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English 1010 Essay #3

Love and Family as Methods of Social Control

In Love's Labors, the first chapter of *Against Love: a Polemic*, by Laura Kipnis, modern love is likened to that of an employer-employee relationship. Kipnis makes the contention that love, one of the most pervasive and seemingly fundamental concepts in human existence, is worth questioning, if only because its status as the ultimate achievement is being taken for granted.

In the piece, Kipnis draws parallels between the obligations and struggles that accompany relationships to those that are found in the working world. For instance, she cites the idea that relationships require consistent and prolonged "work" to be effectively kept. She claims that marriage is a contractual organization of desire, and that it is enforced by "rigid shop-floor discipline designed to keep the wives and husbands and domestic partners of the world choke-chained to the status quo machinery". She refers to the methods used by individuals to police monogamy, such as "surveillance", "dress codes", and "attitude assessments".

The piece is a Polemic, and she sets out more to explore the argument than to truly endorse it. To me, though, it seems as though she avoids extending the argument to its full potential. Her focus on consensual romantic love omits an essential aspect of love as a method of social control, the role of the family. In this essay I will attempt to extend the

fundamental points of her argument to the institution of familial love, and to bring in various sources which strengthen that analysis.

Questioning the institution of the family may prove to be difficult territory. Has there ever been an idea more ubiquitous in human society? Families can be found in nearly every human culture in existence. Regardless of ethnicity, religion, or lifestyle, societies tend to gravitate towards some form of familial structure, and this structure is invariably endorsed by the powers that be, regardless of political inclination. For instance, to invoke a modern example, the United Nation's "Universal Declaration of Human Rights", arguably one of the more liberal documents in human history, states that "The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State." Similarly the concept of "family values" has become a staple of modern conservative thought. Some conservative candidates have even based their entire campaigns on platforms that promise to preserve and strengthen the family, such as Rick Santorum in the 2012 Republican primaries. Throughout the process of his campaign, Santorum repeatedly and explicitly made arguments for the ways in which a society is strengthened by an organizational structure centered on families, and it nearly won him the nomination.

The universal endorsement by world governments should come as no surprise. The family offers a way to organize the social order. It creates stability through small group interdependence. Families exert coercive social pressures that keep people from deviating too far from behavioral norms. These social pressures often drive individuals to pursue life goals that not so coincidentally contribute to the greater institutions of society. Often times these structures are economic in nature. Rituals associated with couples and courtship

almost always go hand in hand with consumerism. They take the form of birthdays, anniversaries, and social outings, which all typically require spending money.

Likewise, family units can also be examined as economic units. Couples with dual incomes are often able to remain financially stable, because each individual has a partner to rely on. In times of economic hardship family members can function as safety nets, providing living accommodations or fiscal assistance. This codependency also affords greater purchasing power. Many couples wait until marriage to buy their first home, or work together to pay for cars and other luxuries. Rituals associated with families like Mother's Day, Father's Day, birthdays, and other holidays also typically involve gift giving.

And of course, the primary function of the family has historically been the creation, socialization, and education of children. Families are the method through which humans are created and integrated into society. They are society's way of instilling social norms and values on children, and of raising them to be more compatible with society's needs.

Applying Kipnis's critical lens to the concept of the family, specifically in regards to the institutions of childhood and parentage, results in some interesting parallels. After all, if marriage is a job, then what is childhood but slavery? When you consider the freedoms afforded to young children it's easy to see that they have almost none. Every aspect of their lives is strictly controlled by their parents. They do not necessarily have a say over what or when they eat, what they wear, how their time is spent, when they sleep, or what ideas they are exposed to. They can't express ideas their parents find objectionable, and they are consistently told what is and is not acceptable behavior. There is no limit on the amount of time a child can be made to do chores by their parents. No rules exist regarding the type of

discipline that is appropriate as long as it stays outside the legal definition of abuse. Children never consent to enter a family. They have no choice, and if a child's personal ideology or identity is at odds with that of their parents, or if they don't conform or respond well to their parent's style of parenting, then they have no recourse but to suffer through the greater part of the first two decades of their lives in silence. But what is it about being a child that invalidates the right to freedom of speech, for example? Isn't any human being an individual deserving of self-determination before they're a part of a group?

Of course, there are plenty of examples of permissive parents who allow their children varying levels of freedoms based on what they consider appropriate. But like slavery, the institution of the family cannot be judged solely based on its most benevolent practitioners. Ultimately, the kindest slave owner in the world still owns slaves.

As children age they are inevitably exposed to alternative lifestyles and ideologies, and the entirely predictable result is often rebellion. Young children will "misbehave"; they will act out and throw tantrums at things they perceive to be unfair. Teenagers, of course, have an even worse reputation for rebellion. According to Kipnis, this is very revealing. She says that "Social historians assessing the shape of societies past often do look to examples of bad behavior and acting out, to heretics, rebels, criminals—or question who receives these designations—because ruptures in the social fabric map a society's structuring contradictions, exposing the prevailing systems of power and hierarchy and the weak links in social institutions". The rebellion inherent to the system of the family exposes the problems of an entirely one sided power dynamic. In a family there are no checks and balances. There is only a hierarchy where those on top claim total, dictatorial control.

The legitimacy of “rebellious” grievances in the context of familial systems are difficult to evaluate. Society has largely stigmatized the complaints of children and young teenagers. They are dismissed for whining or complaining, and their abrasive behavior is viewed as being “just the way they are”. But what if, hypothetically, society decided one day that a person did not exit childhood at age 18. What if the point at which one was considered an adult was extended to age 36? Would we be so hasty to dismiss the small rebellions of 27 year olds over curfews and bedtimes? It may sound far-fetched, but consider that the age at which a person becomes an adult has already risen. In pre-industrial societies “immaturity” was not tolerated. Children were treated more like little adults, and expected to work and contribute to the family on a level comparable to that of other members. In many cultures it was sexual maturity that marked the transition into adulthood. By age 14 a boy could go to war and a girl might be a mother. What happened is, with the advent of economic and social modernization, children now no longer need to be autonomous. Parents can afford to nostalgically extend the childhood of their children, sheltering them from responsibility and individual determination until a later point in life.

Childhood is a luxury, and it may be that its artificial extension has had a negative impact on our society. The overprotective “helicopter-mom”, who puts her child under constant surveillance, sheltering them from any experiences that would allow personal fulfillment and growth, through emotional manipulation and psychological trickery, may be just as harmful as the parent who pays too little attention to their child. In fact, Kipnis's concept of “preventative domestic policing” and its inclusion of “trick questions, psychological torture, and carefully placed body blows that leave no visible marks” is even more prevalent in parenting than in spousal relationships. And as Kipnis says, “Aren't all

precarious regimes inherently insecure, casting watchful eyes of their citizenry's fidelity, ready to spring into action should anything threaten the exclusivity of those bonds?"

This brings us to the critical issue of the methodology through which the family is enforced. While I have previously implied that there is some degree of intentional, top-down pressure from positions of authority, this is not a wholly accurate depiction. In reality, familial systems are self-perpetuating. Kipness hints at the way in which social institutions are self-policing by posing a hypothetical. "Imagine the most efficient kind of social control possible. It wouldn't be a soldier on every street corner—too expensive, too crass. Wouldn't the most elegant means of producing acquiescence be to somehow transplant those social controls so seamlessly into the guise of individual needs that the difference between them dissolved?"

To further examine this point it may be helpful to bring in the chapter "Panopticon" from Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*. In Panopticon, Foucault defines and analyses what it means for an institution to be "Panoptic". The idea comes from an architectural plan for a prison designed by Jeremy Bentham. The concept involved a series of cells spread radially out from a tower. The tower has vision into each cell, but the inmates are unable to see out. Foucault states that the purpose of the Panopticon is "to incite in the inmate a state of consciousness and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power." In believing that they are being watched, the inmates will regulate themselves. It does not matter if they are actually being surveyed, as long as they believe they are. As Foucault says, "The perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary." The genius of the panoptic prison is that the inmate takes charge of their

own incarceration. This extends beyond the example of the prison and into what Foucault calls the "panoptic institution", and of this the family is a perfect example.

Children internalize the critical gaze of their parents when they're young. This influence follows them through life and is again imposed upon a new generation when they have children of their own. In this way families provide "constant visibility". Even after children have left their home there is social pressure for parents to keep track of what their children do, and for children to keep in touch with their parents and siblings.

All of this criticism has so far been limited to the prototypical image of a "functional" and "traditional" nuclear family composed of two parents and one or several children, but it is important to remember that not all families live up to this ideal. Even by traditional standards many people with children are viewed as "bad parents".

It may be hard for those of us who have had supportive and "functional" families to conceive of a parent who does not, on some level at least, love their children. But keep in mind that there are little to no qualifications required to have children. A parent does not need to be intelligent, or kind, or responsible. They don't need to be good with children, financially stable, or physically healthy. Anyone can have a child as long as they have a functioning set of reproductive organs and a willing partner.

Some families naturally self-destruct, or if they do persist, they do so to the detriment of everyone involved. Kipnis talks about the extent of infidelity, but there are also issues such as domestic violence and emotional abuse. Some marriages continue in misery, but ideas about what is "supposed to be" are so entrenched in the minds of the

participants that no one can bring themselves to break it off. For the children in such situations, the institution of the family has failed.

Now, I'm not proposing any concrete alternatives. While there are certainly problems with organizing society around the family, pointing them out and solving them are two entirely different issues. Maybe the problems are surmountable, or possibly negligible. Maybe there are alternative systems that we haven't yet figured out. We could one day find that humanity progresses to the point where it no longer needs to be organized around families at all. Or perhaps we only need to modify our idea of what constitutes a family beyond the "traditional". There is no simple answer, but at the very least we should attempt to be aware of the social forces that influence our lives, and like Kipnis, always consider the question, "Could it be different?"