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The Making and Unmaking of Modern Families

On a spring afternoon half a century from today, the Joneses are gathering to sing "Happy Birthday" to Junior.

There's Dad and his third wife, Mom and her second husband, Junior's two half brothers from his father's first marriage, his six stepsisters from his mother's spouse's previous unions, 100-year-old Great-Grandpa, all eight of Junior's current "grandparents," assorted aunts, uncles-in-law and stepcousins.

While one robot scoops up the gift wrappings and another blows out the candles, Junior makes a wish—that he didn't have so many relatives.

The family tree by the year 2033 will be rooted as deeply as ever in America's social landscape, but it will be sprouting some odd branches.

—U.S. News & World Report[1]

In the summer of 1986 I attended a wedding ceremony in a small Christian pentecostal church in the Silicon Valley. The service celebrated the same "traditional" family patterns and values that two years earlier had inspired a "profamily" movement to assist Ronald Reagan's landslide reelection to the presidency of the United States. At the same time, however, the pastor's rhetoric displayed substantial sympathy with feminist criticisms of patriarchal marriage. "A ring is not a shackle, and marriage is not a relationship of domination," he instructed the groom. Moreover, complex patterns of divorce, remarriage, and stepkinship linked the members of the wedding party and their guests. The group bore far greater resemblance to the postmodern family of the imaginary

twenty-first-century Joneses than it did to the image of "traditional" family life that arouses the nostalgic fantasies so widespread among critics of contemporary family practices.

In the final decades before the twenty-first century, passionate contests over changing family life in the United States have polarized vast numbers of citizens. Outside the Supreme Court of the United States, righteous, placard-carrying Right-to-Lifers square off against feminists and civil libertarians demonstrating their anguish over the steady dismantling of women's reproductive freedom. On the same day in July 1989 when New York's highest court expanded the legal definition of a family to extend rent-control protection to gay couples, a coalition of conservative clergymen in San Francisco blocked implementation of their city's new "domestic partners" ordinance. "It is the totality of the relationship," proclaimed the New York judge, "As evidenced by the dedication, caring and self-sacrifice of the parties which should, in the final analysis, control" the definition of family.[2] But just this concept of family is anathema to "profamily" activists. Declaring that the attempt by the San Francisco Board of Supervisors to grant legal status to unmarried heterosexual and homosexual couples "arbitrarily redefined the time-honored and hallowed nature of the family," the clergymen's petition was signed by sufficient citizens to force the ordinance into a referendum battle.[3] The reckoning came in November 1989, when the electorate of the city many consider to be the national capital of family change narrowly defeated the domestic partners law.

Most popular, as well as many scholarly, assessments of family change anxiously and misguidedly debate whether "the family" will survive the twentieth century at all.[4] Anxieties like these are far from new. "For at least 150 years," historian Linda Gordon writes, "there have been periods of fear that 'the family'—meaning a popular image of what families were supposed to be like, by no means a correct recollection of any actual 'traditional' family—was in decline; and these fears have tended to escalate in periods of social stress."[5] The actual subject of this recurring, fretful discourse is a historically specific form and concept of family life, one that most historians identify as the "modern" family. Students in a course I teach called "The Making and Unmaking of Modern Families" helped me realize that many of us who write and teach about American family life have not abetted public understanding of family change with

our counterintuitive use of the concept, the "modern" family. The "modern" family of sociological theory and historical convention designates a form no longer prevalent in the United States—an intact nuclear household unit composed of a male breadwinner, his full-time homemaker wife, and their dependent children. This is precisely the form of family life that many mistake for an ancient, essential, and now-endangered institution.

"How many of you grew up in a modern family?" I used to ask my students at the beginning of each term. I expected the proportion of raised hands to decline, like the modern family, with the years. It baffled me at first to receive precisely the inverse response. Just when demographers were reporting that twice as many American households were headed by divorced, separated, and never-married individuals as were occupied by "modern" families, increasing numbers of my students claimed to have grown up in "modern" ones. This seemingly anomalous finding was the product, of course, of my poorly conceived survey question. Just as I had anticipated, over the years fewer and fewer of my students were coming of age in Ozzie and Harriet families. Quite sensibly, however, unlike me, they did not regard such families as "modern"; to them they were archaic "traditional" ones. Those contemporary family relationships that my students took to be modern comprise the "postmodern" family terrain that is the central subject of this book.

This is a book about the unpredictable, often incongruous, and contested character of contemporary family practices in the postindustrial United States. It is written by a feminist who has learned to respect and understand some of the social appeals of widespread nostalgia for eroding family forms even though I oppose the conservative gender, class, and sexual politics of the profamily movement. I gained this respect in the course of my ethnographic study of two extended kinship networks of primarily white "working-class"* people who live, love, work, and worry in California's famous, and infamous, Silicon Valley. Most of this book, as its subtitle promises, tells stories about the gender, kinship, and class relationships I observed and learned about while studying members of

*I place this term in quotation marks to signal its current problematic, transitory status. No single conventional social class category adequately describes the families in this study. "Working class" works best as a shorthand code to evoke the social prejudices that informed this study's original, but soon-discarded, research design.

kin groups I refer to as "Pamela's kin" and "the Lewisons"*—family relationships, that is, that I came to characterize as postmodern. Book I of the ethnography, "Feminism, Fundamentalism, and a Postmodern Extended Family," portrays the creative strategies through which Pamela Gama, the bride at the Christian wedding, and her relatives have responded to postindustrial and postfeminist conditions, while the more troubled history of the Lewisons appears in Book II, "High-Tech Visions and Battered Dreams."

Before I introduce Pamela Gama, Dotty Lewison, and their kin, here I set their family biographies in the broad historical context of the rise and fall of the modern nuclear family system in the United States. I hope thereby to suggest that revolutionary changes and struggles over the definition and meaning of family life have a long and continuing history in this country. Central to these struggles are irreconcilable visions of desirable arrangements between the sexes. For "family," as anthropologists have taken pains to demonstrate, is a locus not of residence but of meaning and relationships.[6] Thus, the question for futurologists is not whether "the family" will survive at all, but how our heirs will be arranging and talking about their gender and kinship relationships when postmodern Junior and his stepsisters celebrate their birthdays less than half a century from today. Through an iconoclastic exploration of family life during this crucial transitional period, this book attempts to enhance those conversations.

THE EPHEMERAL MODERN FAMILY

Now that the "modern" family system has almost exited from its historical stage, we can perceive how peculiar, ephemeral, and internally contradictory was this once-revolutionary gender and kinship order. Historians place the emergence of the modern American family among white middle-class people in the late eighteenth century; they depict its flowering in the nineteenth century and chart its decline in the second half of the twentieth.[7] Thus, for white Americans, the history of modern families

*To protect the privacy of participants in this study, I follow the convention of fictionalizing their names, their places of residence and work, and other descriptive details. Santa Clara County, California, however, is the actual general location of this study.

traverses the same historical trajectory as that of modern industrial society.* What was modern about upper-middle-class family life in the half century after the American Revolution was the appearance of social arrangements governing gender and kinship relationships that contrasted sharply with those of "traditional," or premodern, patriarchal corporate units.

The premodern family among white Colonial Americans, an institution some scholars characterize as "the Godly family,"[8] was the constitutive element of Colonial society. This integrated economic, social, and political unit explicitly subordinated individual to corporate family interests, and women and children to the authority of the household's patriarchal head. Decisions regarding the timing and crafting of premodern marriages served not the emotional needs of individuals but the economic, religious, and social purposes of larger kin groups, as these were interpreted by patriarchs who controlled access to land, property, and craft skills. Nostalgic images of "traditional" families rarely recall their instability or diversity. Death visited Colonial homes so frequently that second marriages and blended households composed of stepkin were commonplace. With female submission thought to be divinely prescribed, conjugal love was a fortuitous bonus, not a prerequisite of such marriages. Similarly the doctrine of innate depravity demanded authoritarian parenting to break the will and save the souls of obstinate children, a project that required extensive paternal involvement in child rearing. Few boundaries between family and work impeded such patriarchal supervision, or segregated the sexes who labored at their arduous and interdependent tasks in close proximity. Boundaries between public and private life were equally permeable. Communities regulated proper family conduct, intervening actively to enforce disciplinary codes, and parents exchanged their children as apprentices and servants.

*The family histories of subjugated, "nonwhite" populations in the United States—Native Americans, African-Americans, Mexican-Americans, and Asian-Americans—are also intertwined with that of industrial capitalist development. Yet cultural differences and systemic racial-ethnic subordination produce major differences in the substance and timing of each group's process of family change. I portray the history of the ideal-typical family order of the dominant white population because, until recently, it represented this nation's culturally mandated gender and kinship system. This family regime has been denied to most members of racial and ethnic minorities, and their diverse family arrangements frequently have been judged and found wanting when compared with it. For more comprehensive and comparative texts that treat a broad range of American families, see Mintz and Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions;* Evans, *Born for Liberty;* Baca-Zinn and Eitzen, *Diversity in American Families;* and Coontz, *Social Origins of Private Life.*

Four radical innovations differentiate modern from premodern family life among white Americans: (1) Family work and productive work became separated, rendering women's work invisible as they and their children became economically dependent on the earnings of men. (2) Love and companionship became the ideal purposes of marriages that were to be freely contracted by individuals. (3) A doctrine of privacy emerged that attempted to withdraw middle-class family relationships from public scrutiny. (4) Women devoted increased attention to nurturing fewer and fewer children as mothering came to be exalted as both a natural and demanding vocation.

The rise of the modern American family accompanied the rise of industrial capitalist society, with its revolutionary social, spatial, and temporal reorganization of work and domestic life. The core premises and practices of the new family regime were far more contradictory than those of the premodern family order. Coding work as masculine and home as feminine, modern economic arrangements deepened the segregation of the sexes by extracting men from, and consigning white married women to, an increasingly privatized domestic domain. The institutionalized subordination of these wives to their husbands persisted; indeed, as factory production supplanted domestic industry, wives became increasingly dependent on their spouse's earnings. The doctrine of separate gender spheres governing the modern family order in the nineteenth century was so potent that few married women among even the poorest of native white families dared to venture outside their homes in search of income.[9]

The proper sphere of working-class married white women also was confined to the home. Yet few working-class families approximated the modern family ideal before well into the twentieth century. Enduring conditions of poverty, squalor, disease, and duress rivaling those in industrializing England,[10] most immigrant and native white working-class families in nineteenth-century America depended on supplementary income. Income from women's out work, child labor, lodgers, and the earnings of employed unmarried sons and daughters supplemented the meager and unreliable wages paid to working men. Not until the post–World War II era did substantial numbers of working-class households achieve the "modern family" pattern.[11]

If the doctrine of separate, and unequal, gender spheres limited women's domain and rendered their work invisible, it also enhanced their capacity to formulate potent moral and political challenges to patriarchy.

Men ceded the domains of child rearing and virtue to "moral" mothers who made these responsibilities the basis for expanding their social influence and political rights. This and the radical ideologies of individualism, democracy, and conjugal love, which infused modern family culture, would lead ultimately to its undoing. It is no accident, historians suggest, that the first wave of American feminism accompanied the rise of the modern family.[12]

With rearview vision one glimpses the structural fragility of the modern family system, particularly its premise of enduring voluntary commitment. For modern marriages, unlike their predecessors, were properly affairs not of the purse but of the the heart. A romantic "until death do us part" commitment volunteered by two young adults acting largely independent of the needs, interests, or wishes of their kin was the vulnerable linchpin of the modern family order. It seems rather remarkable, looking back, that during the first century of the modern family's cultural ascendancy, death did part the vast majority of married couples. But an ideology of conjugal love and companionship implies access to divorce as a safety valve for failures of youthful judgment or the vagaries of adult affective development. Thus, a statistical omen of the internal instability of this form of marriage lies in the unprecedented rise of divorce rates that accompanied the spread of the modern family. Despite severe legal and social restrictions, divorce rates began to climb at least as early as the 1840s. They have continued their ascent ever since, until by the middle of the 1970s divorce outstripped death as a source of marital dissolution.[13] A crucial component of the modern family system, divorce would ultimately prove to be its Achilles' heel.

For a century, as the cultural significance of the modern family grew, the productive and even the reproductive work performed within its domain contracted. By the end of the "modern" industrial era in the 1950s, virtually all productive work had left the home. While advances in longevity stretched enduring marriages to unprecedented lengths, the full-time homemaker's province had been pared to the chores of housework, consumption, and the cultivation of a declining number of progeny during a shortened span of years.[14]

Those Americans, like myself, who came of age at that historic moment were encouraged to absorb a particularly distorted impression of the normalcy and timelessness of the modern family system. The decade between the late 1940s and the late 1950s represents an aberrant period

in the history of this aberrant form of family life. Fueled in part, as historian Elaine May has suggested, by the apocalyptic Cold War sensibilities of the post–World War II nuclear age, the nation indulged in what would prove to be a last-gasp orgy of modern nuclear family domesticity.[15] Three-fifths of American households conformed to the celebrated breadwinner–full-time homemaker modern form in 1950, as substantial sectors of working-class men began at long last to secure access to a family wage.[16] A few years later Walt Disney opened the nation's first family theme park in southern California, designed to please and profit from the socially conservative fantasies of such increasingly prosperous families.[17]

The aberrant fifties temporarily reversed the century's steady decline in birth rates. The average age of first-time visitors to the conjugal altar also dropped to record lows.[18] Higher percentages of Americans were marrying than ever before or since, and even the majority of white working-class families achieved coveted homeownership status.[19] It was during this time that Talcott Parsons provided family sociology with its most influential theoretical elaboration of the modern American family, of how its nuclear household structure and complementary division of roles into female "expressive" and male "instrumental" domains was sociologically adaptive to the functional demands of an industrial society.[20] Rare are the generations, or even the sociologists, who perceive the historical idiosyncracies of the normal cultural arrangements of their time.[21]

The postwar baby boom was to make the behaviors and beliefs of that decade's offspring disproportionately significant for the rest of their lives. The media, the market, and all social and political institutions would follow their development with heightened interest. Thus, a peculiar period in U.S. family history came to set the terms for the waves of rebellion against, and nostalgia for, the passing modern family and gender order that have become such prominent and disruptive features of the American political landscape. The world's first generation of childhood television viewers grew up, as I did, inundated by such weekly paeans to the male breadwinner nuclear household and modern family ideology as *Father Knows Best, Leave It to Beaver,* and *Ozzie and Harriet.* Because unusual numbers of us later pushed women's biological "clock" to its reproductive limits, many now find ourselves parenting (or choosing not to) in the less innocent age of *Thirtysomething, Kate and Allie,* and *Who's the Boss?*[22]

For beneath the sentimental gloss that the fifties enameled onto its

domestic customs, forces undermining the modern family of the 1950s accelerated while those sustaining it eroded. In the midst of profamily pageantry, nonfamily households proliferated.[23] As the decade drew to a close, the nation entered what C. Wright Mills, with characteristic prescience, termed its "postmodern period."[24] The emergent postindustrial economy shifted employment from heavy industries to nonunionized clerical, service, and new industrial sectors. Employers found themselves irresistibly attracted to the nonunionized, cheaper labor of women and, thus, increasingly to that of married women and mothers.

One glimpses the ironies of class and gender history here. For decades industrial unions struggled heroically for a socially recognized male breadwinner wage that would allow the working class to participate in the modern gender order. These struggles, however, contributed to the cheapening of female labor that helped gradually to undermine the modern family regime.[25] Escalating consumption standards, the expansion of mass collegiate coeducation, and the persistence of high divorce rates then gave more and more women ample cause to invest a portion of their identities in the "instrumental" sphere of paid labor.[26] Thus, middle-class women began to abandon their confinement in the modern family just as working-class women were approaching its access ramps. The former did so, however, only after the wives of working-class men had pioneered the twentieth-century revolution in women's paid work. Entering employment during the catastrophic 1930s, participating in defense industries in the 1940s, and raising their family incomes to middle-class standards by returning to the labor force rapidly after child rearing in the 1950s, working-class women quietly modeled and normalized the postmodern family standard of employment for married mothers. Whereas in 1950 the less a man earned, the more likely his wife was to be employed, by 1968 wives of middle-income men were the most likely to be in the labor force.[27]

Thus, the apotheosis of the modern family only temporarily concealed its imminent decline. Breadwinners as well as homemakers were renegotiating the terms and tempos of their conjugal commitments. Cultural constraints that tethered women and men to lifelong vows continued to loosen. Writing about the origins of "the virgin and the state," anthropologist Sherry Ortner once theorized that the domestication of men represented a major social evolutionary watershed, which was achieved at considerable cost to the sexuality and autonomy of women.[28] If this is

correct, the historic bargain came apart during the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Even in the familistic fifties, as social critic Barbara Ehrenreich has suggested, beats and playboys rebelled against the monogamous breadwinner mold for culturally mandated masculinity.[29] Advances in contraception paved the path for revolutionary changes in women's sexual behavior during the 1960s, changes that feminists alternately depict as the feminization or the masculinization of sex.[30]

The aberrant and contradictory features of fifties' familial culture prepared the ground for the family revolution of the 1960s and 1970s from whose shock effects American society has not yet recovered. The gap between dominant cultural ideology and discordant behaviors generated radical challenges to the modern family. A social movement for gay liberation coincided with the legalization of abortion. Both posed the ultimate challenges to the cultural bond between sexuality and procreation. Particularly important for the fate of the modern family, a massive and militant movement for the liberation of women also revived in those years. And this "second wave" of American feminism[31] made family politics central to its project.

FEMINISM AS MIDWIFE TO POSTINDUSTRIAL SOCIETY

Feminists intentionally accelerated the modern family's demise. *The Feminine Mystique,* Betty Friedan's best-selling critique of "the problem that has no name," inspired the awakening women's movement to launch a full-scale attack on the exploitative and stultifying effects of women's confinement and dependency as homemaker. Soon feminist scholars were warning women that "in truth, being a housewife makes women sick."[32] This backward-looking critique of a declining institution and culture, one that I personally embraced wholeheartedly and helped to disseminate, colluded unwittingly in postindustrial processes, and at considerable political cost to the feminist movement. Although we intended the institutions of domesticity and their male beneficiaries to be the targets of our critique, we placed housewives on the defensive just when sizable numbers of working-class women were attaining this long-denied status. Feminists provided ideological support for divorce and for the soaring

rates of female-headed households. Feminist enthusiasm for female autonomy encouraged women's massive entry into the postindustrial labor market. This, in turn, abetted the corporate deunionization strategies that have accompanied the reorganization of the U.S. economy.

Millions of women like myself, derived enormous, tangible benefits from the changes in postindustrial home and work life and from the ways in which feminist ideology encouraged us to initiate and cope with such changes.[33] The lioness's share of these benefits, however, fell to privileged women. As postindustrial society became entrenched, many women, perhaps the majority, found their economic and personal conditions worsening. While unionized occupations and real wages began to decline, women were becoming the postindustrial "proletariat," performing most of the nation's low-skilled, poorly paid jobs. As the overall percentage of jobs that were secure and well paying declined, particularly within blue-collar occupations, increasing numbers of even white men swelled the ranks of the under- and unemployed. Nonetheless, most white male workers still labored at jobs that were skilled and comparatively well paid.[34] The devastating economic effects on women and children of endemic marital instability became widely known. Increasing percentages of women were rearing children by themselves, generally with minimal economic contributions from former husbands and fathers.[35] Yet rising numbers of single mothers who worked full time, year-round, were not earning wages sufficient to lift their families above the official poverty line.[36]

Even as marriage bonds lost their adhesive, they came to serve as a major axis of economic and social stratification. Increasingly, families required two incomes to sustain a middle-class way of life. The married female "secondary" wage earner can lift a former working-class or middle-class family into relative affluence, while the loss or lack of access to a male income drove millions of women and children into poverty.[37] In short, the drastic increase in women's paid employment in the postindustrial period yielded lots more work for mother, but with very unevenly distributed economic benefits and only modest improvements in relative earnings between women and men.[38]

In the context of these developments, many women (and men) became susceptible to the profamily appeals of an antifeminist backlash. Because of our powerful and highly visible critique of the modern family, and because of the sensationalized way by which the media disseminated this critique, feminists received much of the blame for family and social crises

that attended the transition from an industrial to a postindustrial order in the United States. "Feminist ideology told women how foolish and exploited they were to be wives and mothers," turning them into "a vicious cartoon," wrote Connaught Marshner, "chairman" of the National Pro-Family Coalition, in her manifesto for the profamily movement, *The New Traditional Woman.*[39]

Had white feminists identified earlier with the plight of the Black "matriarch," we might have been forewarned of our fate. In 1965 Daniel Patrick Moynihan's explosive report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,*[40] blamed Black "matriarchs" for much of the "tangle of pathology" he found in the nation's African-American households. The Moynihan report ignited an acrimonious and deeply sexist debate over the crisis in African-American families, which eventually derailed a planned White House conference on Black families and rights.[41] Debates over feminism and the crisis in white families later caused President Jimmy Carter to scuttle plans for a White House Conference on the Family in the late 1970s. Raging political contests over emergent gender and family arrangements splintered the intended unified conference on "the family" into deeply polarized regional forums on "famil*ies*." In this pluralist definition, liberals and feminists may have won one of the last of our rhetorical victories in the family wars, while the profamily movement of the New Right began to rehearse the antifeminist script that helped to fuel the Reagan revolution of the 1980s.

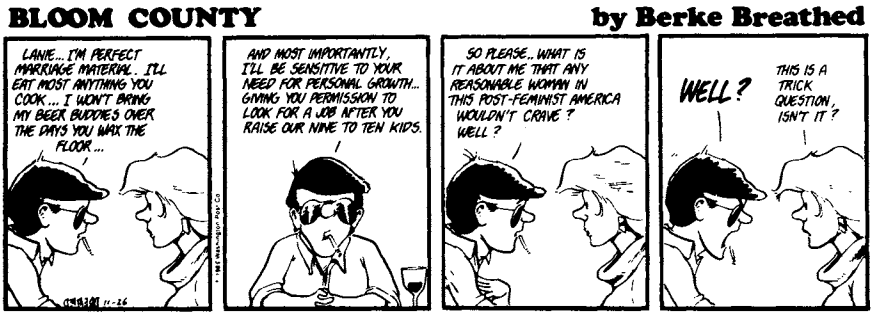
Ronald Reagan was an undeserving beneficiary of the profamily reaction, as humorist Delia Ephron observes in a book review of Maureen Reagan's dutiful memoir: "It is funny and a bit pathetic that Ronald and Nancy Reagan keep finding out their family secrets by reading their children's books. It is also ironic that this couple who symbolized a return to hearth, home and 1950's innocence should, in reality, be candidates for a very 1980s study on the troubled family."[42] The former president's less dutiful daughter, Patti Davis, agrees: "Anyone who hasn't been living in a coma for the past eight years knows that we're not a close-knit family."[43] It seems an astonishing testimony to Reagan's acclaimed media magic, therefore, that despite his own divorce and his own far-from-happily blended family, he and his *second* lady managed to serve so effectively as the symbolic figureheads of a profamily agenda, which his economic and social policies helped to further undermine.

The demographic record demonstrates that postmodern gender and

kinship changes proceeded unabated throughout the Reagan era. The proportion of American households headed by single mothers grew by 21 percent, while rates of employment by mothers of young children continued their decades of ascent. When "profamily" forces helped elect Reagan to his first term in 1980, 20 percent of American children lived with a single parent, and 41 percent of mothers with children under the age of three had joined the paid labor force. When Reagan completed his second term eight years later, these figures had climbed to 24 and 54 percent respectively.[44] The year of Reagan's landslide reelection, 1984, was the first year that more working mothers placed their children in public group child care than in family day care.[45] Reaganites too hastily applauded a modest decline in divorce rates during the 1980s—to a level at which more than half of first marriages still were expected to dissolve before death. But demographers who studied marital separations as well as divorce found the years from 1980 to 1985 to show "the highest level of marital disruption yet recorded for the U.S."[46] Likewise, birth rates remained low, marriage rates fell, and homeownership rates, which had been rising for decades, declined throughout the Reagan years.[47]

Moreover, changes in African-American family patterns that Moynihan's report had treated as pathology, particularly unmarried childbearing and single motherhood, escalated in the Reagan era among whites as well as Blacks.[48] By the time that profamily administration left office, single-parent households were far more numerous than modern families.[49] Little wonder that the profamily movement misrepresented those modern families as "traditional" ones. The Reagan period was indeed the time when the once-modern familial and social order had become the past.

As the modern family order exited, the debate over the meaning of its passing shifted decidedly to the right. Nostalgia for the modern family, and even for premodern patriarchal kinship patterns, generated a backlash literature within feminism as well as elsewhere.[50] Although the antifeminist, profamily movement failed to halt the disintegration of the modern family, it placed feminists and liberals on the defensive and achieved major political gains. So visible and politically effective has been this counterwomen's movement that it has obscured the fact that feminist sympathies and support for changing family life continued among all major age and social groups of Americans throughout the Reagan era. Many feminists ourselves were surprised when a poll conducted by *The New York Times* six months after Reagan left office found that more than



two-thirds of the women and even a majority of the men agreed that the United States still needs a strong women's movement.[51]

RECOMBINANT FAMILY LIFE

Indeed, as this book illustrates, women and men have been creatively remaking American family life during the past three decades of postindustrial upheaval. Out of the ashes and residue of the modern family, they have drawn on a diverse, often incongruous array of cultural, political, economic, and ideological resources, fashioning these resources into new gender and kinship strategies to cope with postindustrial challenges, burdens, and opportunities. In this book, for example, we observe people turning divorce into a kinship resource rather than a rupture, creating complex, divorce-extended families like those gathered to celebrate Junior's not-so-futuristic birthday. Depicted too are religious "traditionalists" who draw on biblical and human potential movement precepts to form communal households that join married and single members of an evangelical ministry.

And as Americans have been remaking family life, the vast majority, even those seemingly hostile to feminism, have been selectively appropriating feminist principles and practices and fusing these, patchwork style, with old and new gender, kinship, and cultural patterns. In the chapters that follow, as in our society, married women struggle to involve reluctant spouses in housework and child care; unmarried white women choose to have children on their own; homosexual couples exchange

marriage vows and share child-rearing commitments; evangelical ministers counsel Christian husbands to learn to communicate with their wives and advise battered women to leave their abusive mates.

I call the fruits of these diverse efforts to remake contemporary family life "the postmodern family." I do this, despite my reservations about employing such a fashionable and elusive cultural concept, to signal the contested, ambivalent, and undecided character of contemporary gender and kinship arrangements. "What is the post-modern?" art historian Clive Dilnot asks rhetorically in the title of a detailed discussion of literature on postmodern culture, and his answers apply readily to the domain of present family conditions in the United States.[52] The postmodern, he maintains, "is first, an uncertainty, an insecurity, a doubt." Most of the "post-" words provoke uneasiness, because they imply simultaneously "both the end, or at least the radical transformation of, a familiar pattern of activity or group of ideas" and the emergence of "new fields of cultural activity whose contours are still unclear and whose meanings and implications . . . cannot yet be fathomed." The postmodern, moreover, is "characterized by the process of the linking up of areas and the crossing of the boundaries of what are conventionally considered to be disparate realms of practice."[53]

Like postmodern culture, contemporary family arrangements are diverse, fluid, and unresolved. Postindustrial social transformations have opened up such a diverse range of gender and kinship relationships as to undermine the claim in the memorable opening line from Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina:* "All happy families are alike, but every unhappy family is unhappy after its own fashion."[54] Today even happy families no longer are all alike! No longer is there a single culturally dominant family pattern to which the majority of Americans conform and most of the rest aspire. Instead, Americans today have crafted a multiplicity of family and household arrangements that we inhabit uneasily and reconstitute frequently in response to changing personal and occupational circumstances.

It is for this reason that I risk the hubris of employing the definite article *the* postmodern family in a book that portrays the gender and kinship strategies of only two white, "working-class" kin networks. The families depicted in this book do not represent the new culturally dominant familial ideal, nor even all of its statistically normative experiences. Under postmodern conditions no such families exist, because no singular family structure or ideology has arisen to supplant the modern family.