

Reviews

THE ANTI-SOCIAL FAMILY
Michele Barrett and Mary McIntosh.
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This book sets out to make a socialist-feminist critique of the family both as a social institution and as an ideology. They argue that instead of talking about the decline of the family we ought to be speaking of the pervasive familial character of society or what they call the ideology of familialism. The book is in four chapters. The first two consider the family from the point of view of what needs it is thought to serve and how the family is represented culturally. The third chapter explains how the acquisition of femininity and masculinity is understood and critically assesses the work of Donzelot and Lasch, in particular, as well as historians and sociologists in general. The final chapter is devoted to a discussion of possible strategies for change in the area of state policies and the law.

Overall the book is provocative and stimulating. The third chapter is a very succinct critique of Donzelot and Lasch and it will be interesting to see how those on the Left who have received Lasch's work with approval will respond. (I don't, though, think that the authors should have been surprised that his anti-feminism was no bar to his obtaining credence on the Left). However, in a short book there is inevitably some telescoping of the arguments and a need to generalise and simplify and I felt there were times when this confused rather than clarified the issues and concepts. For example, in the first two chapters, but not in the third where the concepts are examined much more carefully, there appeared in places to be a confusion about family meaning couple, family meaning household and family conforming to the image in the popular ideology of which they are rightly so critical, namely co-resident parents and young children. Single people and people living alone have families and a case could be

made for arguing that we invest in marriage as much, if not more than, in families in the stereotypical sense.

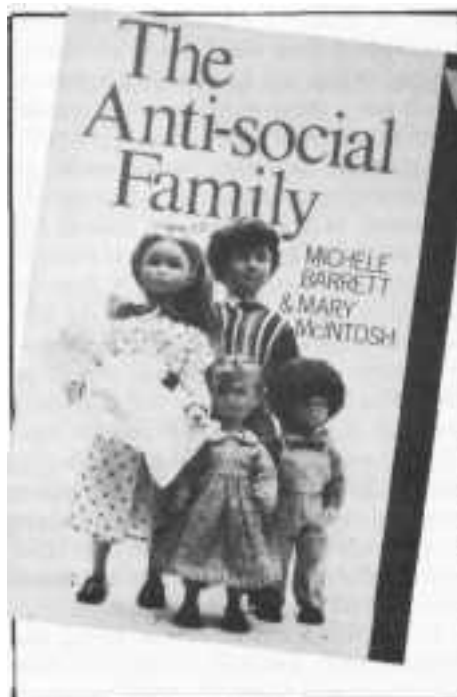
Families with dependent children are not given material privileges in Britain to the extent found in many other societies. Of course this may be partly because we do not rear our powerful male elite in families. Instead they are removed from their parents and siblings to spend most of their childhood in single-sex institutions. As a result they know and understand little of women and children and their allegiance to their peer group is very strong. In the context of British society this makes for powerful resistance to change. The authors clearly approve of childrearing systems which strengthen commitments to one's peers and weaken them to individual kin but this would not *necessarily* make for a more caring society.

In other places they talk of children, forgetting to distinguish between boys and girls. There is not *one* single typical personality whose features they describe as including

'a need to form intimate one-to-one ties to the exclusion of a more diffused bond to a wider group, a tendency to go it alone as an individual and a lack of concern for group support and approval of group interests.' As they discuss elsewhere in the book, family-based child rearing produces very important gender *differences*.

There are inevitable tensions between family and state because the development of the state has required changing kinship-based patterns of responsibilities, loyalties and rewards. I would have welcomed more discussion of this. For example, commenting on the disarmament poster which announces how much the average British family spends annually on arms they say that 'it is as citizens and not as families that we should be protesting about arms spending'. But in this instance does there have to be a conflict? Why can't we oppose nuclear war as families *and* as citizens? Having children is in one sense giving a hostage to the future. Families comprise a very powerful institution in any society for structuring continuity between the generations as they acknowledge in other parts of the book. Indeed if the family were a weaker institution how would we structure obligations between generations, particularly involving the older generations whose productive and reproductive life is over? Increasing peer group allegiances might make this harder not easier.

I would also have welcomed more discussion about the state and its structures in the final chapter. As Mary McIntosh has pointed out elsewhere, there is a contradiction in the demands feminists make that the state should provide more and in feminist criticisms of the state as a set of institutions which oppress women. What kind of state institutions do we want to administer the policies on taxation, housing, social security, etc, outlined in this chapter? I for one would have liked to know more about the context within which both families and state policies would change. But that, no doubt, would have meant a longer book.



Hilary Land