

The “Radical Edge” of Critical Familism

Amy Laura Hall
Duke University Divinity School

This proposal reveals the radical edge to critical familism. Limiting the time and energy that parents dedicate to the wage economy is essential for shaping a society in which the privileges and responsibilities of the public and private spheres of life are available to all parents. (Don Browning, “Critical Familism, Civil Society, and the Law”)

A critique of an overweening wage economy is indeed the “radical edge” of the movement that is “Critical Familism.” Implementation of the proposed reforms of the market would represent a significant transformation of the way we currently do business in the United States. Critical familism advocates that “business and industry should take rapid steps” to allow for benefited part-time and flex-time positions, to increase tangible assistance for the working poor, and in general to encourage incentives toward a combined parental 60 hour work week. This is the most prophetic word of the critically engaged effort to promote the family. By insisting that marriage should primarily focus on the care of embodied dependents, and that parental involvement in the workforce must be limited by that focus, critical familism takes head-on basic assumptions on either side of the usual political divide.

As Browning and John Witte Jr. turn their attention explicitly to a “Project on Children,” I expect that this “radical” critique of the present market-driven workplace will become more apparent. Browning’s assertion, earlier in his essay, that “marriage should be defined primarily with its child rearing tasks envisioned as central,” positions the movement against both the free-market right and the free-love left. The defining purpose of marriage is neither to create a sentimental refueling station for the man of the house nor to facilitate equally satisfying self-expression in the bed and in the office. The primary purpose, according to this alternative movement, is to care for incarnate, vulnerable others. This radical challenge to free-market capitalism can and should more thoroughly inform our analysis of anti-family culture in the U.S. It is increasingly difficult to dismiss the hypothesis that the market distorts our cultural and civic imaginations in the U.S. To use and extend Browning’s felicitous words, the “veritable ocean of assumed metaphors about the basic structures of life” is polluted daily by the force of our present market. To move this diagnosis to the center of critical familism’s efforts would involve something of a shift of emphasis; perhaps due to its prophetic

edge, the critique of unfettered consumer capitalism is too often ignored by those who read its publications.

If Browning emphasizes this aspect of his project, he will find an ally in feminist sociologist Arlie Hochschild. Through a series of engagements with the two-worker family, Hochschild has documented a rapid change in the ways that the middle to upper-middle classes perceive marriage and the daily care of children. In *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home* (1989), we watched as women returned from an eight-hour day of work to a “second shift” of family care. Even though a new class of women had entered the work place, their husbands did not willingly take on the chores of cooking, cleaning, and otherwise tending to children. Rather, the embodied care of dependents became a matter of continued conflict and negotiation within dual-wage earning homes. Almost ten years later, in *The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work* (1997), Hochschild observed that many women and men within a seemingly “family friendly” workplace chose not to make use of flex-time and parental leave, for at least two reasons. First, they feared that their co-workers and bosses would resent them. Worrying over subtle repercussions for placing family first, or even a close second, workers eschewed family policies even within a self-professing, family-friendly workplace. Second, and perhaps more disturbingly, Hochschild discovered the pattern that provided the subtitle of her book. Because relationships, expectations and work routines are relatively predictable at work, parents were less interested than we might expect to spend more time at home. When faced with children to placate, dinner to cook, dishes to wash, sheets to clean, and carpets to vacuum, many parents chose to stay at the office. One way to interpret this shift is that the “second shift” of familial care became less a matter for conflict and negotiation because mothers gave up the fight in favor of the workplace.

But, of course, someone was vacuuming the office carpets, preparing the meals at the company cafeteria, and otherwise making people feel at home at work. In her third book *The Commercialization of Intimate Life: Notes from Home and Work* (2003) and in a collection entitled *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy* (co-edited with Barbara Ehrenreich), Hochschild exposes us to the various ways that the upper-middle and upper classes are employing the same low-wage cleaners and cooks who were tidying up the workplace toilets to take over the domestic tasks previously performed by women. Home is thus becoming home-like in a way shaped by the professional workplace -- low-wage Merry Maids clean the floors, day-care workers change the diapers, and the wholesome, take-out grocery makes dinner. Hochschild and Ehrenreich rightly ask whether intimate domestic life, so commercialized and out-sourced, is indeed intimate or domestic at all.

But the implications go way beyond (or should I say below) the distortion of middle- and upper-class familial life. The present patterns prey upon the working poor. This brings us to a point Don Browning recently made in his “How

Inclusiveness becomes Elitist: Reflections on the Presbyterian Report on Families.” As cultural forces whittle away at real familial intimacy and the attentive care of children, the working poor suffer disproportionately. When the decision-making classes (like those who wrote the Presbyterian document and those who influence conversations in the media and academy more generally) view “alternative” family trends as promising variations on the oppressive template of *Father Knows Best*, they fail to take account of the ways that these changes affect the working and service classes. To combine this important insight with Hochschild’s research is to name a dubious pattern whereby a growing number of parents are exploiting economically vulnerable mothers and fathers in order to create a smoother transition into an overly demanding workplace. By farming out the embodied care of children and our homes to the underclass (overtly, in the case of nannies and underpaid school teachers, and more subtly, in the case of the waitresses and dishwashers at the neighborhood bistro), the upper-middle and even middle-class family seeks to meet the workplace-driven time gap.

It is my hope that Don Browning will continue to pursue this critical edge of his project as he explores the predicament of all children. For I believe that there is a deeply problematic connection between the avoidance of embodied, intimate care by the middle and upper-middle classes and the exploitation of the growing service class in the United States. **To put the matter most bluntly, relatively privileged parents are using economically vulnerable families in order to “get by” in a market-driven culture that is increasingly hostile to dependent, embodied need.** To quote at length the concluding paragraph of Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*:

Guilt you may be thinking warily. Isn’t that what we’re supposed to feel? But guilt doesn’t go anywhere near far enough; the appropriate emotion is shame – shame at our own dependency, in this case, on the underpaid labor of others. When someone works for less pay that she can live on – when, for example, she goes hungry so that you can eat more cheaply and conveniently – then she has made a great sacrifice for you, she has made you a gift of some part of her abilities, her health, and her life. The “working poor,” as they are approvingly termed, are in fact the major philanthropists of our society. They neglect their own children so that the children of others will be cared for; they live in substandard housing so that other homes will be shiny and perfect; they endure privation so that inflation will be low and stock prices high. (*Nickel and Dimed*, 221)

As critical familism sharpens its most “radical edge,” those of us who are privileged enough to read and heed the work of the movement are likely to find it uncomfortably cutting. Feminists in particular will likely worry that the default solution will be for professional women to leave the workplace and care for our own children. While this might be the easiest solution, it is not the solution promoted by Browning and others within the movement

of critical familism. With their proposals to transform the workplace truly, women should not have to make that choice between out-of-home work and attentive domestic care. The perhaps harder question Hochschild (and, to some extent Ehrenreich) asks is: Will many mothers (and, even more so, fathers) be willing to end at 5:00 p.m. our wage-earning, often satisfying office work and go home to the relative mess that is truly incarnate life?