

CHILDREN ARE ONLY LITTLE PEOPLE

or

THE LOUIS RIEL UNIVERSITY FAMILY CO-OP (the day care
demand expanded)

by Melody Milian

"I am going out with you to rouse the women so they will see there can be no real change until they take part in bringing that change."

Louise Lucas

The women's liberation movement in North America and in Europe has repeatedly asserted that women's liberation cannot wait for "the revolution", but must proceed now as we try to discover together new ways of relating to one another for a future free society.

In our discussions in Women's Caucus at SFU we should be aware of the fact that one of our central tasks must be to find ways of bearing and loving children. Partly because we are university students and few of us have had children, we have never discussed this question. Perhaps our silence is imposed also by the fact that so many of us have resolved quietly never to have a baby. We talk a lot about the need for women to be free to choose not to have babies, and we have done good work in the areas of birth control and the movement for legalized abortion. But our work for control of our own bodies does not bring us to a discussion of the forces acting on us that cause us not to want even one child for ourselves.

It seems to me that our problem in Women's Caucus is not only how to prevent unwanted children but also how to create the possibility of wanted children for ourselves. How can we have babies in a society that makes babies burdens to everyone, particularly to women, and at the same time not lose our ability to work effectively to destroy this inhuman system?

If we do not come to grips with this question now, we will either spend childless lives or suddenly find ourselves entrapped by motherhood and depoliticized as a result.

So far our almost unspoken individual solution is infertility, in all its aspects: the pill, abortion, giving our babies away. If these are to be our choices, we must understand that this system that we now recognize and name as the murderer of the babies of the Vietnamese women is also very clearly but more subtly the murderer of our babies--our babies yet unborn and perhaps never to be born.

We should try to open ourselves to sharing and to understanding the pain caused by the alternatives open to us, and then try to find other alternatives for those of us who want them, for our lives, for a future society.

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ALF - SLD

Sez. 6

Sottosez.

Serie 9

Sottos.

Unità 216

PUV 55

Some women's liberation members are actually discussing celibacy, lesbianism, and test-tube babies as solutions to our problems. Our group hopefully still understands that if women have any special commitment to the destruction of a system that must hate its own young, it lies in our desire to make a world in which we can love men and each other and into which we can bear our babies. I hope that we can affirm this commitment before we become so alienated from our own bodies that test-tube babies is what we want for our future.

While our central purpose must be to be militant organizers of other women around women's issues that are revolutionary, rather than to spend time talking about how to make ourselves or others happier now, we can also think along these lines at the same time. This paper is an attempt to describe the structure of child-bearing in this present society that has made us reject it, and a proposed alternative for the movement drawn out of experience in the Simon Fraser Family Co-operative.

There are several reasons for movement people spending time on such alternative life-style proposals:

1. The liberation of some women to become financially autonomous and to do more effective political work. (The question of whether or not to raise the demand for day care for all women in universities, factories, etc., must be debated, and requires research into manpower surplus absorption problems of monopolycapitalism. That debate won't happen in this paper.)
2. The beginning of the integration of men into the child-rearing process. Men are traditionally cut off from children, able to interact with them only at routinized times, etc., When the movement as a whole takes responsibility for the raising of the children, those people who are free to be with them at various times share in their upbringing.
3. The growth of anti-authoritarian people for a future free society. Anti-authoritarian socialization of a new generation is important.
4. The creation of the possibility of having children for movement people without depolitization. It is clear that many "radicals" in recent years have gone into the system, been forced to take establishment jobs, have been unable to break out of their occupational roles precisely because of the family entrapment they have fallen into. The ever-looming fear of selling out, the example of many who cannot act when the chips are down, is often based on the dependencies created by the lack of autonomy of women and children. One significant part of the women's movement may well be that this generation of radicals won't sell out.

in the end because we will have developed a life-style that will enable us to avoid the family role traps that de-activated a lot of those who have gone before us.

5. The strengthening of our ability to face repression: autonomous children and a structure that could function while parents are away.

The mystique of motherhood must be one of the strongest values in our culture. It is very difficult for any mother to admit to anyone her resentment of her won child. She cannot express to others her powerful feelings of rejection and even hatred at times of her own baby.

I am convinced that such feelings are common to almost every mother in this society. The sanctions against their public expression are so strong that almost all women keep them inside themselves coupled with terrible guilt and shame. The feelings are vented on themselves or on the babies secretly in the private, prison-like apartments and houses in which women are kept locked up all day.

The fact is that babies do trap people in this society. During the last stages of pregnancy women usually lose their jobs. Even if they can return to work, the cost of babysitting wipes out their pay-checks. Even harder to surmount is the guilt that is poured onto working mothers, and the anxiety that perhaps the baby sitter is not good, or that something might be going wrong. All of the media, and even one's fellow female workers tell women that their place is in the home with their children. It is with the birth of babies that women become finally irreversibly--financially irreversibly--dependent on men, and that men become horrifyingly entrapped by women, enslaved to jobs and inhuman routines in order to support them.

Most working girls happily assume that they will work only until their first baby arrives. So often I see pregnant girls at work and am horrified at their innocence of their own fates. Their expectations are so high and so happy. The other girls give the young mother a baby shower, the beginning of her new consumer role. When she finally leaves, they send cards. She might visit her old work place once or twice to show off her baby. At first it probably feels good to be away from a job that was probably low-paid and dreary anyway. But then somehow everyone forgets about her. Very soon she finds herself cut off from the outside world. Lonely and bored in her apartment with her baby, she senses that the rest of the world is going on without her. She begins to wonder why it is that she is not happy. Something is wrong, but she is not sure what it is. Isn't it true that having a baby is the most fulfilling event in a woman's life? Didn't her mother and the magazines tell her all her life what led up to this? The clothes and dates and proms in high school, the wedding, the love between herself and her husband--didn't all of these culminate in the birth of her baby?

Why then does she feel these vague doubts about her own child? Why is she so irritable and resentful with her husband? She never wanted to be a nag and a bitch (like her mother!). She was going to be different. She wants to be like the pretty and loving young mothers

pictured in the women's magazines. Her confusion is increased by the fact that at times it is like the magazines. In spite of her fears, it really was exciting to feel her baby move inside her. She is beginning to forget the fear and pain of the birth and the treatment she got in the hospital. She really did feel proud and happy when she saw her little baby for the first time.

Sometimes she stands beside the crib and watches her sleeping baby and is almost overcome by love for him or her. She would not give up her baby for anything. But why then is the love clouded by doubt and guilt? What is wrong with her that she sometimes secretly wishes she had never had the baby? Perhaps she is not maternal enough. Maybe she is sick because she doesn't love her own baby. She knows she has been acting crazy enough lately, crying so much for no reason and screaming at her husband. The doctor might prescribe some tranquilizers. Her husband is beginning to stay at the bedroom parlour to keep away from her and the baby.

They never thought it would be like this. They used to dream of having a family together, but neither of them thought it would be this way. Their love hasn't lasted. Perhaps she isn't pretty enough anymore, or their apartment isn't nice enough. If only her husband made money so that they could buy the things that would make both her and the apartment more like the pictures in the magazines, they would be in love again. And so it goes, the syndrome of the fragmented consumer unit family, recent product of industrialization and based on the economic dependence of the woman. In each of those homes the people think that their problems and unhappiness are "personal" unique, and in some way their own fault. Unable to see the structures and economic forces at work on their lives, people experience enormous guilt and illness, and love is made impossible.

The media tell us that battered children and post-partum depression are psychological aberrations of individual women. Whenever I read of someone beating her children, I feel very sympathetic. The area of most frequent violence in our society must be the millions of homes wherein women daily visit mental and physical violence on babies, and afterwards on themselves in the terrible guilt that ensues.

Anyone who believes that the best environment for children is being locked up in a small area with a person who is stunting her growth, becoming ill out of frustration and lack of stimulation, who sees no way out of her entrapment, is deluding himself. I do not believe that any woman, no matter how educated or creative, can cope lovingly with a small child when she is isolated and dependent. Only those few wealthy women who have been able to afford household help and babysitters have been able to truly appreciate their children.

Who among us has not had an ambivalent mother? So stunted as whole people are now that they must find their identities through their children and their husbands. Consequently the growth of those children and their eventual independence is extremely threatening. The terrible maternal grasping, the real fight almost to the death that is waged by teenagers in order to get away from these mothers, grows out of women's realization that when these children are gone, they are no one. Love must be releasing and freeing. Appreciation of another depends upon separateness and relatedness to him or to her, not on dependency and total merging together.

Erich Fromm has written in this way about mother love without ever seeing the economic structures that prevent women from being able to lovingly release their children. As long as women's sole justification for being supported by husbands

is their role as mother, they will have to be grasping and smothering to their children, purveyors of neurosis and dependency in the new generations. In the same way, mountains of articles have been written on adolescent rebellion and on generation gaps as if all of these symptoms are the kids' fault or the result of huge misunderstandings or "lack of communication" between parents and children. All of these "theories" show a total lack of understanding of woman's economic position in this society.

People will continue to be driven to violence until women have complete occupational equality, complete control over their bodies, day care of a co-operative and communal nature available to them at their places of work, income attached to children. These reforms cannot be made under capitalism, cannot be granted by a system that is based on exploitation.

Our analysis of women's role in capitalism enables us to know that women's liberation will release men and children as well. We know that these problems are the result of women's economic dependence and exploitation. This understanding has led most of us to reject marriage and the traditional role of mother for ourselves. We have discussed alternative ways of relating to men, and we should discuss tentative new ways of relating to children.

THE OPERATION OF THE FAMILY

The SFU Co-op Family grew out of the Board of Governors' meeting room sit-in of Spring, 1968. The Board Room was occupied by students during the CAUT censure crisis. They decided somewhat satirically to use the space to fill a student need. The idea of a nursery was hit upon and some students and faculty who agreed with the sit-in brought their children for a number of days. When the sit-in ended the nursery also ended, but the idea of an on-campus nursery was born.

A member of the the Students' Council (which at that time consisted of a majority of Students for Democratic University members) took on the responsibility of looking into the setting up of a day nursery on campus. She put up posters calling a meeting early in May of mothers interested in discussing the idea. The Council thought that a group could be formed which would negotiate with the Administration for the eventual building of a licensed day care center on campus.

But at that first meeting, the mothers themselves decided to take over an area of the student lounge on the following Monday morning without permission of the Administration. The mothers realized how long it would take to get a nursery if we waited for meetings of committees and writings of briefs. Our collective need was urgent enough that we decided to act on our own. At that first meeting we worked out a tentative schedule for watching each other's children over the coming week and agreed to bring some toys to school on that Monday. And on the following Monday morning the Family began.

In this simple way the only liberated and non-corporate (unincorporated) area of the university was won for the students. For ten months the students and their children have controlled the nursery area.

The entire university has an authoritarian and corporate structure with the exemption of the Family, which is non-hierarchical, anti-authoritarian, and communal in theory and practice.

We did not know each other when we began, and no one of us came into the Family with a theory of anti-authoritarian or communal socialization of children. We began to act together in the way that seemed simplest and most human and then began to be committed to that way of acting and to articulate its meaning. The theory really did grow out of the action. Marx wrote that "the production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is directly interwoven with the material activity and the material relationships of men and women." The truth of this statement has been demonstrated in the evolution of the consciousness of the members of the Family.

First, we decided to keep track only of the grown-ups' time in the Family, because it seemed too complicated to try to equalize the children's time. Some students needed to leave a child in the Family room only for a few hours per week, others needed child-care nearly full time. Some students had two children, some only one. No one could predict his or her schedule rigidly.

Therefore, we decided that each parent should give one half day of co-operation in the Family. We divided the five-day week into ten half days. We decided that we needed two parents in the Family room at all times. Therefore, the co-op runs ideally with twenty parents. In return for his or her half day of co-operation, each parent may leave his or her children in the Family as much as is needed.

No one realized at first how radically different this system is from almost every other system by which people exchange labor and services in this society. One usually gets only what one "pays for." The Family really does take from each according to his or her ability and gives to each according to his or her needs.

We found that we had all sorts of bourgeois hang-ups about "fairness" and "taking advantages". It really seemed at first as if some shouldn't leave their kids longer or leave more kids than others. Almost harder than learning to give was learning to take; people felt guilty about having others spend time with their children for no pay. They tended to hang around or felt that they should be doing something "constructive" like actually studying all the time their kids were in the Family. The money we had given to former babysitters had freed us to do whatever we wished with the time, but it took us a while to realize that the time and care we gave each other also freed us. We began to learn to use the time to drink coffee, or to talk, and to accept from others the gift of cooperation.

In our previous transactional relationships with babysitters we had absolved ourselves of responsibility towards them and absolved them of real responsibility towards us by paying them money. At first, we still had the old way of thinking, and felt that we "owed" people in the Family for taking care of our children. But with time our sense of score-keeping diminished and was replaced by a sense of true sharing. We began to realize that people have different needs, but that everybody's needs could be met as long as we all did our part. Some people got sick, or had troubles that made them use more time than others or miss their co-operation time, but the principle of reciprocity began to be learned; and the concept of "paying

back" vanished. It was realized that some people would take from the system more than others, but that this would not cause the breakdown of the Family.

Reciprocity seems to involve two things: first, the ability to be open in the expression of one's needs; to be able to say, for example: "I am worried about my child's violence and need help in dealing with it," or: "I am feeling badly today and won't be able to cope very well with the children." Secondly, the ability to be responsible for each other, in the sense of really being able to respond to those needs; not to miss one's co-op time, to find a substitute for someone who is ill, to confront members of the Family who fail us. All of this is so simple and really involves only being human in fuller or non-institutional ways, and yet it has been for us to learn these ways of interacting. Inhumanity and institutional ways of relating have obviously been very strongly socialized into us. Our fragmentation from others is reinforced by all of the dehumanized institutions around us. Great effort is required to overcome isolation. One of the central tasks of the Family is internal education of the adults, to overcome our privatization and isolation. This task is made very difficult by the fact that we are all integrated into the society in an authoritarian way. Our parents meetings are efforts to do collective work toward the humanization of our relationships.

We began the Family without a real leader or executive or steering committee or supervisor. We soon realized that we not only did not need one, but that the election or appointment of one would destroy something about what we are trying to do.

The fact that we have no supervisor or coordinator, no person in fact, who has any role different from that of any other parent, has meant that there is no one authority figure for the children to become dependent on. We began to see the Family as an experiment in the formation of a new type of extended or communal Family wherein a number of parents take real responsibility for each others' children. If we together pooled money to buy a substitute mother or parent, we would be negating the concept of collective responsibility for each other and for each other's children. We realized that if we each paid a fee to hire someone we would no longer be a Family but only some individual women and men sharing the cost of babysitting.

The commitment to the formation of a real family grew out of the objective needs of the members. Many of us are single parents, struggling under very isolated conditions to raise children alone. Few of us have other family nearby. We really need close friendship and help with our children.

At first, we thought that the children might be "insecure" or "confused" by having twenty different parents during the week plus numerous other students who come in to play. The parents change in the middle of the day. The group of children changes as parents leave them and pick them up. All of our children had been raised in nuclear family homes with one or two parents or partly by paid substitutes, or in day nurseries with the

same teacher each day. This isolation had created dependencies in both parents and children. Children were afraid of people other than their biological parents. Parents worried about their children and even derived ego-satisfaction from having their children cry for them. People at first were able to relate only to those they were biologically related to.

The children adapted astonishingly quickly to "multiple mothering." They very soon began to develop a sense of their security being vested in themselves, and in the many others around them. In fact, one could say that the children developed autonomy more quickly than did many adults, who had trouble learning not to worry.

Each child in the Family now regularly sees at least fifty other people each week--twenty parents and about twenty-five other children and various student friends. His or her universe is greatly expanded--in fact, exploded, compared to a nuclear home. Yet all of the children who have been in the Family for at least one semester (we are now half way through our fourth semester) are secure in a way few pre-school children are.

They do not look to any one adult for direction or protection. They have very strong friendships among themselves and with students and they all have good friends that their biological parents may not even know. They do not view people other than their parents as enemies or threats, but rather they tend to view others as real parts of their world.

They have a sense of themselves as autonomous people, with separate selves and confidence in their ability to do things and to decide things. It is difficult now for an authoritarian person to "control" the Family's children with orders or with threats. The children also respond to each other's and the adults' needs in a more independent way than most because there is no authority figure to defer to. They take responsibility for comforting each other or enforcing sharing or equipment because they do not automatically look to the parent in the room to do so. Recently one little boy had an eye operation that made him uncomfortable. Everybody knew about it and all of the children cooperated to be comforting to Tal although no adult asked them to.

All of this makes clear the principle that it is not the ideology that is spoken but the structure of institution that matters. No amount of liberal "free" school theory will develop autonomous people with the ability to resist authoritarianism confidently as long as the nursery or school itself has an authoritarian structure. Autonomy cannot be achieved when dependence is transferred from biological parents to teacher. It is achieved when one's self is reflected in many others, reinforced by many others, when dependency is spread among a larger group and turns into autonomy.

Our experience in trying to keep the Family non-hierarchical has taught many of us more about the authoritarian nature of this society. Internally, it has been surprisingly easy to maintain the structure. We communicate via a bulletin board and telephone calls. The only person with any specialized job is the mother who collects \$1.00 a week juice and crackers.

dues and buys the supplies and this has not become an important position. There is no division of labor at all. Everyone does every sort of job, from repairing play equipment to drying tears. People do the work they are best suited for.

Our struggles with the outside world have taught us the difficulty of maintaining community structures in a hierarchical society. It is clear that any communal effort must struggle for its survival. We are going against the grain of every tendency in compartmentalized and regimented.

In order to operate legally we must become licensed as a day care center under the B.C. law. This requires that we hire a licensed supervisor. We don't want to do that. We must elect officers and write a constitution, and set rules. We don't want to do this, so we have negotiated with the government licensing agent for ten months and hope to become licensed by her as we are, as some kind of "experiment."

The university administrators are afraid to bother us because motherhood is popular and the Family has huge support among the students. Many students are part of the Family and it fills a real need in their lives, particularly for affection which can be given freely to the children and received freely from them. But the university is unhappy with our lack of legal status and want us to incorporate and become an ancillary service of the university, coming under their hegemony. They do want us to use their name (SFU) until we do so. We do not need to use their name, and do not wish to conform to their requests. We are also still negotiating this.

The B.C. Welfare offered us \$1.00 a day per child if we will hire a licensed supervisor. No one will give us money without officers responsible for it. (We did get \$500 for toys money from the Students Council as a club.) We would rather do without money than change our structure. If we suddenly had money to spend some people would have to decide how to spend it, would have to sign cheques, and we would divide. The Students' Council money was spent by a general meeting and some mothers took responsibility for ordering the equipment we wanted. But any permanent amount of income to the Family would distort our working together. We have many toys pooled from home and loaned by the education department of the university. Each child, in fact, has the use of many more things than would have had in the nuclear family, especially single parent homes where there is not much money. The children use the equipment without any sense that they are somehow not theirs. Recently a friend of the Family came in and asked the children, who were all having juice, "Who does this tricycle belong to?" Several children answered at once that it belonged to everybody. People have long since forgotten which things used to be theirs. This is very different from learning to share one's toys at a playground but taking one's toys home at the end of the day.

Besides our struggle against the outside world there is also our daily internal educational struggle. Few people come who do not yet understand. We have lousy meetings. People doubt their ability to be with the children or even doubt the daily reality of the Family and want to hire a supervisor. People don't plan anything for their cooperation time. People once more become afraid. Three people freak out and make some rules on their own about dismis-

sing people who miss their co-op time, forgetting that no one can be dismissed from the Family, but only confronted and related to, and taught again the principles of co-operation and reciprocity.

There is a daily struggle with all just teaching and learning. Those who know more teach those who know less, but no one is left behind or abandoned.

We are always conscious that we are trying to do the hardest thing there is: to learn that we can allow our children to be anti-authoritarian while we ourselves have been socialized to have little autonomy or confidence and while we now live in and are oppressed by an authoritarian society.

It would of course be so much easier to hire a supervisor and to relate to each other through money and rules. It would be what we have all learned so well all our lives: to be fragmented from each other, to shirk responsibility for others, to succumb to institutions, to retreat again into individualism.

Out of this and other such community structures could grow more and more people who have the autonomy necessary to be critical of this society and the commitment necessary to change it.