

LETTY COTTIN  
POGREBIN

author of GROWING UP FREE

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# FAMILY POLITICS

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Love and  
Power on an  
Intimate  
Frontier

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# ***FAMILY POLITICS***

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***Love and Power  
on an Intimate Frontier***

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***LETTY COTTIN POGREBIN***

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# ***Author's Introduction***

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WHEN IT COMES to family life, I feel I've seen it all. In fact, it takes me twenty minutes to give an accurate answer to the simple question "Have you any sisters or brothers?" I began my life in a traditional two-parent family but thanks to divorce, adoption, death, and remarriage, I've also had a single parent, a stepparent, a full sister, a half sister, a stepbrother and a stepsister. For the past twenty years, I've been married to my first and only husband and together we are raising three children. My life has been enriched by these dense family connections plus an even more convoluted extended family that has taught me first hand, the legitimate dignity of the diverse marital, sexual, racial, and economic family configurations flourishing in America today. Nevertheless, I leave it to others to survey the particular pleasures and problems of "alternative" families, stepfamilies, and single-parent families. Here I limit myself to a discussion of belief systems that underlie family interaction, regardless of who is in the cast of characters.

The title of this book, *Family Politics*, suggests my two-fold analytical objective: to explore the use and misuse of family issues in American politics, and to examine the politics operating within conventional families—that is, the power relations that exist among women, men, and children who live together.

For the most part, this book is addressed to people who tend to include children in their family life. This is because I think of the reader as someone like myself, a modern parent reared by old-style parents—a member of a unique, transitional generation that is critical of many aspects of traditional family life but also recognizes its virtues, especially for the rearing of children. Our generation is looking for ways to preserve those virtues while changing what is unsatisfying about the family of the past. I believe there are millions of us who want to live in families that distribute happiness more equally; families fueled by reciprocity, not domination; families that strike a balance between intimacy and autonomy, between adventure and security, between individual freedom and group harmony.

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In one sense, then, *Family Politics* is about the *meaning and feeling of family*. But it is also an inquiry into *the place of family* in today's society and *the political uses of families* in the public sphere. I hope to help readers clarify their families' strengths and weaknesses, reconsider the power relations in their households, and understand how social policy and political institutions affect every part of their family lives.

Books written in praise of traditional family structures, such as Rita Kramer's *In Defense of the Family*, Burton Pines' *Back to Basics*, Jeanne Westin's *The Coming Parent Revolution*, *The War over the Family*, by Brigitte and Peter L. Berger and Christopher Lasch's *Haven in a Heartless World*, keep beating the same dead horses. Ignoring real life and real people's situations, they campaign for Dick-and-Jane nuclear households in which fathers earn the money and exercise authority, mothers take care of the house and children, girls and boys respect their elders, and families solve their own problems.

Although these authors come at their theses from various angles, to some degree they each blame professional experts, social service agencies, government "interference," the women's movement, "decadence" schools, child-care centers, and television for disturbing traditional household hierarchies and eroding the good old-fashioned virtues of initiative, hard work and individualism. Somehow, when you finish these books, you sense it is all your fault if your family is not up to snuff. You shouldn't have lost your job, your husband, your health, control of your kids. You shouldn't need any help. Pull yourself together. The traditional all-American family was an independent, self-sufficient, rugged little unit; what's the matter with yours?

In this book, I demonstrate that reality supports a totally different analysis, one that reveals how families have been exploited and then manipulated to blame themselves for their hardships. I try to interpret the larger forces pressing upon families and to locate the original source of our troubles both inside and outside our own walls. *Family Politics* is not a superficial how-to book; it is a book that I hope will influence legislators, sociologists, politicians, journalists, family counselors, and teachers. I would also like it to help women, men, and children reevaluate their treatment of each other and reorganize the ways their families function so that the home becomes a happier place for everyone in it.

Very simply, I hope to preserve family life by saving what is best about it and changing what isn't.

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# ***1***

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***Whose Family  
Is It, Anyway?***

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THE FAMILY IS A HOT ISSUE. Judging by the proliferation of magazine cover stories, television features, talk show discussions, academic research, and public policy discourse being devoted to the state of the American family, it seems safe to say that what civil rights and Vietnam were to the Sixties, and women's rights and the environment were to the Seventies, family issues have become to the Eighties. People care about their own families, of course, but of late they also seem terribly concerned about the *idea* of family and the future of family life in this country.

I share that concern, but I have also begun to worry about the way the family debate has been skewed. I am afraid we won't be able to make reasonable decisions about family needs and problems if we are misled by distorted notions of what families are and want to be. I'm afraid of a phenomenon I think of as "the asparagus syndrome."

As a child, I hated asparagus. I hated the smell of it cooking and my disgust was confirmed by one taste of the soggy, gray stalks my mother boiled to mush. Much later in life, I discovered that asparagus offers other choices: it is delicious raw, crisp as a carrot, dunked into a dip, steamed and glossed with melted butter or lemony hollandaise sauce, or served cold under a fresh vinaigrette, to mention just a few possibilities.

So it wasn't true that I hated asparagus, only that I had been given a *false choice*: overcooked asparagus or none at all. No one told me there were other options.

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The same sort of false choice is now being offered in the family debate. Some people would have us believe that there are only two alternatives: the old-fashioned, confining, authoritarian family or no family at all.

Paul Weyrich, founder of the Committee for the Survival of a Free Congress, calls the ultra-right's fight for the traditional family "the most significant battle of the age-old conflict between good and evil, between the forces of God and the forces against God that we've ever seen in this country."<sup>1</sup>

Other political conservatives and religious fundamentalists warn that "secular humanism" is destroying the family; or feminism is, or public education is, or the Equal Rights Amendment would, or reproductive freedom will. Any social change that might promote pluralism or empower individuals, the ultra-right labels "a threat to the family." Some conservatives have established what they call the "pro-family" movement. Legislation to "protect the family" is at the top of their national agenda. Their magazines and direct mail solicitations hammer away at the need to "strengthen," "defend," or "save" the family. Their books carry such combative titles as, *The Battle for the Family*, *In Defense of the Family*, and *The War over the Family*.<sup>2</sup>

Estimates of the number of people who count themselves part of the political or religious right range from five million to fifty million.<sup>3</sup> Whatever their number, their voices are loud, their leaders well-connected and politically powerful, and their movement slickly publicized and well-financed. The top ten TV ministries raise up to \$90 million *each* per year, and the Moral Majority alone had revenues of \$5.7 million in 1981.<sup>3a</sup> More alarmingly, their message has permeated the public consciousness to a point where even people who are unaffiliated with the ultra-right have unwittingly begun to adopt its apocalyptic vision and to doubt the validity of their own family lives.

But what is this entity we are supposed to defend? When you and I hear "family," do we understand it to mean what someone like Paul Weyrich means? Judging by current varieties of usage, the answer is no.

"Family" is not a precise, universally understood label

for a particular living unit; it has different meanings and produces different results in different contexts. The word is both symbolic and functional. Used prescriptively, it seems able to coerce people into roles, to transform nostalgia into votes, and to create a national ethos out of a myth of domestic bliss. Used descriptively, it is more powerful as an Idea to be distorted and manipulated than as a Reality to be examined for the common good.

### *Who Is the Family?*

In childhood, we say "my family" and mean our parents and siblings. After marriage, few people call a spouse "my family"; we tend to continue using the term "my family" to mean our family of origin until we have children of our own. But if children make a family, then what do we call two adult brothers who live together, or a married couple who cannot or choose not to have children or, for that matter, the 24 million households in which married couples live without children at home? (The 1980 census found that today's women plan to have fewer children than ever before—2.048 births each—and a national poll found that more than eight in ten Americans now believe it is acceptable to be married and not have children.<sup>4</sup>)

Familiar lines, such as "the author lives with his wife and family," "in a family way," and "when are you two going to settle down and raise a family?" suggest that "family" is just another word for *children*. Yet we call orphans "children without a family," and when abused children are removed from the custody of their father and mother, officials say the children were "taken from the family." So maybe "family" is just another word for *parents*.

The definition is further muddled by the fact that families are often identified by the marital status of the parents: in the phrase "single-parent family," we know "parent" usually means *mother*. When a question of authority is involved (asking permission from a "parent," having a "parent" sign a loan, going into the "family" business), "parent" or "family" most often means *father*, but when it's a question of care—as in

"parenting courses," "class parent," Parent-Teacher Association or *Parents* magazine (80 percent of whose readers are women)—"parent" means *mother*.

When traditionalists talk about The Family, they mean an employed father, a mother at home, and two school-aged children, a profile that fits only 5 percent of American households.<sup>5</sup> One out of six youngsters now lives in a one-parent, usually female-headed family (16 percent of all families). Are these mothers and children to be excluded from America's family of families? People such as Jo-Ann Gasper, a self-described pro-family leader, would answer yes: "In the 'good ole days,' " she writes, sanctimoniously, "there were only two 'family forms'—a family and a broken family."<sup>6</sup>

"Broken family" and "single-parent family" describe what the U.S. Census Bureau used to call a "female-headed household." (There was no category for a "male-headed household" because a qualifier is not necessary for what is considered normal.) Regardless of how prevalent it has been across time and cultures, or how solid it may feel to the woman and children in it, the female-headed household has been considered broken, inferior, and abnormal.

### *What Is the Family?*

If *who* is family is a complicated question, *what* is family is a contradictory mess:

When a fellow slays his wife and children, the bewildered neighbors often express shock because he was a "real family man." What do they mean by "family"? Are family men on a continuum with family murderers? Is a family man somehow distinct from other husbands and fathers? Would neighbors call the average wife and mother a "real family woman"?

When policy-makers question "the effect of a working mother on the family," they put a woman in opposition to a hallowed entity. What policies would result if instead we probed "the effect of sex discrimination on a working mother and her family" or "the effect of an uncooperative, demanding husband on the energies of a working mother"? Rather than make mother seem the cause of "family problems," why not

address the legitimate problems and conflicting interests of family members?

When researchers ask "How does domestic violence affect the family?" do they mean to imply that some disembodied object gets beaten up every night, or that domestic violence is experienced in the same way by both the batterer and the victim?

When right-wing spokeswoman Phyllis Schlafly says she doesn't want "unmarried parents and lesbians to have the same social status as a family,"<sup>7</sup> what family does she mean: Godfather Corleone's? The feuding Hatfields and McCoys? The imbecilic inbred Jukes and Kallikaks? Shall we disregard a family's character and award it social status simply because it is legal ("heterosexual marriage or relation by birth, blood or adoption"<sup>8</sup>), while simultaneously denying social status to self-proclaimed families that are far better practitioners of the art of family love?

When Chief Justice Warren Burger rules that "important considerations of family integrity"<sup>9</sup> require a doctor to notify the parents of a girl seeking an abortion, does he mean that the courts can force families to be confidantes and invade a daughter's privacy as no one else's privacy is invaded in our society? Can there be "family integrity" if there is no primary integrity for each person in the family?

When Ronald Reagan says "we have witnessed an extremely disturbing decline in the strength of families,"<sup>10</sup> and at the same time the Russian government subsidizes the purchase of wedding rings because "they are a wonderful tradition that helps strengthen the family,"<sup>11</sup> can we assume strong communist families are the same as strong capitalist families?

When Pope John Paul II tells the Nigerians that contraception and abortion are "the modern enemies of the family,"<sup>12</sup> does he mean that the alternatives of underdevelopment, overcrowding, starvation, disease, and poverty are *friends* of the family? Nigeria's alarming population growth is among the world's highest. What *is* "the family" if to save it we are willing to destroy the quality of life within it?

Why this defensiveness, this talk of enemies and attacks? And why is the campaign for the traditional family picking up so much steam?

*Family as Fetish*

- fe•tish (fě'tish), *n.* 1. an inanimate object, regarded with awe as being the embodiment or habitation of a potent spirit.  
2. any object of blind reverence.

Like a sexual fetish (commonly a shoe or undergarment), an ideological fetish is dehumanized and dehumanizing, the object of compulsive rather than volitional devotion. A fetish triggers a response based on obsession or conditioning, not sense or sentience. The Family has become that kind of fetish for people who prefer inanimate concepts to organic human institutions. They want The Family to be concrete and to deliver fixed pleasures as predictable as those the shoe or silk panties deliver to the sexual fetishist.

After the social upheavals of the Sixties and Seventies, the Eighties brought a kind of national passivity borne of an unstable economy and shifting values. What is embodied in The Family—that is, the *traditional* family promoted by conservatives—is something concrete, secure and orderly: the structure and spirit of patriarchy.

The relationship of a family to its patriarch creates a paradigm for every other power hierarchy in western culture: The team coach controls the captain, the starting lineup, and down to the last guy on the bench. The generals head the chain of command in the military. American corporations and the country itself have their own pyramids of authority, each topped by a president.

Dominance depends on hierarchy and hierarchy begins at home with Big Daddy. Sophocles put these sentiments in the mouth of King Creon centuries ago:

. . . Nothing  
Should come before your loyalty to your father.  
. . . If I allow  
My own relations to get out of control,  
That gives the cue to everybody else.  
People who are loyal members of their families  
Will be good citizens too. . . .  
Once a man has authority, he must be obeyed—

In big things and in small, in every act,  
Whether just or not so just.

—*Antigone*<sup>13</sup>

In the 1980s, would-be kings like Paul Weyrich use Scripture to buttress the same politics: "The Bible ordains the family with the father as head of household and the mother subject to his ultimate authority. The father's word has to prevail."<sup>14</sup> After all, *somebody* has to be in charge; for the sake of efficiency, discipline, division of labor, basic order, natural law, and of course, God's will. Whatever the rationalizations, at root the traditional family is defended because it is the core model for all authoritarian patriarchal structures. (Try substituting "male supremacy" for "family" in those previously quoted pronouncements of the Pope, Justice Burger, Reagan, or Schlafly, and watch the hidden meaning be revealed).

The strategists of the right are scared. If there is an erosion of the elemental Big Daddy model of dominance, what would happen to every other hierarchy? Would people cease to obey their "superiors"? Would capitalist organizations founder? Would soldiers stop following orders? Would the nation "weaken," lose its "supremacy," be conquered and forced to take a lower place in *somebody else's hierarchy*?

With this construct, father dominance is the prerequisite for world dominance. Think of it this way: When "God is Dead" became the slogan of a generation that dared to question all authority, only the Born Again could be counted on to submit. When open education and affirmative action blurred class distinctions, the preserves of the privileged were democratized. When blacks stopped genuflecting to whites and racial mixing and racial pride went public, the satisfactions of white supremacy were eliminated. Now male supremacy is in peril. The women's movement has challenged man's hegemony in business, politics, law, medicine, sports, the media, finance, education, and virtually every other field. Laws have been passed that support women's advancement in the public sphere. Now traditionalists, defenders of the old order, are determined to hold the line at

the door to a man's castle. In other words, save the family. They contend that the measure of a nation depends on the health of its families, and they go on to define a healthy family—not in terms of its physiological and economic well-being—but in terms of a norm that puts men in power and keeps women in the home.

*Item:* Howard Baker, Jr., the Senate majority leader, was apprehensive when his twenty-six-year-old daughter Cynthia made an appointment with him.

"For two days I worried, as any father can worry about a daughter. Thought of the most terrible things she could say. I finally decided she was getting married to someone I didn't like."

What Cynthia came to say was, she was running for Congress. "I still haven't decided if I should be relieved or not," said Baker.<sup>15</sup>

*Item:* Explaining his vote in favor of tax breaks for families in which the husband works while the wife keeps house, Alabama Senator Jeremiah Denton said: "The guy likes to come home and get supper and a couple of martinis from a woman who is reasonably rested."<sup>16</sup>

What do these legislators' comments tell us about life in their families, their sex-stereotyped view of women and men, and how it affects their representation of American families' interests? If his twenty-six-year-old son wanted to see him, would Baker have worried about a bad marriage? And had the son declared for Congress, would the father be ambivalent? Does Senator Baker not believe a woman's place is in the House? Does he think marriage is the be-all and end-all for daughters?

As for Senator Denton, would he favor the same tax break for men who stay home? Who is going to subsidize someone to get supper and martinis for the millions of single working women? Should masculine comfort be supported by the American taxpayer? Does Denton think keeping house is a *restful* occupation?

*Decoding the Strategies on the Right*

In essence, family fetishism and its political strategies are a reaction to, and attack on, the two major barriers to male dominance: uppity women and uppity children.

According to the ultra-right creed, The Family has been eroded by federal "intrusion," by which is meant government empowerment of those who are "supposed to be" subordinate. Thus, traditionalists oppose legislation and federal agencies that *protect women against sex discrimination*, and *protect both children and women against exploitation and abuse*. Although in an everyday sense, most troubled people look for help to relatives, neighbors, or religious organizations, the guarantee that those who need it must have direct access to government assistance and legal redress has strengthened women and children who are under severe duress. The possibility of a federal ally has reduced their powerlessness. That's what bothers traditionalists; they want father to be the only public person, the only family member with direct access to law and government. They complain about government violations of the right to privacy but they mean *man's* right to privacy, the privacy to do as he wishes in his own home. Government must not protect women because that's men's job; government must not regulate women's rights because those rights contradict her higher obligation to serve men. Says one TV evangelist:

Women have great strength, but they are strengths to help the man. A woman's primary purpose in life and marriage is to help her husband succeed, to help him be all God wants him to be.<sup>17</sup>

I'm reminded of a political cartoon in which President Reagan is saying, "A gun in every holster. A pregnant woman in every kitchen. Make America a *man* again!"<sup>18</sup> Nothing less than national virility depends on confining women to the family. Surely female submissiveness is not too much to ask when the stakes are so high.

This ideological maneuver has a long history.<sup>19</sup> Whenever and wherever patriarchal exclusivity has been threatened, in-



evitably someone proclaims a greater good, or a mortal threat. "The historic family has depended for its existence and character on woman's subordination," writes Carl N. Degler. "The equality of women and the institution of the family have long been at odds with each other."<sup>20</sup> In nineteenth-century America, they said educating women's brains would atrophy their wombs; giving women the vote would divide husbands and wives and lure women from children's bedsides into public life. Hitler insisted strong families were the key to a strong Reich; feminists' early-twentieth-century gains in German politics, law, and art were destroyed in the name of Aryan reproduction, and women were instructed to mother the Master Race. In the United States after World War II, hundreds of thousands of Rosie the Riveters were forced out of jobs for which women had been actively recruited; by 1945, government propaganda characterized a "real" woman as one who retreated to her family and gave up her job so that a man could work.

Today, any move for women's political or sexual freedom—from the defeated Equal Rights Amendment to contraceptive education—is labeled "anti-family." Reactionary priests and ministers and Orthodox rabbis proselytize for full-time motherhood and service to the family. Even the respectable Howard Phillips, National Director of the Conservative Caucus, has said the first step in the downfall of The Family was giving women the vote. Phillips sees women's suffrage as "a conscious policy of government to liberate the wife from the leadership of the husband. It used to be that in recognition of the family as the basic unit of society, we have one family, one vote."<sup>21</sup> The husband's vote. Howard Phillips and the other Good Ole Boys miss The Good Old Days. But in the 1980s, most people with reactionary intentions don't come right out and say it quite so flagrantly. If you favor male supremacy, fear the loss of patriarchal power, and hate the idea that women and children might control their own destinies, you can mask your indelicate views behind a clever all-American slogan: Call yourself "pro-family" and all you have left to worry about is defining the *kind* of family "family" is, so that you can comfortably be for it. Then anyone who's against it is "anti-family."

Pro-family strategists call any change in women's or chil-

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