

Feminism and the Market

Neil Gilbert, *A Mother's Work: How Feminism, the Market, and Policy Shape Family Life* (Yale University Press, 2008), 228 pages

Reviewed by Daniel J. Blackman

Professor Neil Gilbert asserts three things: that the culture of capitalism undervalues the economic worth of child-rearing activities and domestic production; that prevailing feminist expectations overestimate the social and emotional benefits of labor-force participation; and that the so-called “family-friendly” policies of the welfare state create incentives that reinforce the norms and values of capitalism and feminism. Gilbert wants to “restore a sense of social admiration for motherhood,” whilst not intending to denigrate mothers who raise children and work full-time.

Gilbert frames the social context of recent decades as one of revolution surrounding motherhood and women in the workplace. In 2002, almost one in five American women in their early forties was childless, almost double that of 1976. Numerous European countries find themselves in a demographic winter with below the 2.1 children per couple replacement birthrate. Italy, Spain, Austria, and Germany have total fertility rates of only 1.4 or so, while Poland and Russia struggle at 1.32 and 1.44 respectively (based on UN world population prospects report 2011) However, basing himself on recent data, Gilbert argues that there is also a small but growing “opt-out revolution” with slight declines in women entering the workplace and an increase among those choosing the homestead.

Parenting has become a market in which the role of parents is outsourced to childminders and day care centers whilst parents serve capitalist markets. Between 1991 and 2001 the proportion of three- to five-year-olds being looked after by non-parent caregivers reached 74 per cent. For Gilbert, these revolutions erode the bonds of family: “the triumph of materialism in modern times feeds the market and leaves childrearing and family life undernourished.” Where traditionalists see moral decline and the exaltation of selfishness and individualism, the revolutionary postmoderns see human liberation and the advance of freedom.

Gilbert divides women and mothers into traditional, neo-traditional, modern, and postmodern contrasexual (preferring to remain unmarried, focused on careers and personal pursuits) categories, based on number of children or childlessness, time spent at home raising children, and time spent in the workforce. Again, Gilbert argues that modern, neo-traditional, and postmodern women who have fewer or no children, and are more focused on career and leisure, provide fertile ground for market expansion – mortgages, holidays, insurance, childcare centers, and so on. Gilbert also notes the difference in parenting between middle-class intensive parenting (more structured activities like sports and music lessons) and working-class natural growth parenting (less structured, reliant more on initiative, slower paced) traditional mothers, and the effects that non-parental childcare is having upon the educational and emotional development of children. Helpfully, Gilbert recognizes that some women are single, childless, or both, through force of circumstance rather than because of a freely made decision to embrace the contrasexual life.

Joseph Schumpeter's theory of creative destruction, first coined in his book *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, argues that the inner dynamism of capitalism pushes industries,

technologies, and methods forward with newer and better products. However, with capitalist progress comes the destruction of older prior products, methods, industries and even societal institutional supports (e.g. families) and market drivers. Finally, the newer and better products, methods, and industries bring about their own demise, together with that of further societal institutions and partners, as market competitors produce ever newer, improved, and cheaper rival versions, and thus the process of creation and destruction continues.

Gilbert utilizes this theory to shape his presentation on the outsourcing of parenting and family life (though he notes a pure cost-benefit analysis is not sufficient; the emotional and psychic “income” of motherhood having an important yet difficult-to-quantify influence). Everything from caring for children and preparing meals, to commercial sperm banks, trading in ovaries, and wombs for hire, indicates that “the capitalist process of creative destruction has moved into the productive and reproductive functions of motherhood.” In this way capitalist culture subverts domesticity – but so does the socialist doctrine propounded by Marx and Engels. Some of communism’s first fruits included liberal laws on abortion and divorce. Gilbert claims that several modern governments have embraced communism’s quest for egalitarianism through certain family-friendly policies, which in his view indicates the subversion of socialism by feminism, although ironically the same feminism ends up advancing capitalist culture.

Recently in the UK a media furore broke when the government announced plans to show financial favor to working mothers who choose day care centers for their children, enabling them to return to the workplace. This policy largely ignores mothers who choose to stay at home and care for their children. Soon after, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development published a report revealing that the average family in the UK with one worker and two children loses 27.9 per cent of its wages in tax, compared with 26.2 per cent before David Cameron’s (“conservative”) government was elected.

When examining the feminist expectations that permeate the modern psyche of women, Gilbert hammers home a clear point: the assumptions, expectations, vision, and experience of modern feminism reflect the concerns of white, middle-class, well-educated, high-earning women, rather than the real-life experience of the majority of women. Modern feminist expectations undermine the value and fulfilment of domestic work done by mothers and wives, and overrate the freedom and fulfilment promised by paid employment in the workforce. For many, membership of the workforce means repetition, lack of fulfilment, restriction of freedom of time and work pattern preference, office politics, bullying, and the continual threat of redundancy. Ironically, the work pattern advocated by feminists is very much the masculine model of continuous labor-force participation from young adulthood until retirement.

Gilbert’s solution seems twofold: first, give attention, value, and appreciation to mothers who choose to be homemakers and care for their children full-time; second, advocate more flexible patterns of work (part-time, working from home, flexitime, and gradual transition practices for mothers returning to work after raising children). Gilbert points out the oddness of a situation in which feminists deride unpaid work and care in the home, yet applaud men who take on these domestic tasks, whilst looking down on women who choose to stay home and do them. Gilbert makes a distinction between narrow economic independence via the workforce, which is the promise offered by elite feminists, and a much richer and broader idea of self-sufficiency which can lead to a variety of work-related decisions and human relationships, a sort of expanded and healthy freedom *for*, rather than a mere freedom *from*.

From here, Gilbert ties in the possibilities and experiences of happiness and fulfilment from domesticity and stay-at-home parenting.

Gilbert concludes by drawing our attention to Scandinavian practices, often considered the pinnacle of enlightened family policy. He explains the considerable differences between his preferred traditional models of Finland and Norway with their various home-care benefits for mothers raising young children, and the revolutionary example of Sweden and Denmark which seek to eliminate all gender differences between men and women, something propounded by radical feminists and critiqued by Pope Benedict XVI in his 2012 "Christmas Address to the Roman Curia." Along with flexible working patterns, Gilbert also calls for home-care allowances and credit-sharing arrangements for pensions and property – that is, based precisely on the marriage of husband and wife.

No book can cover everything. In this case, although Gilbert acknowledges the availability of divorce, contraception, and abortion, their significance is understated, when really they play a huge determining role – something acknowledged by economist Gary Becker in his own work. Likewise, it is difficult to produce a comprehensive book on the choices women make as mothers without a serious examination of the influence of men (boyfriends, husbands, and fathers) on those choices. The absence of fathers and husbands in this book might unknowingly be perpetuating the narrative of the absent father, manifest in the sad epidemic of fatherless families. A restoration of social admiration for fatherhood is vital.

Gilbert's conclusions at the end of book clearly emphasize the vital importance of marriage and the family based on marriage, which would have been a much appreciated and important theme for the whole book. Perhaps the UN's *Doha Declaration on the Family* and the Vatican's *Charter of the Rights of the Family* could provide an exciting and inspirational framework for Gilbert's suggestions. Finally, though Gilbert does examine the role of state welfare, fundamental questions about the relation between the family, the state, and the principle of subsidiarity are not part of his equation on this occasion.

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