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ed. J. Mollenkopf
ccs. Manuel Castells
Sage Publications
1991

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The Separation of Mothers and Children

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The relationships between work, child rearing, and household formation highlight some of the contradictory consequences of recent changes in New York City's class structure. The increasing social and economic polarization in recent decades has been accompanied by growing interdependence among different kinds of households. The household is the linchpin that connects changing relations of labor, social reproduction, and biological reproduction.¹ Historically, women have performed most of the tasks associated with the creation of "home" and family, in the ideological sense. The processes of home creation and family formation are constantly changing and involve interdependencies of both class and gender. The changes of recent decades in New York City have led households to employ a wide variety of strategies to maintain home and family, most of which rely primarily on women. The following discussion focuses on the contrasting opportunities open to women of different groups and how their new strategies for organizing biological and social reproduction have shaped the interconnections among different kinds of women. The restructuring of households varies by class, and this ultimately determines the rearing and socialization of children for different class positions.

The growing female work force spans the labor market from the lowest paid wage earners to the highest paid lawyers, doctors, and corporate investors. As the 1980 census indicated, 27.9 percent of all children under six in New York City had mothers who were working, and another 3.8 percent had mothers who were in the labor force but unemployed.² The increasing incorporation of women into the labor market has led to far-

poverty level.⁵ More than half the families living below poverty level were supported by women alone.⁶ In the period under review the number of children living in poverty and the number of households "headed" by women in New York City have also been increasing. In 1950, the poverty rate for New York City was below the national rate, 16 percent in contrast to a national figure of 22 percent. Since 1969, however, the poverty rate has consistently exceeded U.S. national rates, and in recent years the margin appears to have widened. By 1989, 23.2 percent of New York City families were living below the poverty line as opposed to a national rate of 13.5 percent.⁷ The poverty rate for female-headed households in New York City increased from 41 percent in 1969 and 55 percent in 1979 to 63 percent in 1987. In addition, while one out of five New York City children lived in poverty in 1969, by 1987 almost two out of five children were being reared in poverty, a rate which exceeded the national average.⁸ While the numbers of poor children and poor adults have been increasing in New York City since 1969, the number of people in poverty who have been able to obtain public assistance in the form of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (the main source of public assistance in New York City) has been decreasing.⁹ Along with the restructuring of the New York City economy and decline in manufacturing and unskilled jobs, expenditures on the social reproduction of the poorer segments of the labor force appear to have decreased.

A 1988 survey reported that 45 percent of the adult population of New York City (aged 16-64) did not hold a job.¹⁰ As the unemployment rate at that time was 4.5 percent, this suggests that approximately 40 percent of the adult population was not in the labor force. Since 1977, there have been increases in jobs available in white collar occupations in the public sector, financing, and insurance. However, the retail and manufacturing jobs generally available to the poor have decreased since the 1970s.¹¹ Thus, poor children growing up with inadequate resources, under the supervision of women working for incomes below poverty level, have, in fact, poor prospects in the labor market. Let us now examine the household organization and conditions for child rearing engendered by these circumstances.

Since 1975, the problems of poverty in New York City have been manifested most obviously in the increasing numbers of homeless people and the renewed phenomenon (not seen since the 1930s Depression) of homeless families. However, homelessness is only one extreme example of how poverty and reduced government support for the unskilled labor force have undermined households. Unemployment, underemployment, and poverty are the first assaults on household structure; homelessness is the second.

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women with young children to work in order to qualify for public assistance.²¹ As a result of workfare women may seek to place their children in publicly certified and subsidized forms of daycare. If they fail to find daycare and leave children alone or arrive late to pick them up, children may be removed from their families by the Child Welfare Administration, an agency of the Human Resources Administration.

While the federal government and New York State mandate that the "welfare mother" go out to work, they do not provide care for their children commensurate to newly created needs. In 1980, New York City provided places for only 22 percent of the 144,000 children under six who were financially eligible for publicly funded daycare and in need of the service because their mothers worked. Of the 72,000 children under two in need of publicly funded daycare, only 6 percent were able to find spaces.²² Other children were placed in daycare situations that were often overcrowded, sometimes dangerous, and conducted in poor housing with poor supervision and no state certification. Since they are not licensed, there is no way to count the actual number of children in such situations. In 1985, only 16 percent of all children in need of "substitute care" (care other than the mother), were cared for by licensed childcare providers in New York State.²³ As Governor Mario Cuomo's Report on the *State of the Child in New York State* notes, "The low proportion of estimated need that is accommodated by licensed care is one indication that the majority of childcare in New York State is unregulated."²⁴ Care given in a child's own home or by a relative other than a mother has also declined. Thus, it is probable that most children being cared for outside licensed facilities are under the care of women who are paid to watch a number of children but fail to meet licensing requirements.²⁵

According to the 1980 U.S. Census figures provided in Table 8.1, most children under six years old, regardless of family type or whether the mother was working, were not enrolled in public, church, or other private schools. (Approximately 26 percent of these children were in some form of school.) Only within female-headed households where the mother worked does this proportion rise to 40 percent, and this accounts for only a small fraction of the children under six. The census does not tell us who cared for the great majority of children under six who were not in school. The great bulk of them (almost 285,000 children) had mothers who were not working and who could presumably care for them, but over one out of four (94,520) neither were in school nor had a mother not working. In households where the mother worked, only 34 percent of the children under six were in any form of school or nursery school, leaving 66 percent without an obvious source of care. Even among female-headed households with working mothers, 60 percent of the children under six were

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apartments for sale, rising cost of rents, and the reduction of low-income housing. This has made it even more difficult for poor families to house themselves than was the case a decade earlier.²⁶ There are currently 200,000 names on the waiting list for apartments in New York City housing projects.²⁷ More than 300,000 people may be doubled up in apartments, living with friends or relatives. In 1988, 15,600 people, including 10,000 children, lived in 82 hotels for homeless families citywide.²⁸ The number of homeless families increased from 30 to over 5,000 between 1969 and 1987.²⁹ Since the homeless population is constantly shifting, as people find and lose housing, the figures consistently underestimate the number of people who have experienced homelessness in any one year.

It is significant that we talk of homeless and not "houseless" or "shelterless" people. Just as a person or family creates a "home" out of a household, the process of homelessness involves "de-domestication," the loss not simply of a house but the destruction of a home. People need a "home" in order to create the emotional and organizational elements of a "family." The 300,000 families "doubling up" in apartments might also be viewed as lacking a home by these criteria. Let us now examine the progressive destruction of family that accompanies the process of becoming homeless.

As mentioned above, the number of female-headed households with children increased 72 percent in New York City between 1969 and 1979. Some of these households were created through divorce and others represent mothers who never married. It has long been argued that unemployment leaves men unable to contribute to household income and thus exaggerates family conflicts through increased alcoholism, child and wife abuse, and depression among all household members.³⁰ It may be the first step in the destruction of family ties.

*Male unemployment
The impact of female unemployment on families has rarely been studied.*

In New York City, home relief programs will fund families where an unemployed father is present. However, the federal program, AFDC, primarily funds women and their children.³¹ When a woman applies for public assistance, those for whom the woman is financially responsible and who meet the Department of Social Services criteria are placed on the woman's "budget." In other words, her biweekly check is calculated to include some funds for each of these dependent individuals. For a variety of reasons, older male children (who unlike girls cannot claim public assistance for children of their own) and fathers are not generally listed on a woman's budget with public assistance.³² This step in the disintegration of the family becomes more significant when people lose housing.

Families who cannot find rental housing or who lose their homes through inability to pay rent, landlord harassment, or fires are eventually referred to offices recently created to deal with the new demand known

one father whose three children had been placed in foster care until he could find a place to live said, "We're still a family even though our children are not with us."⁴¹ City officials estimate that over 1,200 women in city shelters for single women could be reunited with their families if housing were available.⁴²

The pressures toward separation of parents and children do not end once families have been placed in hotels for the homeless. If they are "fortunate," families waiting in EAUs will be referred to one of the hotels for homeless families. One or two rooms with nonfunctional bathrooms, no kitchen, and often hazardous stairways and elevators are common. However, families not assigned such rooms (at a cost of approximately \$3,000 per month to the city, state, and federal governments) may end up in the streets. At that point, they are almost certain to lose their children to foster care. Families in hotels for the homeless are also liable to find themselves designated as unfit parents by New York State and their children placed in foster care or temporary group homes. In 1988 there were 20,553 children in foster care in New York State and 3,472 children being cared for by relatives paid foster care stipends; these numbers have subsequently increased. A 1987 survey by the Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies, a group representing foster care agencies, found that approximately one-half of children in foster care in New York City "could be returned home immediately if their parents found permanent housing."⁴³

Children are referred to the foster care system through the Child Welfare Administration, an agency of the Human Resources Administration responsible for identifying children at risk. Placements may be made in response to referrals of child abuse and neglect by hospitals, schools, and other agencies. In addition, evidence of use of illegal narcotics by the mother (in hospital urine samples, for example) can also precipitate the removal of children. A recent study found evidence of illegal drug use among 11 percent of pregnant mothers in hospitals around the country; numerous New York City children could possibly be removed from their families.⁴⁴ Since the rates of drug use among pregnant women are much higher than the rates of foster care, certain selection factors not clearly delineated are implicated. Most significant among these are probably the mother's poverty, homelessness, and lack of prenatal care.

Thus, if the lives of the poor in New York City are examined since 1965, several factors have converged to increase the separation of social reproduction from familial ties. Most mothers must work to support their children. Among the marginally poor but not yet homeless, new public assistance regulations require women with young children to work in order to qualify for public assistance. While the image of the "welfare moth-

responsible for household services. Some men have increased the amount of work they do in the household, but this has seldom replaced the work carried out by women in many tasks associated with creating a home. In addition, the proportion of female-headed households has increased for high-income families as well as among poor households, and many professional women are rearing children alone.

Thus, educated women in New York City are increasingly employed in high-paying professional jobs, which require extensive time commitments. At the same time, many of these women are also primarily responsible for the maintenance of home and family. The impact of these dual and contradictory commitments is being reflected in current discussion of the "mommy track" and the career compromises highly paid professional women are making in order to provide for children.

The popular advice literature oriented towards middle class women with children is beginning to reflect changes in women and men's roles. To quote the revised edition of Berry T. Brazelton's *Infants and Mothers*, one of the most widely read publications, "When this book first appeared I hoped it would demonstrate the vital importance of nurturing a baby in the first year. . . . Inadvertently, I may have added to mothers' feelings of guilt when they were not able to stay at home throughout the first year."⁴⁷ The literature of the 1980s reflects women's guilt and sense of incompetence about their lack of full-time child rearing and the same problems with relation to career. There is lip service paid to the need for "quality" childcare at the same time pediatricians and psychologists are emphasizing bonding and the importance of the parents' involvement with the child.

Middle class women rearing children are thus caught between the need to be available to children and the demands of a professional career.⁴⁸ In New York City, this contradiction is partially mediated by the poor and immigrant women who serve as householders, baby sitters, and combining these tasks, as full-time housekeepers. Frequently, housekeepers cook, do the laundry, and clean the house/apartment, as well as care for babies and meet older children at the school bus. Sometimes, they also do the shopping and chores. Some live-in housekeepers may even be responsible for picking up crying babies at night, in addition to full daycare, cooking, and tidying up.⁴⁹

Domestic work in New York City today pays higher than the minimum wage paid for home health aides and higher than the \$5 or \$6 an hour earned by temporary sales help. In Manhattan in 1988, daytime baby sitters may earn \$6 to \$10 an hour in middle class households, and weekly house cleaners may earn more for less time. Immigrant women may seek domestic work to obtain migration papers. For most poor women,

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tions allow visas for domestic workers, and New York State attempts to certify daycare centers. By law, domestic workers are supposed to be registered for social security and pay taxes on their income. In practice many do not. Although an estimate of numbers in this case is difficult, many domestic workers do not want to jeopardize possible access to public assistance or pay taxes, and most domestic employers do not want to be liable for payment of social security and other expenses. In such cases, no official record is made of the relationship, by mutual agreement. On the other hand, immigrants who come specifically to work in a household must pay social security or they lose their status with the immigration authorities. In these cases, official records exist of the arrangements.

Although a middle class child may see his or her parents little more frequently than the immigrant or poor children, he or she is provided with a parental substitute. In fact, the first language of many middle class U.S. children looked after by baby sitters may be Spanish. Thus, the definition of "mother" among upper income families comes to rely more on biological and economic factors as other aspects of the relationship between parents and children are eroded.

Conclusion

As most women, including most mothers of small children, are beginning to work outside their own homes, the jobs they find in New York City are becoming more differentiated. The data and examples presented here suggest a growing polarization among women workers, as some join the professional and corporate elite and, at the other extreme, poor women find themselves working for below poverty-level wages. Childbearing and rearing patterns reflect this polarization, starting with the age and education of the mother and followed by access to different childcare facilities and schooling opportunities.

Among both groups of women examined here, mothers are increasingly separated from their children and dependent on others to rear them, almost from birth. This may indicate changes that more households in New York City will face over the next decade.

The increasing separation of mothers from their children has created interdependencies among women in caring for children. Poor women may leave children with older siblings, other relatives, neighbors, or alone while a fortunate few will find publicly subsidized daycare, frequently overcrowded and staffed largely by poorly paid, untrained women workers. Others may lose their homes altogether and then lose their children to be looked after by other women in foster care programs.

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