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America's Parenting Economy: How the Ideal of Parental Investment Scaffolds Family-Hostile Policy

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The American parenting economy is built around the notion that raising children is a matter of private parental investment. This essay outlines briefly the features of what is best characterized as, not family-friendly, but rather family-hostile policy in the United States, before it proposes two reasons for why the ideal of parental investment holds its grip. The first is the historical political entanglement of neoliberalism with neoconservatism that continues to entrench the focus on traditional family values. The second is the more recent cultural backdrop of building knowledge infrastructure around "the economic way of looking at parents" to repurpose economist Gary Becker's Nobel Laureate lecture title, which has permeated public discourse and reframed "childrearing" as "parental investment." Therefore, the possibility of policy change is not simply a matter of political struggle. A potent obstacle to family-friendly policy is cultural. Parents and nonparents will not demand, nor will politicians embrace, radical institutional transformation of the American family policy if we do not shift our thinking. We need less economic reasoning and more sociological imagination, recognizing that parenting, no matter how intimate and personal it seems, is inextricably and thoroughly bound up with social structures and culture. And that raising children—all children in the manner they deserve—is not a matter of private investment but a common responsibility.

KEYWORDS: economy; family policy; family values; neoliberalism; parental investment; parenting.

INTRODUCTION

> On so many measures of family hardship, young children and their parents in the U.S. suffer more than their counterparts in other high-income nations. Babies are more likely to die and children are more likely to grow up in poverty. The U.S. is the only rich country in the world without national paid family leave. And while other wealthy countries spend an average of $14,000 each year per child on early-childhood care, the U.S. spends a miserly $500. Underlying each of these bleak truths appears to be the same, misguided belief: that government support for parents is at odds with parents being responsible for their kids. (Hurley 2022)

That parents are solely responsible for their kids is a deeply ingrained cultural belief in the United States. The recent rise in parents' rights movements taking up pandemic mask-wearing and school curricula (Schultz 2022; Stanford 2023) make it patiently obvious: parental autonomy over raising children takes precedence over public concerns. While President Biden's 2021 Build Back Better plan offered a glimmer of hope for many postpandemic exhausted and overspent parents for a more family-friendly future—with universal free preschool, paid parental leave, and

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extended child tax credits, among others—these hopes were crushed quickly as none of those proposals reached needed support, not even among all Democrats in the Senate.

In January 2022 debates on whether the government should make childcare more affordable, Republican Senator Ron Johnson of Wisconsin argued that "people *decide* to have families and become parents. That's something they need to consider when they make that *choice* … I've never really felt it was society's responsibility to take care of *other people's children*" (Teh 2022, emphases added). For many like Johnson, children are a stock of parental investment—not a common responsibility. Indeed, contemporary American family policy is built on this very notion of the centrality of private parental investment. This essay discusses the American parenting economy by first outlining, briefly, the family policy in the United States before unveiling two ways in which it continues to be scaffolded and unlikely to change: through the political-historical context of the converging movements of neoliberalism and neoconservatism as well as the ideational-cultural context of the rising influence of economic thinking in how we should understand parenting.

WORK-FAMILY-HOSTILE POLICY

In her book, *Making Motherhood Work: How Women Manage Careers and Caregiving*, Collins (2018) recounts some dire facts: "Of all Western industrialized countries, the United States ranks dead last for supportive work-family policies: No federal paid leave. The highest gender wage gap. No minimum standard for vacation and sick days. The highest maternal and child poverty rates." The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Family Database (2022) on parental leave systems across OECD and European Union (EU) countries reports that with the exception of the United States, nearly all countries offer mothers at least 14 weeks of leave around childbirth. The United States "is the only rich country without nationwide, statutory, paid maternity leave, paternity leave, or parental leave" (Gromada and Richardson 2021:8), and it "is the only OECD country to offer no statutory entitlement to paid leave on a national basis" (OECD Family Database 2022:2). In contrast, the United Kingdom offers 39 weeks of paid maternity leave, and in Greece, 43 weeks. The average of paid maternity leave duration among OECD nations is 18.5 weeks. Overall, fathers are entitled to less paid paternity leave across OECD nations, but the OECD average of paid paternity leave is still 2.3 weeks, meaning most countries provide for it. Yet in the United States, fathers are not entitled to any paid paternity leave either.

According to a 2021 report published by UNICEF, the United States ranks 40 out of 41 countries in terms of four indicators of family-friendly policies including paid leave and access, quality, and affordability of childcare, lagging behind not only Scandinavian countries and Western Europe but also countries with much less resources, including Mexico, Bulgaria, and Turkey, among others (Gromada and Richardson 2021). Currently, the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) of 1993, signed by President Bill Clinton, "entitles eligible employees of covered employers to take unpaid, job-protected leave for specified family, and medical reasons with continuation of group health insurance coverage under the same terms and conditions as if the employee had not taken leave" (U.S. Department of Labor 2023a). Under this act, eligible employees are entitled to 12 work weeks of leave in a 12-month period for the birth of a child or to care for a newborn; to care for one's newly adopted child or child put into their foster care; to care for one's spouse, child, or parent with serious health conditions; or if one has a serious health conditions making them unable to perform essential job functions (U.S. Department of Labor 2023a). They also can take 26 work weeks of leave during a 12-month period to provide care to their spouse, child, parent, or next of kin if they are a covered servicemember with a serious injury or illness (U.S. Department of Labor 2023a). It is important to note that the act entitles employees to only *unpaid* leave. Beginning October 1, 2020, through the Federal Employee Paid Leave Act (FEPLA), "certain categories of Federal civilian employees" gained access to 12 weeks of paid parental leave during the 12-month period from the date of a child's birth or placement for adoption/foster care (U.S. Department of Labor 2023b). There are employers now who provide paid leave, however, eligibility requirements are strict. For instance, the Institute for Women's Policy Research finds that in 2012, only about half of mothers in the workforce ages 18–34 were qualified for job-protected leave (IMPAQ International 2017).

The UNICEF report suggests that "childcare is seen more as a private rather than a public responsibility" in the United States (Gromada and Richardson 2021:8). Notably, there was one historical exception when the United States did offer families universal childcare: World War II. Over the course of 3 years from 1943 to 1946, "the federal government used the Lanham Act of 1940—legislation that provided federal grants or loans for war-related infrastructure projects—to pay for child-care facilities in areas where many women were employed in defense-related industries" (Samuels 2014). In 1971, the United States considered again universal childcare programing through the Comprehensive Child Development Act (CCDA), a bill that would have created federally funded public childcare centers across the country and provided universal childcare to 3- and 4-year-olds, and parents would have been charged on an income-based sliding scale (Karch 2013). The Bill *was* passed by the House and the Senate. Alas, it was vetoed by President Nixon. Among his reasons was displeasure with the proposal "diminish[ing] ... parental authority and parental involvement with children." According to Nixon, it was unacceptable "for the Federal Government to plunge headlong financially into supporting child development [and] commit the vast moral authority of the National Government to the side of communal approaches to child rearing over against the family-centered approach" (Nixon 1971). In light of the Cold War, anything that could be associated with "communal approaches to child rearing," a euphemism for "communist," was a political no-go. And there is no secret that such sentiments were openly voiced. For example, Conservative Democrat from Louisiana John Rarick called CCDA "the most outlandish of the Communist plans" (Rose 2012:60). So, Nixon nixed (pun intended) the plan and instead, he signed the 1971 Revenue Act, which "essentially facilitated the system that exists today relying on private child care arrangements, with tax deductions to help the middle and upper class families and often inadequately-funded public child care supports for the poorest families" (Waxman 2021).

Despite several Democratic governments in power since the 1970s, America has not substantially changed its childcare or parental leave policy. There are many reasons for this. In this essay, I focus on two potential explanations.[1] The first is the historical political entanglement of neoliberalism with neoconservativism that has entrenched traditional family values. The second is the more recent cultural backdrop of building knowledge infrastructure around "the economic way of looking at parents" that has permeated public discourse and helped transform raising children into parental investment.

THE POLITICAL BACKDROP TO PRIVATIZED PARENTING

The privatization of children was strengthened with the political confluence of neoliberalism and neoconservativism. Neoliberalism promoted the ideology of free market capitalism and has gained force after the decline of after-WWII Keynesian approaches. Neoconservatism was the rise of the new conservative movement of erstwhile liberal traditionalists who reacted to 60s radicalism. Both showed influence already during the Nixon government and got strongly entrenched with the Reagan one.

First, while many are familiar with the ideas of neoliberal economists such as Milton Friedman and Gary Becker on free market and human capital, it is important to remember that these economists also contributed to building a knowledge infrastructure (Hirschman 2021) around understanding of the family, applying the economic style of reasoning. In fact, Becker wrote a book entitled *A Treatise on the Family* published in 1981. He begins the volume as follows:

> The family in the Western world has been radically altered—*some claim almost destroyed*—by events of the last three decades. The rapid growth in divorce rates has greatly increased the number of households headed by women and the number of children growing up in households with only one parent. The large increase in labor force participation of married women, *including mothers with young children*, has reduced the contact between children and their mothers and *contributed to the conflict* between the sexes in employment as well as in marriage . . . Conflict between the generations has become more open, and today's parents are *less confident* than those of earlier years that they can guide the behavior of their children. (1981:1, emphases added)

Presented as a work of economic social science, the tone of this passage comes across as all but neutral. There is lurking fear of the fact that the traditional family has been destroyed, mothers of young children are creating conflict in marriage by working, and parents are at a loss on how to guide their children.

In this context, Becker espouses an economic approach to the family, as if aiming to help discipline the family to better mirror the traditional conservative image. Social critic Melinda Cooper would agree. In her book *Family Values*, Cooper (2017)

[1] To be sure, I am not claiming that these two reasons are the only ones, but they are central to a cultural economic analysis of family policy. I do not discuss the extensively documented history of racial and gender issues implicated in the status quo of poorly resourced care infrastructure (See Carr 2021). I also do not discuss how family policy is homologous to broader welfare policy and its failed revolution (See Steensland 2008).

provides a fascinating analysis of this alignment of neoliberalism with neoconservatism. Their combined contempt for a broad range of countercultural social issues brought these two unlikely movements together in the 1970s. They saw eye-to-eye in the need to preserve a traditional family structure as the primary unit in society:

> Neoliberals and neoconservatives establish a working relationship over the question of "family responsibility." Both perspectives need to enforce the non-contractual obligations of family in some way, albeit for different reasons—for neoliberals, family acts as a necessary alternative to the welfare State and a ballast to the free-market, whereas for neoconservatives, family is the unquestioned foundation of all social order. (Della Torre and Cooper 2022:243)

For example, Margaret Thatcher, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1979 to 1990, famed as one of the earliest neoliberal politicians, who led her government to drastically reduce the welfare state, put family responsibility front and center. This is one of her frequently quoted speeches:

> I think we have gone through a period when too many children and people have been given to understand 'I have a problem, it is the Government's job to cope with it!' or 'I have a problem, I will go and get a grant to cope with it!' 'I am homeless, the Government must house me!' and so they are casting their problems on society and who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first. (Thatcher 1987)

Thatcher is known for her questioning that *society* exists. But she not only argued that individuals are all that matter. Rather, she also emphasized the fundamental role of families. Yet, referring to *families* in the above quote, in plural, does not suggest an endorsement of a variety of contemporary family forms. Thatcher's political neoliberalism is couched deeply in a traditional understanding of a family, whereby it is the responsibility of the married mother and father to provide for their children.

Former U.S. president Ronald Reagan was Thatcher's political soulmate. In the words of historian Julian Zelizer, they "each believed in the strength of free markets [and] disdained communism" (Abdullah 2013). It is widely understood that Reagan was lifted to power because he appealed to the neoconservative political right that arose in the 1970s (Hoeveler 1990). He also embraced neoliberal views, having Milton Friedman as one of his key economic advisors.

In *Family Values*, Cooper tells a feminist history of neoliberal capitalism and the family, arguing that the conjoined influences of neoliberalism and neoconservativism have installed the traditional family, and not the state, as the site of care and responsibility. Cooper acknowledges that a generation of welfare-rights activists in the 1960s and 1970s fought, with some success, to create more equitable forms of welfare, and ones that were more available to non-traditional families such as unmarried women with children. But as historian Chappel (2017) summarizes: "The expansion of the welfare state, coupled with attacks on the nuclear family by feminists, gay rights activists, and other countercultural forces, generated a backlash." He goes on to explain what this backlash in the 1970s meant:

> [N]eoliberal economists and a new generation of social conservatives . . . found surprising common cause around opposition to inflation, depicting rising prices as a consequence of unrestrained deficit spending necessitated by the Woodstock generation's out-of-control sexual morality and sense of

> entitlement ... [T]hey forged a powerful alliance, heralding a sweeping transformation of American political economy from the Reagan years to the present. (Chappel 2017)

This "powerful alliance" is possible even if neoliberals and traditional conservatives see the family differently. Neoliberals see parents as rational actors making choices to maximize benefits and minimize costs. Traditional conservatives see family as a sacred institution that preserves religious values. But for both, the family is a site of *privatized risk*. That means that risks which in most other industrialized countries are public and shared have become in the United States largely individual and private (Calhoun and Hacker 2008). It has not always been like this in America. The New Dealers argued for the extension of government and social insurance and feminists and gay rights advocates fought for acceptance of new family visions (Calhoun and Hacker 2008). In this context, it is less surprising that, as mentioned in the previous section, in 1971 President Nixon vetoed the comprehensive child development and day care bill that aimed to delimit privatized childrearing and relieve some of the burden of investment in children that parents carry. As reported in *The New York Times* on December 9, 1971: "In a stinging message, President Nixon vetoed today a Congressionally initiated bill to establish a national system of comprehensive child development and day care. The proposal, he said, was characterized by fiscal irresponsibility, administrative unworkability and *family-weakening implications* (Rosenthal 1971, emphasis added)."

In brief, the political backdrop of the neoliberal and neoconservative alliance from the 1970s and onwards has helped solidify that it is the nuclear unit of a traditional family that is responsible for raising children and that the government should keep away. Interestingly, future terms of democratic presidents did not move away from this understanding. This is in line with Berman's (2022) argument that they, too, have embraced the economic style of reasoning for public policy. Ultimately, the political scaffolding to this economic style, or economization, has helped turn kids into private property. Critically, Goodman wrote for *The Washington Post* in 1988 in (another failed) anticipation of the childcare bill that "working parents [have] to find places for [childcare] the way they might find a parking space in a downtown crossing." A *paid* parking space, to be sure, and for which families have been devoting an increasing share of their income (Bandelj and Grigoryeva 2021), willingly paying the price for priceless children (Zelizer 1985).

THE CULTURAL BACKDROP TO PRIVATIZED PARENTING

While the political history is better known to analysts, less attention has been paid to how scientists and researchers may have contributed to strengthening of privatized parenting through the notion of parental investment.

First, it is important to note that most discussions in sociology about parenting have recently centered on the notion of intensive parenting. Deriving from Hays' (1996) conceptualization of "intensive mothering," intensive parenting has come to the forefront in discussions about childrearing in the past decades. Intensive parenting is a cultural ideal of parenting that is child-centered and time-intensive (Hays 1996). Coining a kin concept of concerted cultivation, focused "cultivation" of children's schedules and activities and engagement with institutions, Lareau (2011) suggested a difference between upper/middle class families who use concerted cultivation and the working-class ones who do not. Yet, Ishizuka (2019) finds that, today, parents—both mothers and fathers to both sons and daughters—across social class believe in the value of intensive parenting. As journalist Pinsker (2019) for *The Atlantic* puts it, "intensive parenting is not just what the well-off practice—it's what everyone aspires to." With all this attention to intensive parenting, especially the tremendous challenges to its execution in light of COVID (Miller 2020), it comes as a surprise that over the past decades, scholars, experts, and practitioners have significantly more widely used an economic metaphor—*investment*—for childrearing, captured with the notion of *parental investment*. As Fig. 1 reveals, mentions of "intensive parenting" in books searchable by Google pale in comparison to "parental investment."

A frequently used phrase is not just innocent word but a pithy expression of a social transformation: an economic way of looking at parenting. Indeed, *economization*, the centrality of economic reasoning and economic analysis to understanding public policy and everyday lives, not only parenting, has become increasingly prominent in the past decades (Çalışkan and Callon 2009, 2010; Griffen and Panofsky 2021; Livne 2021; Murphy 2017; Spring 2015; Thomas 2019). While there is much research now on how the economic reasoning has influenced American public policy, less is known about the application of the economic style of reasoning to parenting by social scientists and economics experts. Here, childrearing is conceived of as "parental investment," assuming that we can deploy the logic of investment and return, choice and incentives, and a cost–benefit analysis to understand how parents raise children.

When one thinks about the study of economics, one may think of supply and demand and prices and financial markets. It is unlikely to think of parenting as the object of economic analysis. However, economists disagree. They have recently taken up the topic of parenting as an area of social life that can be well understood by using economic theory. For instance, in his endorsement of the 2019 book by economists Zilibotti and Doepke, *Love, Money, and Parenting: How Economics Explains the Way We Raise Our Kids*, MIT economics professor Daron Acemoglu puts it this way:

Fig. 1. Google Ngram for intensive parenting versus parental investment.

> Economics is usually the last thing on people's minds when they think about parenting. This wonderfully readable and original book aims to change that. It shows how different parenting styles are about trade-offs, how they shape the way children explore and experiment with the world and take risks, and how economic factors have played an important role in striking changes we have experienced in the way parents think about their children and parent them.[2]

This idea of parenting governed by choices, incentives, and trade-offs, calibrated by parents as rational actors, underlies a broader body of work that has increasingly used "parental investment" as a way to refer to how parents decide to invest their resources in children.

In an article published in 2019 in the *Annual Review of Economics*, Doepke et al. write about three themes in parenting that are relevant for building children's human capital, another central economic concept (cf. Bandelj and Spiegel 2022). Consistent with rational choice theory, these economists theorize that the first choice that parents make is to pick a parenting style: passive (refrained intervention in child's behavior); authoritarian (imposing a parent's will on a child through coercion); or authoritative (imposing a parent's will on child through persuasion). In addition, the timing during which parents choose to "invest" in their child, whether it happens early or later in a child's life, matters for optimizing children's skill development. Moreover, it matters where a parent chooses to raise a child (e.g., a city or rural area). Each of these parental decisions, they argue, ultimately affects the future economic value of the child, as the investment in their human capital will determine their wages and value in the labor market as adults. Thus, they recommend authoritative parenting as a superior parenting style, since it involves investing early in childhood education and is more likely to optimize a child's human capital.

Contemporary scholarly work (and not only in economics) is replete with references to parental investment, not intensive parenting or childrearing. While calling a phenomenon *parental investment* may seem like just a turn of phrase, there are significant assumptions about parents and children embedded in this language: it is about rational behavior of parents who are weighing costs and benefits in making individual choices related to children. Parental investment makes childrearing an optimization problem, and one that parents need to solve. In brief, increasing emphasis in scholarly writing on parental investment brings with it a distinct "economic way of looking at" parenting, to paraphrase the title of Becker's (1992) Nobel Prize Lecture. This comes full circle to Becker's (1981) treaties of the (traditional) family and the alignment of it all with political neoconservativism.

CONCLUSION

On April 28, 2021, President Joe Biden announced the "American Family Plan" as a part of legislative framework known as "Build Back Better Plan" (Bill number: H.R.5376) that sought the largest nationwide public investment in social, infrastructural, and environmental programs since the great depression-era policies in the

[2] Back cover endorsement of *Love, Money, and Parenting: How Economics Explains the Way We Raise Our Kids* (2019).

1930s (The White House 2021b). The part focused on American families proposed to provide universal high quality free preschool to all 3- and 4-years-old which would benefit 5 million children and save an average family an estimated $13,000. In addition, Biden proposed to invest $225 billion to provide direct support to American children and their families for childcare, which would be free for the most economically disadvantaged and cost no more than 7% of household income for most families. The American Family Plan also included a national comprehensive paid family and medical leave program that would "guarantee twelve weeks of paid parental, family, and personal illness/safe leave ... [and] provide workers up to $4,000 a month, with a minimum of two-thirds of average weekly wages replaced, rising to 80 percent for the lowest wage workers" (The White House 2021a). The plan would also extend the Child Tax Credit, Earned Income Tax Credit, and Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit. Concretely, for a family with two parents earning a combined $100,000 per year and two children under six, "the Child Tax Credit expansion means an additional $3,200 per year in tax relief. For a family with two parents earning a combined $240,000 per year and two children under six, the expansion means even more, with a credit increase of than $4,400 because the full credit was not previously fully available to them" (The White House 2021a). With these measures in place, America's family policy could be rightfully called the most generous in the country's history. While "[t]he US has long accepted widespread poverty and restricted access to basic benefits", the Build Back Better Plan "could be pivotal break with this approach in favor of protecting people's [children's, parents'] economic and social rights" (Human Rights Watch 2021).

The vote on the Build Back Better Plan took place on December 19, 2021. Yet, Senator Joe Manchin, a democrat from West Virginia, voted "nay." Given that none of the Republican senators voted in favor either, Manchin's vote effectively killed the bill. After months of negotiations in Congress, Manchin's argument was that he "cannot take that risk [of supporting the plan] with a staggering debt of more than $29 trillion and inflation taxes that are real and harmful to every hard-working American" (Manchin 2021), clearly privileging concerns of economic efficiency over social equality (cf. Berman 2022). Given how close America was to a very substantial reform of its family policy, some commentators did not spare their criticism of Manchin. "Americans will remain some of the last people on the planet to have no right to paid leave when they have children, and for that, you can thank Joe Manchin," concluded one commentator, calling Manchin's actions "astoundingly cruel" (Filipovic 2021). While Manchin's expressed rationale focused on the debt and inflation—and note how similar this rationale was to the 1970s concerns over inflation by neoliberals and neoconservatives— it's clear he wasn't very keen on the generous family policy. Manchin identifies as pro-life (Gonzalez 2014) and had openly expressed concerns about "changing our whole society to an entitlement mentality" (Weisman and Cochrane 2021), practically warning of dangers of state overreach that would end up spoiling the undeserving poor (cf. Steensland 2008). Moreover, for all the opposing Republicans, the strongly entrenched ideals of traditional family and privatized parenting seemed to have been taken for granted. And also expressed openly, if you recall the words of Senator Ron Johnson of Wisconsin, quoted at the beginning of this essay, and his conviction about society *not* being responsible for children (Teh 2022).

In sum, I have argued in this essay that the insistence on children as a private responsibility of parents has been scaffolded for decades, not only because neoliberals and neoconservatives see eye-to-eye on family values but because our public discourse has been suffused with the economic way of looking at parents. On subjects of family and parenting where sociologists have been dominant, we have seen increasing influence of economic reasoning, entrenching the view that childrearing is a matter of private parental investment. This has important implications for possibilities of reform. It means that a potential transformation in American family policy is not simply a matter of political struggle. Some of the most potent obstacles are cultural. Parents and nonparents will not demand, nor will politicians embrace, radical institutional transformation in American family policy if we do not shift our thinking. We need less economic reasoning and more sociological imagination, recognizing that parenting, no matter how intimate and personal it seems, is inextricably and thoroughly entangled with social structures and culture. And that raising children—*all* children in the manner they deserve—is not a matter of private investment but a common responsibility.

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