

Book Review Editor
Ruth Stewart



WHAT IS TO BE DONE ABOUT THE FAMILY? — Crisis in the Eighties.

Edited by Lynne Segal. Published by Penguin Books, in association with the Socialist Society, 1983, Great Britain. \$6.95, 237 pages.

Reviewed by: Prue Digby, Children's Services, Local Government.

'To call for the return of the traditional family is like calling for the return of the British Empire. Its time has passed', concludes Segal in the final article of 'What is to be done about the Family - Crisis in the Eighties'. The book, edited by Segal, an Australian, teaching psychology in Middlessex, England, is a collection of articles written by seven socialist feminists in England. All articles are written from a feminist perspective and look at the changes that have occurred in family life, as they bear upon struggles for sexual equality.

The past five years has seen an increasing call by Right Wing Neo-Conservative forces for a return to the traditional family. That is, a domestic unit comprising a heterosexual couple and children dependent on a male wage, in which women are responsible for child care and housework. Whether this call has arisen as a means to justify spending cuts in the wake of the economic recession, or is indicative of a growing moral Right, the future of women's equality is being threatened throughout the world.

Publication of this book, Nava states, is evidence of a renewed concern with the family as one of the key sites in which womanhood is acted out and perpetuated.

Changes in family ideology do not seem to keep pace with other changes in our lives. This book questions whether current ideology obscures the nature of how we live and the problems we face.

In searching for answers, the articles in this book explore the changes in the way we live and their complex relationship to the persistence of family ideology. 'What is the connection between our actual experience of family life and our image of the family?', ponders Segal.

Segal traces the development of the fierce critique of the family in the early 60's to the emergence of the counter culture and com-

munal living at the end of the decade, as a response to this critique.

The emergence of a feminist critique of the family in the early 70s and the key ideas embedded in this critique are analyzed by Mica Nava.

Susan Himmelweit's contribution concentrates on the history of the family and its interconnections with the world outside of it. How did women become identified with 'home' and the caring emotional values it is supposed to provide? What is the relationship between wage labour and housework? What is the relationship between the status of women and capitalism?

The needs of women and children are seen by society to be one and the same. Denise Riley tackles the question of children's needs and whether there is a conflict between the needs of children and women's demands for equality. The contradictions of mothering are explored as are the limitations of premature assumptions of shared parenting as a solution to the problems of child care.

Beatrix Campbell examines the effects of sexual reform, and the development of family planning in regularising women's sexuality as mothers within marriage. Campbell outlines feminist campaigns around sexual politics and the family. The discussion of the relationship between lesbianism and heterosexuality in the women's movement and the need for an alliance which can challenge the sexual ideology of the family, is of particular interest.

The effects of the family ideal on those who live outside of it are explored by Wendy Clarke, who analyses the ideological hold the family has on all of us. Clarke questions whether collective households meet many of the unseen and unexamined needs people have and points out the frequent inability and failure to examine and understand these needs. Clarke concludes that we must deal with the family as a set of relationships, not just as a household structure.

The family ideal and the domestic role of women are supported by the State, and its various institutions. Fran Bennett examines the complex relationship between State policies and women's dependence. Bennett discusses the problems of legislating for women's independence in a situation of underlying inequality.

Segal, in the final article, contends that although the most blatant sexist practices are generally opposed, women's situation has not changed very much. Household structures and employment patterns have changed, but women's domestic role basically has not. Segal considers women as an oppressed group and looks at their deteriorating situation in the economic recession. Whilst espousing pro-family rhetoric, the Thatcher government's policies exacerbate the pressure on families and the work load and stress on women. Segal concludes that pressure to strengthen traditional ideas about the family are out of step with reality as the 'ideal' family is no longer typical.

In attempting to answer the question, 'What is to be done about the family?', this book provides some challenging ideas. If the reader is looking for detailed, practical answers to this question, they may well be disappointed. Rather the book serves to highlight the myriad of complexities that need to be addressed in overcoming sexual inequality and the problems of traditional family life in which this inequality is embedded.

There is consensus among these writers that feminist thought has moved considerably from presenting prescriptive and moral solutions to the problems of sexual inequality. Raising political consciousness, personal change, collective households and shared parenting are no longer presented as the most apposite or correct, nor are they sufficient, in the struggle to advance the position of women. Instead this book advocates changes in State policies which must tie up with changing women's conditions at 'work', a restructuring of working lives and changing men's attitudes to child care and housework. Fundamental social change is required which integrates work, family life and community where flexible social provision enables the affectionate and caring relations to extend beyond individual households.

Feminist ideas are essentially about giving women choices. Ensuring that gains that have been won are not lost and that choices are made in conditions which do not impoverish our lives, entails constant analysis of government policies and community attitudes. This book makes a significant contribution in terms of this analysis and to the critique of the family and the role of women within it.