gender conventions, might point the way toward the disconnection of gender and power, not only in their families, but in other societal arenas and institutions. A primary aim of this book is thus to explore whether, and how, the practices of dual-mother families may challenge the constitutive substance of gendered social power.

UTOPIA NOW?

The family, in most strands of social thought, is intricately bound up with gender, so much so that it is difficult to understand the relationship between them. The most rudimentary (and schematic) expression of the relationship between family and gender is that the family produces gender and is itself structured by gender, where gender is understood broadly as a set of social relations that distributes humans into dimorphic sexes and thereby organizes biological reproduction, emotional cathexis, and erotic desire around those two sexes.

The family’s role in the production and reproduction of gender, on the one hand, occurs through the socialization of children. In Freudian terms, children’s gender identity consolidates by means of the successful resolution of the oedipal crisis. On the other hand, parents themselves have already been “socialized” by the gender system—which includes the wider cultural meanings and expectations associated with dimorphic sex—and project their own internalized understandings of gender and sexuality in their relations with spouses, lovers, and children. None of these relations or processes is a matter of straightforward reproduction or correspondence; they are extremely complex, with the family itself mediated so much by and through other institutions, including mass media, that it may make sense to begin thinking of the family-in-representation as more important than families in actuality in the production of gendered per-
Summarizing the relationship of gender to family, Nancy Chodorow wrote in 1978:

Psychoanalysis shows us how the family division of labor in which women mother gives socially and historically specific meaning to gender itself. This engendering of men and women with particular personalities, needs, defenses, and capacities creates the condition for and contributes to the reproduction of this same division of labor. The sexual division of labor both produces gender differences and is in turn reproduced by them. [Psychoanalysis] suggests that major features of the social organization of gender are transmitted in and through those personalities produced by the structure of the institution—the family—in which children become gendered members of society.

Sexual orientation (sexual object choice) is predicated on the social constitution of individuals as male and female, so the significance of lesbian- and gay-parent families in relation to gender and power has more to do with the gender of parents than the sexual orientation of parents per se. The significance of same-sex-parent families for the gender order also moves beyond a simple question of whether children will be conventionally gendered, for this question does not speak directly to the issue of the source of gendered power in families. Power is immanent in gender relations as a result of what Connell calls “the creation of a relevance” upon, and the suppression of sameness of, the reproductive biology of human bodies. Like anthropologist Gayle Rubin before him, who conceptualized the sex/gender system as social arrangements by which “the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped,” Connell sees the social structure that is gender as a “particular historical response to human reproductive biology.” That historical response, the creation of a sexual distinction of and relevance upon human reproductive biology, conveys social power relationally toward those whose sex as defined by the distinction subsequently benefit from that distinction. The power of gender derives from the definition, meaning, and practices of women in relation to the definition, meaning, and practices of men. Men in relation to women have historically benefited from the sexual distinction and relevance made of human reproductive biology, and because this distinction and relevance