

Introduction

In August 2018, the *New York Times* published an article about college-educated mothers' stalled re-entry into the United States labor force.¹ The piece featured the research of four economists, who sought to explain why women in the United States continued to outpace men in terms of education when they did not seem to be putting that education to use in the labor market. Women's participation in the workforce hit a wall in 1990—after a rapid increase between 1960 and 1980, it had largely plateaued. The team of scholars—Ilyana Kuziemko, Jessica Pan, Jenny Shen, and Ebonya Washington—offered a multi-part answer to this puzzle.² The first part was largely structural: the costs of motherhood began increasing in the 1990s. Child care had become more expensive since the 1980s, breastfeeding was strongly encouraged over formula, creating an exorbitant time cost, and the rise of what sociologist Sharon Hays called “intensive parenting” in the 1990s meant more money and time going towards children's extracurricular activities starting at a very young age.³ The second part was more psychological: women born in the 1960s through the 1970s, the cohort the economists based their findings on, seriously underestimated “the employment costs of motherhood”—“the time, effort or money” necessary to raise their children while also working. Despite having invested

greatly in their professional development and stating that they had every intention of continuing their careers after giving birth, the study found that these same women were more likely to be at home with the kids after motherhood had proved far more costly than they anticipated.⁴

Nearly forty years ago, feminist poet Adrienne Rich cautioned that using middle-class women's white-collar employment as a measure of progress was bound to result in a misdiagnosis of the work that remained. Commenting on the 1980s trope of the white, professional mother whose ability to "have it all" supposedly made feminism obsolete, Rich wrote, "The working mother with briefcase was, herself, a cosmetic touch on a society deeply resistant to fundamental changes. The 'public' and the 'private' spheres were still in disjunction. She had not found herself entering an evolving new society, a society in transformation. *She had only been integrated into the same structures which had made liberation movements necessary.*"⁵ Capitalism was willing to accommodate these new workers, so long as they did not let their other job—mothering—get in the way of their paid work. Furthermore, declining wages, the shift towards a service economy, and long-standing racial and gender hierarchies that stratified the labor market ensured that beginning in the 1970s mothers who went to work without briefcases would become a growing share of the nation's poor and working class, concentrated in jobs that comprise the feminized, racialized, and ever expanding "care economy."⁶ Rich understood what the economists seemed to have missed: to measure motherhood solely as a drain on one's labor supply and potential earnings took for granted the devaluation of care integral to a society "deeply resistant to fundamental changes." What Rich could not have predicted in 1986 was just how rapaciously "these same structures" would wrest accommodation—in terms of time, earnings, and general way of life—from the vast majority of workers in the United States. What the Occupy movement asserted in 2011 with the slogan "We are the 99%" has only become steadily more visible and applicable: the concentration of income and wealth among the top 1 percent of earners in the United States has reached levels not seen since the Gilded Age. Income inequality has risen in every state since the 1970s, producing a labor market characterized by poverty wages, precarious categories of supposed non-workers such as the "independent contractor," a

“culture of overwork,” and wage growth experienced almost exclusively by the top earners. Following the recovery from the Great Recession, the top 1 percent captured 91 percent of the income gains between 2009 and 2012, and by 2014 71 percent of American workers earned less than 50,000 dollars a year.⁷ As the vast majority of Americans were squeezed, they had to figure out how to take care of their families with less time, less earnings, and less security. While the study featured in the *New York Times* measured the rising costs of motherhood in time spent on childrearing, breastfeeding trends, and child care expenses, recent estimates based on data from the Current Expenditures Survey put the price tag of childrearing at 12,980 dollars annually per child—an unfathomable cost if, like 38 percent of American workers did in 2014, one earns less than 20,000 dollars a year.⁸ It was not just that the college-educated mothers in the study had underestimated the demands of parenting, or even that the aspects of motherhood tracked by economists had become more costly. It was that by the twenty-first century, capitalism placed serious limits on most Americans’ horizons and required them to resolve on their own whatever aspects of life exceeded those limits.

And all of this is to say almost nothing of the unpaid job women had taken on when they “failed” to make good on their career plans. When economists concluded that “current cohorts of women indeed overestimate their future labor supply,” they reproduced the logic of a system that makes reproductive labor invisible, thereby justifying its devaluation even when it is waged.⁹ Despite the fact that women repeatedly told researchers how parenting was harder than they had anticipated—evidence of how motherhood *itself* requires a “labor supply”—the study emphasized the cost parenting posed to potential but, ultimately, lost profits. In this way, the study took for granted the disjuncture between the public and private spheres Rich had hoped might be transformed in a society organized around the equal distribution of necessary resources, leisure, and life chances. In contrast to the study’s conclusion that family making imperiled women’s *real* work, visible as such due to the wage it garnered, socialist feminists have suggested we can think of time caring for others as uncompensated labor that powers the economy through its reproduction of current and future workers. Feminist scholarship has also noted, just as

the precarious, low-wage jobs of mothers who work in the fastest growing sector of the labor market providing care make clear, that caring for others is as real a labor market as any other. These interrelated realities—the insistence that family making is not work and the extreme exploitation of care work that is paid—are partially responsible for the inequality that has accumulated over the last forty years.¹⁰ Which raises an important question: if the aforementioned discussion paints a picture of ever worsening working conditions for labor that is paid, what would we find if we looked at the other job working mothers have been doing for the past forty years through a similar lens? What worsening conditions as they relate to family making might we need to account for in order to further explain the untenable inequality that has come to define life in the United States?

Reproduction Reconceived answers these questions by examining the history of family making on the margins. The following pages offer an appraisal made possible by an alternative value system, one that does not devalue the reproduction and care of humans—that sees care work not as a drain on capital but as a boon to it. What I call family making—the practices, costs, and labors of creating and maintaining parent-child relations—is an investment of labor, time, and money that produces and sustains not products, but people who, in turn, create yet more, varied intimacies that make life worth living while also making society itself possible.¹¹ When it comes to the vaunted realm of the nuclear family, the United States is deeply invested in the idea that the care of one's own children should be, at best, a “labor of love,” at worst, a private burden resolved via the market, but should never be accorded the status of invaluable work that contributes to the public good. As I argue in the following chapters, this inaccurate assessment of family has produced immense, varied, and often incalculable costs. But in order to fully reckon with the costs that have accumulated, it is first necessary to understand the conditions that produced them. Neither family making nor our current ideas about it are unchanging. Over the past forty years, the *labors* that comprise family making have been forced to multiply as a result of deepening inequality, while the idea that having a family is an economic privilege has hardened. *Reproduction Reconceived* is a history of these changes and their costs. It is an appraisal of how family making became harder, what costs piled up as a result of such unequal circumstances, and which families have borne the greatest share of them.

ORIGIN STORIES

When it comes to the recent history of reproductive politics in the United States, arguably nothing looms larger than the Supreme Court's decision to legalize abortion in 1973 and the subsequent legacy of *Roe v. Wade*. Over the past seven years, I have described this book to most people with the same one-liner: "It is about reproductive politics in the U.S. since the 1970s." Without fail, my audience assumed reproductive politics meant the right to abortion, and proceeded with a comment or question about the current state of the abortion debate. Despite the growing visibility of the reproductive justice movement, not to mention numerous histories evidencing the expansiveness of reproduction, "reproductive politics" continues to conjure "abortion" in the minds of many.¹²

No doubt one of the reasons for this narrowed focus is the longevity, volatility, and visibility of the abortion debate in the United States. The popular understanding of *Roe*—as a contest between those who believe abortion represents a fundamental right to bodily autonomy and those who see it as the disavowal of the sanctity of human life—is a cleaner version than history would ever allow.¹³ Nonetheless, this narrow understanding of *Roe*, and the seemingly intractable nature of the struggle over its future, captures the significance of the decision for those who consider themselves to be involved in this fight and for the many, many more who observe from the sidelines. Specifically, the phrase "reproductive politics" raises the specter of the entrenched terms that define the debate over abortion, where a "woman's right to choose" collides, often violently, with the "unborn's right to live."

But before this view of abortion rigidified into a defense of the quintessential reproductive right on the one hand and the quintessential threat to life on the other, it was sanctioned by a legal decision, *Roe*, that had a specific effect: pregnancy became a choice for motherhood rather than a precondition of motherhood.¹⁴ This statement is not as obvious as it might seem. The dominant framing of the abortion debate, courtesy of the decades-long campaigns waged by the pro-choice and pro-life movements, captures only half of the issue: is the choice to end a pregnancy a fundamental right of bodily autonomy or a fundamental affront to human life? The other possible outcome of that choice, *choosing motherhood*, is left

dangling, somehow at a distance from “choice’s” legally sanctioned arrival. This gap demands our attention, an investigation of what the post-*Roe* world has meant for those whose so-called choice is not the one the abortion debate pivots around. What happened to ideas about motherhood when *Roe* made it a legal choice? How does this redefinition of motherhood square with what families have faced in the post-*Roe* decades? And why is the ability to have an abortion immediately recognizable, while the ability to have a family—much less family as a right that one is entitled to—so much harder to envision?

To answer these questions, we need to consider the 1973 decision alongside a number of related developments. With the help of other changes that collectively untethered sex from procreation and, more importantly, marriage, *Roe* inaugurated a new understanding of pregnancy. In fact, in many ways, *Roe* is best thought of as the end of the so-called “sexual revolution.” Americans’ views on abortion were already becoming more liberal before the 1973 decision, a shift made possible in part by the increasing tolerance for contraception and premarital sex that took place over the course of the 1960s. The legalization of contraception in 1965 set in motion an evolving definition of privacy that would also underpin *Roe*, and by 1967 contraception was being sold over the counter regardless of a customer’s marital status. These changes initiated a new way of thinking about having children as many Americans came to treat having a family as a question—a choice to be made.¹⁵ A series of Supreme Court cases that declared distinctions between marital and nonmarital children as unconstitutional delivered another blow to marriage’s authority. In a very short period of time, norms structuring marriage, gender, and sex were upended. Both legal changes and individual practices helped make previously taboo topics like premarital sex, co-habitation before marriage, and single motherhood more common and openly discussed topics than had been the case just a decade prior. The political stakes of these changes were also made clear by different feminist movements during the 1960s and 1970s. Contraception and abortion to control one’s reproductive life, to allow sex for pleasure, and to turn marriage and motherhood into options rather than mandates—these were some of the changes that would need to take place if women were going to gain more autonomy in society.¹⁶

But only the right to abortion had the power to untether pregnancy from motherhood, to make whether or not to remain pregnant a choice, to decide what one's own body would and would not do—even after it had started down a course of doing. This reality explains why feminists from a variety of movements considered the right to abortion so fundamental to liberation struggles, even if they disagreed about the societal conditions required to ensure abortion was freely chosen.¹⁷ The legalization of abortion made pregnancy an unstable condition in a way that the possibility of miscarriages could not. After *Roe*, the pregnant individual was the major factor upon which a pregnancy hinged. And, as pregnancy became a choice, so too did motherhood.

Choice in 1973, however, was as limited as it was liberating. Importantly, *Roe* delivered legal choice *after* the nation had already made some key decisions about just how much the family should be reorganized to accommodate changing norms around gender roles, sex, and marriage. Two years prior to *Roe*, President Richard Nixon vetoed a bill, despite its bipartisan support, that would have delivered universal child care. Federal government also failed to meet the demands of different feminist movements responsible for popularizing the idea that child-rearing was a job in and of itself, one for which mothers should be compensated, as the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) argued in its efforts to bring dignity and a living wage to poor, Black mothers demonized and neglected by welfare.¹⁸ These and other decisions had material impacts on the feasibility of family making for millions of Americans. But they also signaled the start of a broad-scale shift in political winds that one historian has described as “the moment when liberalism came to seem to many millions of ordinary Americans more like a moral threat than an economic helping hand.”¹⁹ Wide swaths of the population were fast losing faith in the tenet that government should play a role, however limited such a role had been throughout the nation's history, in mitigating racial, gender, and economic inequalities. Debates over feminism, sexuality, and the family—alongside those over civil rights, urban rebellions, and law and order—remade the nation in the final decades of the twentieth century. As conservatism moved from the right to the center of American politics, ultimately bringing Democrats along, the liberal welfare state came under ideological and material attack.²⁰ This is part of the backdrop against which motherhood took on its post-*Roe* features.²¹

When children became a choice women knowingly and actively made, this meant that the circumstances which shaped family making since the 1970s, no matter how dire, also became women's responsibility to overcome. It matters that motherhood became a choice just as more and more families confronted what one historian has called the "Age of Inequality."²² For many Americans, economic circumstances stressed rather than supported the costs and labors of caring for children. Struggling families in the 1970s confronted stagnant wages, inflation, and job loss especially in manufacturing, an industry whose owners sought relocation to escape union power.²³ These realities pushed ever greater numbers of married women into the labor market to secure a second income to compensate for the family's primary wage earner's deflated or lost wages.²⁴ The vast majority of such women encountered a dramatically altered labor market defined by precarious, low-wage, service jobs that would come to define the "new postindustrial order."²⁵ These married women joined single women, many of them also mothers, who had long labored outside the home but had largely done so in the only employment available to them in a market stratified by race and gender: domestic and "pink collar" work that was poorly paid. Despite this dramatic influx of married women into the labor market, working Americans wound up poorer than when the decade began.²⁶

The realities of a market increasingly comprised of low-wage, service jobs and the unresolved labor problem of child care fell heaviest on single mothers, as evidenced by their continued participation in Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) during this period. Throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s, these families increasingly turned to the social welfare program in order to make ends meet despite rampant racial and gender discrimination, inadequate payments, and burdensome work requirements.²⁷ Whether they looked to the wage economy or the welfare state to make ends meet, single mothers confronted an ideological system that stubbornly refused to recede despite the unfolding economic reality. This ideological system dictated that fathers, not mothers, were the primary breadwinners and that the work women did caring for their families was not work at all. As a result of the worsening economic conditions, the "feminization of poverty" that would mobilize some feminist groups by the early 1980s was already in full swing by the time motherhood became a choice—by 1977 nearly half of all poor families were headed by a single

mother, a number that had doubled since 1950.²⁸ So, what did the immediate post-*Roe* world look like for families?

Writing about the future of the reproductive rights movement in 1981, scholar and activist Angela Davis went so far as to describe the conditions in which poor, women of color found themselves and their families as “so miserable” they could cause women to “relinquish the right to reproduction itself.” Here, Davis issued a warning to the majority-white abortion rights movement that reproductive choice could easily slide into reproductive coercion if women felt their impoverished circumstances made it impossible to imagine raising another child that they otherwise wanted. To the movement’s argument that abortion “provided a viable alternative to the myriad problems posed by poverty,” Davis issued the corrective, “as if having fewer children could create more jobs, higher wages, better schools, etc., etc.”²⁹ Davis understood that capitalism and racism would accommodate *Roe*, producing a terrain where the liberatory elements of reproductive choice were hamstrung by the persistence of exploitative conditions. This was the terrain that confronted families following the legalization of abortion, and one that would become only more treacherous as both inequality and the idea that child-rearing was best left to the private family increased over the ensuing decades. Having children had become a choice at the precise moment more and more families were struggling *and also* were expected to meet the costs of family making on their own.

“Family values,” or the politics of sanctifying the heteropatriarchal home, became the ground upon which conservative power was consolidated. But these ostensibly “cultural” politics consistently carried policy riders: fiscal austerity measures that decimated social supports. This devastating and effective political framework helped transform those reliant on government support (rather than on their own economically well-functioning nuclear families) into bad actors who got what they deserved—very little to nothing at all.³⁰ Gender and sexual politics during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s helped remake the welfare state and the breadwinner wage, ultimately turning both into artifacts of a bygone era.³¹ It did not matter that the viability of an economy structured around a male provider had never been universally accessible and had largely disappeared before the close of the 1970s—for different reasons, both liberals and conservatives refused to “face facts” with regard to this economic reality.³² The

unforgiving harshness of a politics hellbent on responding to mounting inequality with little more than the mantra of “personal responsibility” is typically illustrated by two prominent plot points when it comes to debates about family making: President Bill Clinton making good on his promise to “end welfare as we know it” and the “unfinished business” of precisely how mothers are supposed to balance work in the home with work in the wage economy.³³ Scholars and journalists have focused on these two sites for good reason. Both illustrate the privatization of dependency that defined the political visions of the vast majority of politicians, regardless of party, by the end of the twentieth century. Both make clear that the costs and labors of family making would not only be borne by individual families but would also be subordinated to “the almost universal adult role” of breadwinner that mothers, whether by choice or coercion, were taking on.³⁴ One scholar recently described the conditions we have inherited from such policy decisions: “universal free childcare remains a dream, paid family leave is just now moving seriously onto politicians’ agendas, and workfare has replaced welfare rights activists’ demands for income supports for caregiving.”³⁵ Collectively, these policy decisions and the problems they failed to resolve have helped make work, daycare, and welfare the plot points around which debates regarding the euphemistically phrased “work-life balance” continue to revolve.

There is no doubt that these plot points—which most immediately index the problem of needing both a steady cash flow and a steady labor source in order to ensure children are taken care of—remain key to the story of family making since the 1970s. But as anyone who has participated in the work of family making knows intimately, they are far from the only forces that keep true reproductive freedom out of reach. This book argues that having a family has become *harder and costlier* since the 1970s —especially for those who built families on the economic, racial, and sexual margins of society—due to proliferating and often interconnected factors that are less often associated with “family,” “reproduction,” or “work-life balance.” Specifically, disease, increased criminalization and mass incarceration; medical and legal gatekeeping of the means required for queer people to make and be recognized as “a family”; a racist, for-profit system of healthcare; and the unprecedented reliance on charitable, faith-based organizations to deliver social welfare services have all

wreaked havoc on families. As a result, the reproductive labor of family making has increasingly extended far beyond merely how to juggle child care in between work shifts and how to pay for food and rent. As this book shows, these basic but crucial necessities were only the tip of the iceberg for women diagnosed with a life-threatening disease, incarcerated in prisons, who dared to raise fatherless children in lesbian households, or feared their newborn would not live to see their first birthday due to their own lifetimes of medical neglect. The exclusive focus on home, work, and welfare greatly underestimates the barriers to family making erected as a result of broader political and economic shifts that have shaped American life since the late 1970s. In order to capture the full extent of the labors and costs these barriers have placed on families, *Reproduction Reconceived* broadens the scope of what counts as the labor of family making, where it gets performed, and how the state has refused to share in this necessary work.³⁶ Importantly, state refusal not only ensured that choice would be a fiction for most. It also necessarily produced new forms of reproductive labor through its own negligence. At the broadest register, *Reproduction Reconceived* is a labor history of the work involved in choosing family during a period where meaningful choice for many families was nowhere to be found.

FOREGROUNDING STATE NEGLECT IN REPRODUCTIVE POLITICS

Some caveats are in order. Since the late 1970s, life in the United States has been steadily approaching our current reality, one in which “every family and household has the private responsibility to figure out how to support dependents and enable them to survive and thrive, even as they do so on an uneven playing field constructed by both business and government.”³⁷ Yet it is necessary to acknowledge that this is not a wholesale departure from government’s relationship to family making prior to the 1970s. The social movements that captured political life in the 1960s and 1970s were, after all, demanding a radical transformation of both liberal society and the inequality that appeared to them integral to—rather than a grand departure from—the foundational premises of the United States.³⁸