

## “Family Politics: Feminism and Its Enemies” (1991)<sup>1</sup>

*E. J. Dionne, Jr.*

OF ALL THE ACHIEVEMENTS of the 1960s counter-culture, none was so enduring as its success in transforming popular attitudes toward women’s roles, sexuality, and the family. The changes are reflected every day in scores of ways: in the content of television shows, in the entry of women into virtually every field of work, in the growth of fast-food restaurants to cater to families in which both parents hold jobs outside the home, in the easy way in which people talk about all aspects of sexuality, in the very words men and women use when they talk with each other. The word sexist would have been incomprehensible thirty years ago. Now, everyone understands it and uses it. More significantly, most people think that “sexism” exists, and most think it’s wrong.

Thus one of the many mysteries of politics in the 1980s: How could a time in which feminist and permissive values continued to have so much power be considered a “conservative era” at all?

One answer is that permissive and feminist values have actually declined. There is at least some evidence to support this view. The 1980s saw divorce rates edge down. Birth rates leveled off after steep declines and began rising. Conservatives pointed to a wave of self-criticism among feminists to demonstrate that even the founders of feminism were beginning to have second thoughts. Conservatives applauded feminist criticisms of “no fault” divorce laws, which tended to benefit divorcing husbands and left their long-suffering wives in desperate economic circumstances. The conservatives noted with approval Betty Friedan’s arguments for the value of the family in *The Second Stage*, published in 1981. Friedan said the second stage acknowledged “women’s own needs to give and get love and nurture.” It involved “coming to new terms with the family” so that “we can live a new ‘yes’ to life and love and can choose to have children.” In pursuit of a broader constituency, the feminist movement was increasingly casting its demands as part of what it called “the work and family agenda.” Conservatives, who had gained so much ground by casting themselves as “profamily,” complained that feminists had “stolen” their favorite words, but counted it as a victory that their foes felt a need to pick up conservative language. Conservatives took comfort in the fact that the language of politics generally was backward looking. In 1988, John Kenneth White, a political scientist, wrote a book called *The New Politics of Old Values* in which he argued that President Reagan had transformed not only American politics but also that great barometer of American culture, prime-time television. “Family, work, neighborhood and authority,” White declared, “are rediscovered themes in entertainment, from ‘Leave It to Beaver’ (which has returned for yet another run) to ‘The Cosby Show.’”

Some of these changes could be attributed to the life cycle: As baby boomers got older, they had children of their own. When they had children of their own, they found sixties values less appealing. But whatever the cause, the transformation of attitudes was measurable. Allan

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Carlson, a conservative who wrote widely on family issues, explained the change with an aphorism: “A social conservative is a liberal with a daughter in high school.”

Plainly, there was a backlash against sixties values that hurt liberals. But the backlash was neither as deep nor as widespread as conservatives thought. Polls showed repeatedly that the women’s movement and the word *feminism* drew positive responses from large majorities. The Reagan administration sought to curtail affirmative action programs and opposed the Equal Rights Amendment, but it did not convince women to leave the work force or give up on equal pay or government-assisted child care. Nor, except for the fear of AIDS, was there a notable change in the country’s attitude toward sexuality. If anything, AIDS itself only increased the level of political organization in the gay community, which became politically conscious in the late 1960s and early 1970s and was a powerful force for social liberalism. So important had the gay vote become in California that Republican Pete Wilson, elected governor in 1990, did battle against antigay Republicans, whom he saw driving a relatively affluent constituency into the arms of the Democrats.

It is true that television advertising shifted some in favor of monogamous, loving couples, another indication that the baby boom was settling down. But advertisers demonstrated no new inhibitions about using sex to sell things, and anyone who thought sex was out was not watching MTV. Indeed, judging from the work of young novelists such as Bret Easton Ellis, the author of *Less Than Zero*, unconstrained sex was no less popular among young people in the 1980s than it had been in the sixties. Eighties permissiveness was different from sixties permissiveness only in that the new version was shorn from any claims—or pretensions—that it was connected to a political movement. “I’m not really out to change someone’s consciousness,” Ellis said, “because I think writers are primarily entertainers.”

But cultural politics are complicated. Even as the country as a whole shifted in favor of more liberal standards, there were substantial pockets of resistance that became key constituencies for the conservative cause. And many Americans were ambivalent about the new society they had created. That ambivalence also worked against liberalism.

## II

It is the natural lot of human beings to assume that the times in which they live are unique and unprecedented. In fact, feminist revolts and sexual revolutions are common in periods of general disruption, and they have been the rule in the United States since the American Revolution. “If particular care and attention are not paid to the ladies,” wrote Abigail Adams to her husband, John, “we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation.”

But if feminism has a long history in the United States, the roots of the current revolt lie in the Progressive Era, which saw the rise of movements for both women’s rights and sexual liberation. Christopher Lasch has argued that the rise of new attitudes toward women and the family after the turn of the century could be traced to radical changes in the nature of production as farms declined and production shifted out of the home and into factories. The new family had a paradoxical effect, since it “simultaneously degraded and exalted women.” On the one hand, it

deprived them “of many of their traditional employments, as the household ceased to be a center of production and devoted itself to child rearing.” On the other hand, as child rearing itself came to be seen as more important, society concluded that to carry out that responsibility, women needed more education “for their domestic duties.” The Progressive Era, Lasch noted, taught that women “should become useful rather than ornamental,” and this created a much broader revolt as “bourgeois domesticity gave rise to its antithesis, feminism.” The new domestic arrangements “gave rise to a general unrest,” Lasch noted, encouraging women “to entertain aspirations that marriage and the family could not satisfy.” The new attitudes toward family life led to a series of remarkable changes in the position of women in society. Female college enrollment tripled between 1890 and 1910 and doubled again in the teens. There was explosive growth in the membership in women’s organizations and a sharp upturn in women’s participation in the work force.

Traditionalists had increasing difficulty in holding the line against experimentation in other aspects of family life, notably sex. As the family’s role in production declined, its new importance lay in providing comfort and intimacy in an increasingly competitive world. As mass production took some of the joy and individuality out of work, the family came to be seen as the primary arena in which individuality could be expressed. The sexual revolution after the turn of the century, which reached its height in the 1920s, was a natural by-product of these changes. The emancipation of women meant that their own sexual needs and desires suddenly became legitimate. The triumph of the value of “healthiness” over the demands of religion and tradition emphasized individual satisfaction over adherence to communal norms. In their excellent social history of the American family, Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg reported that the “purity crusade” of the Victorian 1880s and 1890s against prostitution and venereal disease had the ironic effect of vastly liberalizing attitudes toward sex. The crusade “broke the veil of silence that had surrounded discussions of sexuality during the nineteenth century and inspired pioneering efforts at sex research and sex education,” they wrote. “For the first time, women’s sexuality was publicly acknowledged.”

Thus the new morality which, as Lasch wrote, “proclaimed the joys of the body, defended divorce and birth control, raised doubts about monogamy, and condemned interference with sexual life by the state or community.” A 1913 magazine cover declared that the hour had struck “sex o’clock in America.” Defenders of the family came to realize that full-scale resistance to the new morality would not work. “Instead of trying to annihilate the new morality, they domesticated it,” Lasch wrote, celebrating “a freer, more enlightened sexuality within marriage.” The result was a new theory of family life, “the companionate family.” As Mintz and Kellogg put it, the new theory held that “husbands and wives would be ‘friends and lovers’ and parents and children would be ‘pals.’” The companionate marriage, Mintz and Kellogg noted, “placed an unprecedented emphasis on the importance of sexual gratification in marriage.”

The triumph of such norms was interrupted by the Great Depression and then World War II. These were followed by the domesticity of the 1950s and early 1960s, a time when the country seemed to be stepping back from an ethic of liberation. In many respects, the 1950s were special, marking a sharp break with the patterns of the previous half century. Marriage rates during the 1950s reached an all-time high. By the end of the 1950s, 70 percent of all women were married by the age of twenty-four, compared with just 42 percent in 1940—and 50 percent in the 1980s.

The rate of increase in divorce was lower in the 1950s than in any other decade in this century. Mintz and Kellogg argued that it made perfect sense that so many Americans turned inward in the pursuit of “a house of their own and family togetherness.” After the struggles of the Depression and the sacrifices and dislocations of war, nothing seemed so logical as the quest for “security and fulfillment.”

But in some of the most important respects, the 1950s were not about change at all. Rather, the decade represented continuity with the patterns that had been established between 1900 and 1930. It was in the 1950s that the “companionate family” took deep root in the country. Even before the Depression, the companionate ideal had been available only to a relatively small middle class. But in the prosperous postwar years, “the luxury of mutual pleasure and companionship could be enjoyed by millions of Americans.”

One of the things we remember most about the 1950s is its rigid definitions of gender roles, with women serving as “homemakers” and mothers while men worked outside the home for bread, clothing, and the mortgage payment. Indeed, it was common then for marriage experts to reduce a woman’s role to “understanding” her husband and making it easier for him to achieve his potential. But much was written at the time about the growing power of women and the decline of the male role within the household. Some family experts feared that patriarchy was being replaced by “a matriarchal society, with children who know men only as nighttime residents and weekend guests.” Elaine Tyler May, a historian of the American family, noted that during the 1950s, “observers of middle class life considered homemakers to be emancipated and men to be oppressed.” *Life* magazine went so far in 1956 as to label the decade so often cast as a time of quiet conformity as the “era of the feminist revolution.” If in practice women were assigned inferior roles, in theory marriage was supposed to be “a fifty-fifty deal,” as the singer Pat Boone put it in 1958.

The proclamation of egalitarian ideals within marriage led directly to the feminist revolt. It turned out that the theory of “companionate marriage” was riddled with contradictions. In the 1950s, these contradictions manifested themselves even in the most stable and happy of middle-class households. “On the one hand, young women received the same education as men and were encouraged to develop their skills and intellectual abilities,” Mintz and Kellogg noted. “On the other, women were pressured to maintain their ‘femininity’ and seek fulfillment as wives and homemakers, and they were cautioned against pursuing a career.” The same contradictions that haunted women after the turn of the century arose again.

Betty Friedan captured that turmoil dramatically in her 1963 classic, *The Feminine Mystique*:

It was a strange sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with the children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night, she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question—  
”Is this all?”

Betty Friedan had some surprising company in her concerns about women's roles. In 1955, Columbia University hosted a Conference on the Effective Use of Womanpower, which had the informal support of the Eisenhower administration. Speakers at the conference called for a new approach to women's work, including increasing women's education levels, discouraging early marriage, promoting flexible hours, and encouraging women to take scientific and technical jobs. Not just rebellious feminists but also sober Republicans of the Eisenhower stripe were prepared to do some new thinking about how women could contribute to society—and themselves.

If the movement of production outside the home changed the nature of household work, so, too, did the technological revolution in housework, everything from vacuum cleaners to electric dishwashers. By reducing the time it took to maintain a home, the new devices contributed mightily to the reassessment of women's roles that began in the 1950s.

The point is that feminism did not arise from nowhere. Nor were feminist ideas the product of some radical fringe. In ways that few realized at the time, the “domestic” 1950s prepared a new generation of women for entirely new roles. By the end of the 1950s, most Americans took the security that had eluded them during the Depression and war for granted again. They were free to return to the struggle to redefine women's roles that had begun at the turn of the century. It turned out that it was not possible for society to accord women much more formal education and then expect them to abandon the outside world for the home. Indeed, not just feminists but also businessmen and government planners were reluctant to see all that education and training “wasted” by forcing women out of the work force. In the 1950s and early 1960s, most women continued to see their most important role as involving the upbringing of children. But increasingly, it was not the only role they looked to.

It is important to understand the deep roots of the feminist revolution in order to see why feminist values became so widespread in the 1960s and 1970s. Too often in our political discussions, we treat feminism as a sudden development. Critics see feminism as a fad foisted upon women by well-educated liberal propagandists; feminism's supporters sometimes see feminism as the fruit of sudden enlightenment, the response of women whose eyes have been opened to the costs of patriarchy. It is more helpful to view feminism as part of a gradual process through which society is trying to adjust to a vast array of changes that began with the industrial revolution, including changes in the nature of production and of household work. Those changes, in turn, transformed our values about the nature of equality between men and women and about what women could and should do with their lives. The revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s can thus be seen as an attempt to bring our values and our behavior into line with each other and to think our way through the contradictory demands society has come to place on women. Understanding that the 1960s were not a onetime episode but part of a long and difficult process is one key to moving beyond a politics of false choices.

### III

The way feminism was received in the United States was greatly influenced by the economic circumstances of the 1970s, the moment when feminism began to amass real political

power. Feminism had the misfortune of gaining ground in the period when the American economy suffered from its most severe shocks since the Great Depression.

The coincidence of the rise of feminism and vast changes in the economy has produced a “chicken and egg” debate over what led so many American women to join the work force. Was it the power of feminist ideas? Or was it simply that middle-class families needed more than one income to make ends meet? The answer obviously involved a combination of the two. But how did the economic forces interact with the power of the feminist idea?

There is nothing new about women working outside the home—most poor women have done so since the industrial revolution drew hundreds of thousands of their number to factory work. Before the enactment of child labor laws, children also poured into the factories. The affluence of the postwar period allowed the country to change these practices on a large scale. As wages rose dramatically, the wives of even working-class men were able to stay home with their children.

In the 1970s, this became less and less easy. Real wages stopped rising in 1973, and in a display of what might be called “companionate economics,” husbands and wives decided together that they could no longer maintain their standard of living on one income alone. Thus, the work force was fed by two parallel streams of women: On the one side were well-educated women who commanded relatively high salaries—even if they generally made less than men in comparable jobs. On the other side were less-educated women who took whatever jobs the economy could provide.

The return of this second group to the work force had little to do with the dreams of the women’s movement for a genuinely equal society. As economist James K. Galbraith noted, “the vast bulk” of the increase in women’s employment occurred in sectors of the service economy where genuinely good jobs were hard to find. “Women,” he wrote, “are now accepting jobs that are, in terms of pay, prestige, potential promotion and the conditions of work itself, increasingly bad.”

Conservative leaders were torn by this state of affairs. Many free-market conservatives resisted any form of state intervention in the labor market, and some insisted that the idea that there had been a decline in the average family’s standard of living was a myth. But other conservatives, less wedded to free-market economics, acknowledged that the changing economic circumstances were a grave threat to the “traditional values” they held dear and urged changes in tax laws and salary structures to make it easier for mothers of modest means to escape the work force.

Conservatives and liberals alike also bemoaned changes in the tax laws that subjected a larger and larger share of family income to taxation. In 1948, the median income for a family of four was \$3,468. At the time, the first \$2,667 of income for such families was tax exempt—meaning that three-fourths of median family income was exempt from taxation. Over the years, inflation ate away at the value of the standard deduction and personal exemptions. The result was that average families paid more and more of their income in taxes. In 1983, the median family income for a family of four was \$29,184, but only the first \$8,783 of income was exempt from tax—less than one-third. “The point here is that the costs of raising a family no longer bear any relationship to the amount of income not subject to federal tax,” wrote Daniel Patrick Moynihan,

who cited these figures as an example of the federal government's indifference as to how its policies affected family life.

Feminism itself bore no responsibility for the new pressures on moderate-income families. Indeed, many feminists argued that working women were under pressure precisely because society put so little value on the work women did as mothers and in the home. Nonetheless, feminists found themselves answering for developments that appeared superficially to be the result of their own preachings. Feminism was victimized by a false syllogism: Feminists defended women's right to work; women from families under financial pressure were flooding into the workplace; therefore, feminism was to blame for the new pressure facing families of modest income.

The entry of women into the work force had other paradoxical effects, notably a widening of the gap between the incomes of wealthier and poorer families. As Barbara Ehrenreich among others pointed out, the tendency of professional men and professional women to marry each other increased class inequality, concentrating income in families where both professionals worked. Ehrenreich also noted that the most striking feminist successes had come in the professions. In medicine, only 9 percent of first-year students were female in 1969; in 1987, 37 percent were. The proportion of law degrees going to women rose from 8 percent in 1973 to 36 percent ten years later. In the same period, the proportion of MBAs going to women rose from 4.9 percent to 28.9 percent. "It was an achievement, however, that was sharply limited by class," Ehrenreich wrote. "The chief beneficiaries of the opening of the professions were women who already had the advantages of good schools, an encouraging home life, and the money and leisure for higher education."

The result was a class war among women. Expressing a widespread view, Betty Canellas, who founded a day-care center in Rockville, Maryland, told a reporter in 1989 that she thought the women's movement had been most helpful "to women who are vice presidents or executive secretaries, who earn more than thirty-five thousand dollars a year." Ms. Canellas said she was a strong supporter of the women's movement, but added: "I don't think they do enough for low-income women." Eleanor Smeal, the former president of the National Organization for Women, countered that women at the bottom of the economic ladder had, in fact, been more "successful" at achieving equality with men in comparable positions than had wealthier women. But this happened, she said, less because lower-income women had gained so much ground than because lower-income men had been losing so much ground. Ms. Smeal complained that the women's movement was being blamed unjustly for changes in the broader economy that had nothing whatsoever to do with feminism. Unfairly or not, feminism often did find itself shouldering blame for the gap between professional and working-class women. Conservatives successfully cast feminists as the defenders of the professionals and the scourge of "ordinary women."

The class war also raged around the abortion issue. In her exceptionally sensitive study of activists on both sides of the abortion issue, *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*, Kristin Luker argued that the views of prochoice and prolife activists are explained in large part by their radically different interests and life choices. "Prolife women have always valued family roles very highly and have arranged their lives accordingly," Luker wrote. "They did not acquire high-level educational and occupational skills, for example, because they married, and they married because their values suggested that this would be the most satisfying life open to them." By

contrast, “prochoice women postponed (or avoided) marriage and family roles because they chose to acquire the skills they needed to be successful in the larger world, having concluded that the role of wife and mother was too limited for them.”

Luker sees the conflict over abortion as being in part a battle between groups of women with different resources. “Having made a commitment to the traditional female roles of wife, mother, and homemaker, prolife women are limited in those kinds of resources—education, class status, recent occupational experiences—to compete in what has traditionally been the male sphere,” Luker writes. “The average prochoice woman, in contrast, is comparatively well-endowed with exactly those resources: She is highly educated, she already has a job, and she has recent (and continuous) experience in the job market.” The importance of Luker’s analysis is that it allows us to see how difficult it is to disentangle values and interests. Prolife and prochoice women had different values; they therefore made different life choices; and they thus developed different resources and different economic interests. In the abortion debate, each side defends not only a heartfelt position on a difficult moral question but also an entire way of life. Thus did a war over values become a class war. The class war was made ever more bitter by a religious war, since very religious people were much more opposed to abortion, on the whole, than others.

The political paradox in this is that feminism cost Democrats and liberals votes *even though most of the country supported feminist positions*. Polls showed that Americans overwhelmingly welcomed the expansion of women’s opportunities. Typical were findings cited by Daniel Yankelovich in his book *New Rules*. Between 1970 and 1980, the proportion of Americans wanting to strengthen women’s status within society rose from 42 to 64 percent. Three-fourths of Americans said that a woman who found housework unsatisfying should be able to develop her interests outside the home even if her husband wanted her to do more around the house. In 1989, a *New York Times*/CBS News poll found similarly strong support for women’s rights. Two-thirds of Americans, for example, agreed that the United States “continues to need a strong women’s movement to push for changes that benefit women.” Seventy-two percent said that the women’s movement had made relations between men and women in both romance and work “more honest and open.”

Yet the workings of coalition politics produced some odd political results. Feminists had “won” many of the arguments with a majority of Americans. But many in the “feminist majority” were ambivalent about certain aspects of feminism and shared the worries if not the solutions of feminism’s foes. Thus, many in this “feminist majority” did not vote for feminist positions, but on the basis of other issues entirely. By contrast, the minority fervently opposed to feminism was not ambivalent. It was much more willing to vote its antifeminism. The antifeminist minority thus made its votes count in a way the other side did not.

This was markedly the case in the 1980 election. Polls in 1980 showed that substantial majorities supported the Equal Rights Amendment and opposed a constitutional amendment to ban abortion. Ronald Reagan took the minority position on both issues, and only 15 percent of the electorate agreed with both his anti-ERA and antiabortion stands. Yet Reagan “won” on both issues because that small socially conservative minority voted its social convictions and gave Reagan a landslide margin. By contrast, the larger number of voters who were social moderates or liberals were much less inclined to cast ballots on the basis of the social issues alone. Thus, they gave Reagan enough votes for him to win easily in 1980 and by a landslide in 1984.

Especially harmful to liberals was where the antifeminist votes came from. Because of the “class war” that feminism spawned, many of the most ardent antifeminists were concentrated among lower income whites—a group that had traditionally voted for Democrats and liberals. In the late 1970s and the 1980s, Republican and conservative gains among these lower-income antifeminists more than balanced off their losses among middle-to-upper-income feminists. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, the bills are coming due for the Republicans now that well-off social liberals can no longer count on the Supreme Court to protect abortion rights and other liberal victories. But through the 1980s, the reaction of a minority against feminism and social experimentation was a powerful factor in the rise of the right.

#### IV

Republicans and conservatives also gained on the social issues in a more subtle way. By casting themselves as champions of “family values,” men and women of the right—advocates of individualism in the economic sphere—were able to present themselves as defenders of community and to cast their liberal opponents as defenders of an “antifamily” individualism. This at least partially insulated the right from the real political dangers created by its economic doctrines.

As the 1980s drew to a close, it became an article of liberal faith that America had suffered in the Reagan years because it had become increasingly “selfish.” The liberals did not make this worry up. The broader public was uneasy about a rise in selfishness, which is one reason why George Bush implicitly criticized the Reagan years by calling for “a kinder, gentler nation.” But the public’s sense of what constituted selfishness went beyond the malefactors of great wealth, the Wall Street lawyers and investment bankers of liberal demonology. That is why the language of the conservative “profamily” movement resonated with so many people, including some who disagreed with the profamily conservatives on a whole range of specific issues ranging from abortion to sex education. Despite the widespread acceptance of women’s quest for equality, the public did hanker for aspects of what they perceived to be the good old days and was especially worried about how the new family arrangements affected children. Yankelovich, for example, reported that despite all the popular support for feminist positions, two-thirds of Americans said they wanted “a return to more traditional standards of family life and parental responsibility.” (They could, of course, have been thinking of male responsibility.)

The conservatives took advantage of the public’s uneasy sense that the sexual revolution, looser laws on drugs and pornography, even feminism itself, were the values of a self-centered individualism. Conservatives, who were committed to precisely such an individualism in the economic sphere, appealed to public doubts about individualism as it affected the family and child rearing. Implicit, and sometimes explicit, in the attacks of “profamily” conservatives on feminism and liberalism was the question: “And what happens to the children?” Conservatives sometimes gave this question an emotional edge by bemoaning child pornography and the content of television programs.

Many feminists were as worried as conservatives about how children were being cared for. If Americans were responding to “profamily” themes, such feminists asked, was it not in part

because they sensed that marketplace values were coming to dominate in all aspects of American life, even in areas such as the family where they seemed inappropriate? Was it reasonable—or “feminist”—for women to have large incentives to take low-paid, unrewarding jobs, and no economic incentive whatever to take care of children? Thus, Alan Wolfe, a radical critic of American capitalism, argued that the quest for women’s equality had combined with the workings of the economy to produce a situation that few feminists had had in mind when they embarked on their revolt. Wolfe put it succinctly: “Fathers have always spent too little time with their children. Now mothers have joined them.”

Conservatives had few real answers for this problem. They were reluctant to have the state interfere with economic developments that did far more to push women out of the home than any feminist bestseller. But by linking their movement to “profamily” themes, conservatives gained ground in the short term on two fronts. They furthered their image as “populists” by identifying with “average families” against feminists who were cast as upper-class “elitists.” And conservatives softened their image as advocates of rugged individualism by presenting the family as a buffer against the economy’s harshness; the family was a “haven in a heartless world.” Conservative thinkers such as Michael Novak, Peter Berger, and Richard John Neuhaus argued forcefully that capitalist democracy needed the “mediating structures” of family, church, neighborhood, and voluntary association to strengthen individuals in their dealings with both the state and the private economy. Such ideas had considerable merit, and they were invaluable in the battle for votes. A conservatism with a communitarian lilt was far more attractive than one that preached only the disciplines of the marketplace. It was much easier for Ronald Reagan to extoll “family, work, and neighborhood” than to defend the workings of large corporations.

Thus, conservatives escaped the contradictions of their own brand of individualism in the late seventies and eighties. Liberals did not. Liberals, the traditional advocates of community and mutuality, were left with the noble but politically difficult work of defending the individual rights of unpopular minorities. Liberals were uneasy with all the “traditional family” talk, since they saw lurking behind it a desire to push women out of the workplace, to discriminate against gays and lesbians, to censor the arts, and to enforce rigid moral standards that few Americans, in fact, lived by. Liberals also argued, plausibly, that the much-touted “traditional family” existed mainly in the popular imagination. Liberals scoffed at conservative claims that the family structure of the 1950s, which was historically unusual, represented a “traditional” norm that could be traced back to the Middle Ages or to somewhere even further back in the mists of the past.

But in their eagerness to defend minority rights and in their insistence that what the conservatives wanted could not possibly exist, liberals surrendered some of society’s most evocative moral symbols—family, motherhood, selfless child-rearing—to the political right. Indeed, as Moynihan has pointed out, liberals became increasingly uncomfortable with the idea of “family,” in the singular, since liberals regarded what most Americans called “the family” as just one among many options. Thus, the 1980 White House conference on family life was about “families,” plural. “It was to be *asserted*,” Moynihan wrote, “that no one set of arrangements—parents raising children—was to have social priority over alternative lifestyles, as the phrase went.”

Conservatives took advantage of a tension that existed within feminism itself between individualistic and communitarian norms. In the popular mind, feminism is usually thought of as

a “liberal” or “leftist” movement. That is natural, since feminists were advocates of change and most of them thought of themselves as liberals or leftists. Theirs was the classic appeal of a left-of-center cause: Feminism championed women as an oppressed group deserving of various forms of relief.

In the United States, we usually associate liberal and leftist politics with policies of collective provision, social solidarity, and redistribution. Liberals and leftists are usually critics of the “rugged individualism” of the marketplace. Yet the goals of the feminist movement focused necessarily on individual emancipation. It enlisted the solidarity of “sisterhood” in support of a highly individualistic agenda. The new women’s movement demanded an end to discrimination against women where pay, benefits, or the chance of promotion were concerned. It demanded that abortion be legalized, since women had “the right to control their own bodies.” Preferences in favor of marriage were to be abolished, and as the movement advanced, so were preferences in favor of heterosexuality. In a sense, feminism was a demand that the capitalist marketplace behave precisely as a capitalist marketplace—it should treat all men and women equally, as individuals. Feminists demanded that in their dealings in the labor market, women should not be encumbered by their traditional roles or traditional “protections” that the law had accorded them.

Many of the more radical and socially minded feminists were troubled by this individualistic approach. They worried that a movement that had once hoped to change the world gradually transformed itself into an effort to integrate women into the world as it was. “Surely,” wrote Barbara Ehrenreich, “the aim of the struggle was not to propel a few women to the top of an unjust hierarchy, in which most women counted for cheap labor.” But feminists had to take any gains they could get, since, as Ehrenreich noted, “there is no way that an economically marginalized group can be expected to ‘wait for the revolution,’ letting moral purity compensate for certain poverty.”

The trend toward individualism was also clear in the new developments in family law. Courts showed themselves increasingly willing to intervene on behalf of children’s rights against their parents, on behalf of women’s rights against their husbands. To pick just one example: The growing acceptance that there is such a thing as “marital rape” represented a monumental victory for women and feminism (and decency, too). It also reflected a large extension of the government’s ability to intervene within the household. Increasingly, the law treated the family less as a corporate unit than as a collection of individuals. Mintz and Kellogg grasped the trend toward individualism inherent in these decisions quite clearly. “One ironic effect of these legal decisions has been the gradual erosion of the traditional conception of the family as a legal unit,” they wrote. “In the collision between two sets of conflicting values—individualism and the family—the courts have tended to stress individual rights.”

The women’s movement generally insisted that its animating principle was solidarity—“sisterhood”—not individualism. Insofar as feminists defended interference” in the family, it was to stop palpable injustices, such as spousal abuse. Yet to feminism’s critics, solidarity among women seemed to be at war with the solidarity within the family. Conservative critics of feminism were thus often successful in capturing the rhetorical high ground. The antifeminists cast themselves as the defenders of the warm and supportive family against those who assailed it in the name of abstract “rights.”

The conservatives' success in capturing "traditional family values" also undermined what had historically been the most powerful argument that liberals and social democrats invoked in defense of the welfare state. Initially, the welfare state was seen as a *family policy*, a way of strengthening families, especially families where the breadwinning father had died. Minimum-wage laws, the WPA, collective bargaining—all were seen as vehicles for increasing the salary of the male breadwinner, to the advantage of his wife and children. Indeed, the dominant image that promoters of the welfare state sought to promote was that of the needy child. The hardest hearts softened at the specter of a child punished by the workings of a coldly efficient economic system or by the failings of his or her own parents.

But in the 1960s, the idea that the welfare state helped children and families was undermined by the rise in the number of households headed by single mothers, and particularly the increase in the number of single mothers who were on welfare. Suddenly, the welfare state became the enemy of the family, promoting dependency, illegitimacy, "permissiveness." In a typical conservative jeremiad, columnist R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr., neatly linked a populist assault on rich liberals with an attack on welfare programs, arguing that the welfare state promoted "divorce, alcoholism, drug abuse, psychosomatic illness, neurosis, suicide, and the incidence of social problems." The result, he said with tongue planted in cheek, was to foster among the welfare poor the values of "some of the most rarified regions of the upper class," those practiced within "the Beverly Hills-Hollywood axis." A more sober statement of the same argument was offered by Charles Murray in *Losing Ground*, his statistical evisceration of welfare programs. Murray argued that welfare programs promoted such socially self-defeating behavior—especially in the area of family life—that it would be better for the poor if "the entire federal welfare and income-support structure for working-aged persons" were abolished altogether.

Liberals had ample grounds on which to defend the welfare state, and liberal scholars offered impressive statistical refutations of Murray's arguments. But committed as they were to an increasingly vague idea about what "family" was, liberals were in an ever-weaker position to respond to the conservative attack. Liberals often felt obliged to defend single motherhood on feminist grounds, and also because some of the attacks on the inner-city family smacked of racism. There was much nobility in the liberal response, but the loss of the idea of "family" to conservatives was a grievous political blow to the welfare state.

## V

The battles over families and feminism—or, more precisely, a conservative parody of feminism—hurt Democrats and liberals because they put the beleaguered liberal state under pressures it could not withstand. The battle brought new issues into politics and forced the government to take a stand in favor of this or that kind of family, this or that brand of morality, this or that approach to child rearing.

The cost to Democrats and liberals was twofold. By pushing class issues to the side, the new cultural politics gave Republicans and conservatives new ways of winning votes from those with modest incomes and traditionalist values. And the new cultural politics guaranteed that a significant section of the public would be alienated from government as the state was forced to

pick and choose among competing moral systems. The liberal state was well-suited to redistributing economic benefits. It was ill-suited to making fundamental moral choices for a nation that was engaged in a vigorous debate with itself over the meaning of family life and sexuality. Conservatives had no sure answers to these questions, either. But conservatives were not expected to be the guardians of the liberal state, and they were more than happy to profit from its weaknesses. They did so throughout the 1980s.

Yet if ever there were a set of issues on which Americans wanted less polarization and political posturing, it was surely on those involving families, children, and sexuality. Americans agreed with feminism's basic demands for equality—but worried about many of the directions that family life was taking. Americans generally welcomed less repressive sexual norms, but were concerned about the rise in teen pregnancies and uneasy that “sexual permissiveness” might be going too far. They wanted women to have more choices in the workplace, but they feared that the “new family” was increasingly less nurturing to children. Americans opposed discrimination against gays and lesbians and responded impatiently to the handful of conservative politicians who tried to use the AIDS issue to whip up antigay feeling. Yet Americans also continued to insist that there was something special about *the* family—a husband and a wife taking care of children. Americans were individualists who believed each person should be free to make his or her own choices. They were also communitarians who understood that society was more than a collection of isolated individuals. They believed in private choices, yet also saw merit to publicly proclaimed moral norms—some choices were *better*, for individuals, society, and especially dependent children, than others. Americans wanted expanded assistance for child care outside the home, yet they also believed that parents tended to do a better job of taking care of their own children than even well-qualified custodians designated by the state or by private companies.

The false choices offered by an ideologically polarized discussion made it ever harder for such nuanced views to express themselves. Liberals blamed conservatives for promoting polarization—and polarization certainly helped the conservative cause in the 1980s. Yet as the advocates of change, liberals themselves had the primary obligation to make change easier. In this, they failed. Indeed, it was not until conservatives had won two electoral landslides that liberals began to pay genuinely respectful attention to the nuances of public opinion on family life. Too often, liberals saw the world as divided between “progressives” and “reactionaries,” between “the open-minded” and “the bigots.” This, too, was a false choice, a form of bigotry against the conventional. It was a false choice for which liberals paid a heavy price.