

ARLIE RUSSELL HOCHSCHILD

**THE COMMERCIALIZATION
OF INTIMATE LIFE** | *Notes from
Home and Work*

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2 THE COMMODITY FRONTIER

An advertisement appearing on the Internet on March 6, 2001, read as follows:

(p/1) Beautiful, smart, hostess, good masseuse—\$400/week.

Hi there.

This is a strange job opening, and I feel silly posting it, but this is San Francisco, and I do have the need! This will be a very confidential search process.

I'm a mild-mannered millionaire businessman, intelligent, traveled, but shy, who is new to the area, and extremely inundated with invitations to parties, gatherings and social events. I'm looking to find a "personal assistant," of sorts. The job description would include, but not be limited to:

1. Being hostess to parties at my home (\$40/hour)
2. Providing me with a soothing and sensual massage (\$140/hour)
3. Coming to certain social events with me (\$40/hour)
4. Traveling with me (\$300 per day + all travel expenses)
5. Managing some of my home affairs (utilities, bill-paying, etc.) (\$30/hour)

You must be between 22 and 32, in-shape, good-looking, articulate, sensual, attentive, bright and able to keep confidences. I don't expect more than 3 to 4 events a month, and up to 10 hours a week on massage, chores and other miscellaneous items, at the most. You must be unmarried, unattached, or have a very understanding partner!

I'm a bright, intelligent 30-year-old man, and I'm happy to discuss the reasons for my placing this ad with you on response of your email application. If you can, please include a picture of yourself, or a description of your likes, interests, and your ability to do the job.

NO professional escorts please! NO Sex involved!

Thank You.

You can email me at . . . !

In this ad, we are looking at a certain cultural edge beyond which the idea of paying for a service, to many people, becomes unnerving.² But what activities seem to us too personal to pay for or do for hire? What about a social context and culture persuade us to feel as we do about it?

To be sure, a transaction that seems perfectly acceptable to some people in one context often seems disturbing to others in another. Notions of agreeableness or credibility also change over time. Indeed, I wonder if

American culture is not in the midst of such a change now. A half century ago, we might have imagined a wealthy man buying a fancy home, car, and pleasant vacation for himself and his family. Now, we are asked to imagine the man buying the pleasant family, or at least the services associated with the fantasy of a family-like experience.

In this essay I explore some reactions to this ad, selecting from the treasure trove of Neil Smelser's extraordinary corpus of creative work, especially his work on the relationship between family and economy, and on the psychological function of myth. For together, these ideas help us develop another of his key insights—that "economic man" is a very cultural and emotionally complex being.

I used this ad as a cultural Rorschach test. What, I asked upper-division students at the University of California, Berkeley, is your response to this ad? As I show, their response was largely negative—ranging from anxious refusal ("he can't buy a wife") to condemnation ("he shouldn't buy a wife") to considerations of the emotional and moral flaws that might have led him to write the ad. They were not surprised at the ad, only disturbed by it.

So how did the ad disturb the students and why? After all, family history is replete with examples of family arrangements that share some characteristics with the commercial relationship proposed in this ad. In answer, I propose that students, like many others in American society today, face a contradiction between two social forces.

On one hand, they face a commodity frontier. While the market is creating ever more niches in the "mommy industry," the family is outsourcing more functions to be handled by it. Through this trend, the family is moving, top class first, from an artisanal family to a post-production family. And with this shift, personal tasks—especially those performed by women—are become monetized and to some degree impersonalized.³

On the other hand, the family—and especially the wife-mother within it—has, as a result, become a more powerful, condensed *symbol* for treasured qualities such as empathy, recognition, love—qualities that are quintessentially personal. The resulting strains between these two trends have led to a crisis of enchantment. Are we to hold onto the enchantment of the wife-mother in the familial sphere, or can purchases become enchanted too? Each "faith"—in family or marketplace—brings with it different implications for emotion management. Each is also undergirded by the mistaken assumption that family and market are separate cultural spheres.

RESPONSES TO THE AD: CULTURAL SENSITIVITIES TO THE COMMODITY FRONTIER

I distributed copies of the ad posted by the shy millionaire to seventy students in my class on the sociology of the family at the University of

California, Berkeley, in the spring of 2001 and asked them to comment. I also followed up the survey with conversations with some half-dozen students about why they answered as they did. While many came from Asian immigrant families and believed in the importance of strong family ties, quite a few were also heading for workaholic careers in Silicon Valley where outsourcing activities that meet domestic needs is fast becoming a fashionable, if controversial, way of life. So, while hardly typical of the views of educated American youth in general, the views of these students hint at a contradiction between economic trends that press for the outsourcing of family functions and a cultural fetishization of insourced functions.

Most students expressed a combination of sympathy ("he's afraid to go out and get a girlfriend" or "he's pathologically shy") and criticism or contempt ("he's selfish," "he's a loser," "he's a creep," "he's too socially conscious"). Others expressed fear ("this ad is scary"), anger ("what a jerk"), suspicion ("he's a shady character"), and disbelief ("this is unreal").

Perhaps the most eloquent response came from a young woman, a child of divorce who still believes in love. As she put it:

It is a very sad commentary on the state of relationships today. Even family life is being directly sought in commodity trade. Forget the messy emotions. Just give me the underlying services and benefits money can buy. And what's the point of trying, when all it brings are pain, strife and divorce? Then the act of sexual interaction is relativized and commodified, but *not* as prostitution. Clearly the intrinsic value [of the sensual massage] to the buyer is much higher [\$140 an hour] so we're not talking a shoulder rub. But even the beautiful intertwining of loving, caring, spiritually connected partners in love-making is reduced to mechanized, emotionless labor for hire. Is it any wonder there's so much smoldering rage in such a graceless age?

Another commented: "This takes the depersonalization of relationships to new heights." At the same time, most of the respondents said the ad was thinkable. It was plausible. It wasn't surprising. As one student put it, referring to the San Francisco Bay Area and Silicon Valley, it could happen, "at least around here." Referring to another website he had seen, one young man said, "Given the website www.zkforawife.com [a website advertising for a wife, no longer up as of July 2001], I'm not that surprised." A minority condoned the ad: "If he has the money to burn, by all means . . ." Or they anticipated that, given the high salary, others would respond to, if not quite condone, it. Indeed, a number of the students spoke of living in a culture in which market-home crossovers were unsurprising. As one put it: "My reaction is one of 'sure, this is normal.' My own reaction surprises me because I know years ago . . . I would have been shocked and angry. But now I am desensitized, and accept that relationships don't always happen in the nice, neat boxes I once thought they came in."

Only four out of seventy thought the ad was a hoax.⁴

HOW WAS THE AD DISTURBING?

For most of these young educated Californians, the ad seemed to strike a raw nerve. How did it do this? First of all, it disturbed many students that a familial role was shown to be divisible into slivers, a whole separated into parts, as the student quoted above referred to the "beautiful intertwining of loving, caring, spiritually connected partners in love-making." Second, it bothered the students that this taken-apart wife-mother role was associated with varying amounts of money. Traveling together was to be worth \$300 a day; managing home affairs, \$30 an hour. Both the divisibility and the commercialization were offensive. But perhaps they were doubly so because the separate tasks were then implicitly associated with more diffuse personal characteristics apparently unrelated to the tasks. As one person noted: "It seems like he's looking for a personal assistant [to do these tasks]. . . . Yet he is specific about the *kind of woman* he wants—he mentions the word 'sensual' more than once. She needs to be attractive, young, in shape, sensual, bright (all marriageable qualities). If he just wanted these tasks done, why couldn't an old, fat man do them?" Another observed that the millionaire wanted someone ready to hear confidences, someone available to travel, and thus orient her time around his, which, even more than looks and age, implies a diffuse "intertwined" relationship.

The students were also disturbed, perhaps, by what often comes with monetization—a cultural principle of giving that characterizes market deals—short-term tit-for-tat exchanges. Commercial exchanges often also provide a shortcut around other principles of giving—decadal or generational tit-for-tat exchange, or altruism. One person remarked, "The man wants a wife, but he doesn't want to be a husband." He wants to receive, but not to give—except in cash. In other words, by offering money as the totality of his side of the bargain, the man absolves himself of any moral responsibility to try to give emotionally in the future. As one put it, "For him, money took care of his side of the deal." The students did not congratulate the man on his monetary generosity, though they understood the sums he offered to be high. Indeed, one woman commented, "He is taking the easy way out. He doesn't want to have to deal with what a partner may need from him emotionally and physically. So he is just looking for the benefits without the work." Another said, "He's advertising for a sexless, no-needs wife. While I do not object to this on principle I do think it sad that he would have *no need to give* in a relationship. It seems lonely and false" (emphasis mine). A few others also pointed out that the man stood to lose, not gain, through his financial offer. As one person put it, "The man's losing the chance to give. He's cheating himself."

Students were also disturbed by a closely related issue: the absence of emotional engagement. Here they focused directly on his emotional capac-

ity and need. One complained that the man was emotionally empty, detached, invulnerable: "He has a strong desire to be in total control." Another young woman remarked, "He must feel very unloved and unable to give love." They thought he *should feel* something for the woman who does what he has in mind. The man who posted the ad said he had a "need," another observed. But what is his "need" for these services? "I find it amusing," he said, "that [the man] calls this a need." In later conversation the student explained, "The man mentions luxury items he doesn't really need, but what he does need, emotionally, he's not asking for or setting it up to get." Another commented, "It is so fascinating to me the things men will do to avoid emotional attachment."

Not only was emotion missing, so was the commitment to think about or work on one's feelings in order to improve the relationship. As one put it, "He wants to hire someone to fulfill his needs but without the hassle." Another complained, "I was disgusted [that the man is buying] the grunt labor of a relationship." In a sense, the students were observing the absence of an implied inclination to pay any allegiance to familial feeling rules or to try to manage emotions in a way mindful of them. He was buying himself out of all this.

Finally, for some it was not the splintering of the wife-mother role or the commodification of each part that posed a problem so much as the fact that—partly because of these—the potentially enchanted experience of being together was *disenchanted*. For a couple to feel their relationship is enchanted, they must feel moved to imbue the world around them with a sense of magic that has, paradoxically, power over them, the magic now coming from outside. In an enchanted relationship, not only the relationship but the whole world feels magical. And it does so through no apparent will of one's own. The individual externalizes his or her locus of control. This sense of enchantment is similar to Freud's notion of "oceanic oneness," which some associate with religion, and all, Durkheim argues, associate with the sacred.

This dimension of experience is here curtailed off—not as it impacts the worst part of a close relationship but as it impacts the best. As one student observed, "It almost seems like the man wants to pay a woman to do the fun things couples do together." He was disenchanting fun.

Or, rather, he was gaining apparent control over any obligation to have fun. He exempted himself from family feeling rules. He doesn't want to even *have* to have fun. He wants to feel free to have a relationship—impersonal or personal—as he wishes and on the terms he wishes. Money *liberates* him, as Georg Simmel observes. But as the respondents noted repeatedly, he is also using money to narrow the relational possibilities. In the end, they felt that the options he was free to choose among were themselves stripped

of meaning (a) by the separation between exclusive sex expression, intimacy, and affection; (b) by the attachment of money to each part of what is imagined to be whole; (c) by a noncommittal stance toward the emotion work and feeling rules that often apply in intimate engagement; and (d) by the implicit disenchantment with the whole complex they associate with adult sexual-emotional love. In a sense he seemed to them as he would to Simmel, as if he were trapped by a supposed liberation. The man was creating for himself a context in which he would be called upon to employ a mechanism of ego defense—depersonalization.⁵

WHY WAS THE AD DISTURBING?

All of this says *how* the ad was disturbing but not *why*. Why, we can ask, did the students sound this alarm? The answer is not, after all, self-evident. History is replete with examples of family patterns that illustrate each of the various ways in which this ad offended them. For example, in traditional China and many parts of Africa and the Muslim world, polygamy challenges the idea of the unity of love with sexual exclusivity. In Europe, the tradition of maintaining a bourgeois marriage and a mistress—sometimes paid with allowances or gifts, though not through salary—also disrupts the expectation that marriage, intimacy, affection, sexual exclusivity, and often procreation will form parts of one whole. A more covert pattern combines a conventional marriage and children with an intense homosexual relationship, again separating parts of this whole.

In the realm of parenting, too, history provides many examples of differentiation. In upper-class households, no one holds their breath at the slicing and dicing of "a mother's role" into discrete paid positions—nanny, cook, chauffeur, therapist, tutor, camp counselor, to mention a few. In the antebellum South, slave women breastfed children, and sometimes served the head of household as concubines. In all these times and places, people felt no commitment to the feeling rules and forms of emotion work which uphold the ideal of the romantic love ethic and the enchantment created by it. So the question becomes why, given all this, did this ad hit a certain contemporary cultural nerve?

The answer, I suggest, is that the ad strikes at a flash point between an advancing commodity frontier, on one hand, and the hypersymbolized but structurally weakened core of the modern American family, on the other.

THE COMMODITY FRONTIER

The commodity frontier, Janus-faced, looks out on one side to the marketplace and on the other side to the family. On the market side it is a frontier

for companies as they expand the number of market niches for goods and services covering activities that, in yesteryear, formed part of unpaid "family life." On the other side it is a frontier for families that feel the need or desire to consume such goods and services.

On the company side a growing supply of services is meeting a growing demand for "family" jobs. In a recent article in *Business Week*, Rochelle Sharpe notes, "Entrepreneurs are eager to respond to the time crunch, creating businesses unimaginable just a few years ago." These include "breast-feeding consultants, baby-proofing agencies, emergency babysitting services, companies specializing in paying nanny taxes and others that install hidden cameras to spy on babysitters' behavior. People can hire bill payers, birthday party planners, kiddo taxi services, personal assistants, personal chefs, and, of course, household managers to oversee all the personnel."⁶ One ad posted on the Internet includes in the list of available services "pet care, DMV registration, holiday decorating, personal gift selection, party planning, night life recommendations, personal/professional correspondence, and credit card charge disputes." The services of others are implied in the names of the agencies that offer them—Mary Poppins, Wives for Hire (in Hollywood), and Husbands for Rent (in Maine).⁷ One agency, Jill of All Trades, organizes closets and packs up houses. Clients trust the assistant to sort through their belongings and throw the junk out. As one assistant commented, "People don't have time to look at their stuff. I know what's important."⁸ Another Internet job description read as follows:

Administrative assistant with corporate experience and a Martha Stewart edge to manage a family household. . . . A domestic interest is required and the ability to travel is necessary. Must enjoy kids! This is a unique position requiring both a warm-hearted and business-oriented individual.⁹

Not only do the qualities called for in the assistant cross the line between market and home; the result can cross a more human line as well. As the *Business Week* reporter Rochelle Sharpe describes: "Lynn Corsiglia, a human resources executive in California, remembers the disappointment in her daughter's eyes when the girl discovered that someone had been hired to help organize her birthday party. 'I realized that I blew the boundary,' she says." Lynn Corsiglia felt she had moved, one might say, to the cultural edge of the commodity frontier as her daughter defined that edge.¹⁰

This expansion of market services applies mainly to executives and professionals—both single men and single women, and "professional households without wives" as Saskia Sassen has called them.¹¹ Often faced with long hours at work, many employees see the solution not in sharing or neglecting wifely chores, but in hiring people to do them. With the increasing gap between the top 20 percent and bottom 20 percent of the income scale, more rich people can afford such services, and poorer and middle-class peo-

ple are eager to fill jobs providing them. As their income rises, wealthy people—especially those in high-pressure careers—take advantage of the goods and services on this frontier, and many poor people aspire to do so.

The commodity frontier has impinged on Western domestic life for many centuries. It is doubtful that Queen Victoria clipped her own toenails or breast-fed her children. Indeed, in early modern Europe, it was common for urban upper-class parents to give their babies over to rural wet nurses to raise during the first years of life.¹² So the commodity frontier has a history as well as a future trajectory, and both are lodged in a local sense of what belongs where for life to seem right.

Still, within American and European culture in recent decades, the character of the commodity frontier has changed. We can speak crudely of newer and older expressions of it. Relative to ours today, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century commodification of domestic life involved a greater cultural blur between service and server. An eighteenth-century white southern aristocrat who bought a slave bought the person, not the service—the very ultimate in commodification.¹³ And the indentured servant differed from the slave only in degree. The millionaire's ad for a "beautiful, smart hostess, good masseuse," by contrast, strikes us as modern in that it is purely the services, classified and priced, that are up for purchase. The ad seems to tease apart many aspects of what was once one role. Structural differentiation between family and economy, a process Smelser traces in English history, becomes here a cultural idea in a commercial context, which lends itself to an almost jazzlike improvisation. As in jazz, the ad plays with the idea of dividing and recombining, suggesting different versions of various combinations.¹⁴

Especially in their more recent incarnation, the commercial substitutes for family activities often turn out to be better than the real thing. Just as the French bakery often makes better bread than mother ever did, and the cleaning service cleans the house more thoroughly, so therapists may recognize feelings more accurately, and childcare workers prove more even-tempered than parents. In a sense, capitalism isn't competing with itself, one company against another, but with the family, and particularly with the role of the wife and mother.

A cycle is set in motion. As the family becomes more minimal, it turns to the market to add what it needs and, by doing so, becomes yet more minimal. This logic also applies to the two functions Talcott Parsons thought would be left to the family when all the structural differentiation was said and done: socialization of children and adult personality stabilization.

To be sure, there is a countertrend as well. The cult of Martha Stewart appeals to the desire to resist the loss of family functions to the marketplace—like the "do-it-yourself" movement, which of course creates a market niche of its own for the implements and knowledge needed to do it yourself.

Still, the prevailing direction is toward relinquishing family functions to the market realm. And various trends exacerbate this tendency. Most important is the movement of women into paid work. In 1950 less than a fifth of mothers with children under six worked in the labor force while a half century later, two-thirds of such mothers do. Their salary is also now vital to the family budget. Older female relatives who might in an earlier period have stayed home to care for their grandchildren, nephews, and nieces are now likely to be at work too.

In addition, work has recently been taking up more hours of the year. According to an International Labor Organization report, Americans now work two weeks longer each year than their counterparts in Japan, the vaunted long-work-hour capital of the world. And many of these long-hour workers are also trying to maintain a family life. Between 1989 and 1996, for example, middle-class married couples increased their annual work hours outside the home from 3,550 to 3,685, or more than three extra forty-hour weeks of work a year.¹⁵

Over the last half century, the American divorce rate has also increased to 50 percent, and a fifth of households with children are now headed by single mothers, most of whom get little financial help from their ex-husbands and most of whom work full-time outside the home.¹⁶ Like the rising proportion of women who work outside the home, divorce also, in effect, reduces the number of helping hands at home—creating a need or desire for supplemental forms of care.

The state has done nothing to ease the burden at home. Indeed, the 1996 federal welfare reforms reduced aid to parents with dependent children, with the responsibility devolving on the states, which have in turn reduced aid, even for food stamps. Many states have also implemented cutbacks in public recreation and parks and library programs designed to help families care for children.

In addition to the depletion of both private and public resources for care, there is an increasing uncertainty associated with cultural ideas about the proper source of it. The traditional wife-mother role has given way to a variety of different arrangements—wives who are not mothers, mothers who are not wives, second wives and stepmothers, and lesbian mothers. And while these changes in the source of care are certainly not to be confused with a depletion of care, the changing culture itself gives rise to uncertainties about it. Will my father still be living with me and taking care of me fifteen years from now, or will he be taking care of a new family he has with a new wife? Will the lesbian partner of my mother be part of my life when I am older if my mother's parents don't accept her, or will it be my grandma I don't see? In addition to a real depletion in resources available for familial care, then, the shifting cultural landscape of care may account for some sense of anxiety about it.

Thus, as the market advances, as the family moves from a production to

a consumption unit, as it faces a care deficit, as the cultural landscape of care shifts, individuals increasingly keep an anxious eye on what seems like the primary remaining symbol of abiding care—mother.

THE HEIGHTENED SYMBOLISM OF MOTHER

The more the commodity frontier erodes the territory surrounding the emotional role of the wife and mother, the more hypersymbolized the remaining sources of care seem to become. And the more the wife-mother functions as a symbolic cultural anchor to stay the ship against a powerful tide. The symbolic weight of "the family" is condensed and consolidated into the wife-mother, and increasingly now into the mother. In *A World of Their Own Making*, the historian John Gillis argues that the cultural meanings associated with security, support, and empathy—meanings that once adhered to an entire community—were in the course of industrialization gradually focused on the family.¹⁷ Now we can add, within the family, these symbolic meanings have been increasingly directed toward the figure of the wife-mother.

The hypersymbolization of the mother is itself partly a response to the destabilization of the cultural as well as economic ground on which the family rests. As a highly dynamic system, capitalism destabilizes both the economy and the family.¹⁸ The more shaky things outside the family seem, the more we seem to need to believe in an unshakable family and, failing that, an unshakable figure of mother-wife.

In addition, in the West, capitalism is usually paired with an ideology of secular individualism. As an understanding of life, secular individualism leads people to take personal credit for their economic highs and personal blame for the lows. It leads us to "personalize" social events. It provides an intra-punitive ideology to go with an extra-punitive economic system. The effect of the impact of destabilizing capitalism on one hand and inward-looking individualist ideology on the other is to *create a need* for a refuge, a haven in a heartless world, as Christopher Lasch has argued, where we imagine ourselves to be safe, comforted, healed. The harsher the environment outside the home, the more we yearn for a haven inside the home. Many Americans turn for comfort and safety to the church. But the great geographic mobility of Americans often erodes ties to any particular church as it does bonds to local neighborhoods and communities.¹⁹ In addition, divorce not only creates a greater need for supportive community, it tends to reduce the size of that personal community, as Barry Wellman's research on networks suggests.²⁰

Like other symbols, the symbol of mother is "efficient." It is not the family farm, local community, or even whole extended family that does the symbolic work. All the meanings associated with these are *condensed* into the

symbol of one person, the mother, and secondarily the immediate family. As Smelser observes, Americans entertain a "romance" of family vacations, family homes, and family "rural bliss" and, along with the hypersymbolization of the mother, these have probably grown in tandem with the destabilizing forces to which they are a response.

In sum, the students may have seen in the millionaire's ad, and in the commodity frontier itself, an attack on a symbol that had become a symbolic "holding ground," while all else seemed increasingly up for grabs. The attack on this symbol invites a crisis of enchantment. For, to believe in the wife-mother figure, one must submit to a sense of enchantment, magic, even a sense of being in love as a source of meaning in and of itself. At the same time, through the enormous growth in advertisement, the commodity frontier chips away at just this enchantment too. Is it the mother who is enchanted, the student may be led to wonder, or is it the services that pick up where she leaves off? And through advertising, is the commodity frontier gradually borrowing or stealing the enchantment of what seems like an ever more necessary remaining anchor against a market tide?

COMMODITIES AND THE MYTH OF THE AMERICAN FRONTIER

As Smelser has observed in his analysis of the myth of California, every myth has an element of both reality and unreality. In our mental life a myth is located somewhere between daydream and ideology.²¹ We have a myth of the American frontier, and of course, there really was a western frontier. The very possibility that a young man on a New England farm could set out for a more fertile and extensive plot of land out west led his parents to be more lenient, the historian Philip Greven shows, in hopes of motivating him to stay.²² Attached to this real geographic frontier is a larger set of meanings, perhaps, including the idea that one can always leave something worse for something better. One doesn't have to stay and live with frustration and ambivalence: one can freely seek one's fortune on the emotional frontier. American heroes from Daniel Boone and Paul Bunyan to the restless prairie cowboy analyzed by Erik Erikson start somewhere and end somewhere else. At the end of *Huckleberry Finn*, Huck says, "I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me and I can't stand it."²³

Myths grow and change, and as part of change, myths can extend themselves to other areas of life. And perhaps we have seen a symbolic transfer of the fantasy of liberation from a geographic frontier to a commodity frontier. For the geographic frontier the point of focus is a person's location on land. For the commodity frontier the point of focus is a location in a world of goods and services. Instead of "going somewhere," the individ-

ual "buys something." And buying something becomes a way of going somewhere.

In the past, the fantasy of a perfect purchase might more often have centered on some feature of external reality. One might have dreamed of buying a perfect house, on a perfect lot of land, signifying one's rise in social station. But today, as more elements of intimate and domestic life become objects of sale, the commodity frontier has taken on a more subjective cast. So the modern purchase is more likely to be sold to us by implying access to a "perfect" private self in a "perfect" private relationship. For example, a recent ad in the *New Yorker* for "Titan Club, an Exclusive Dating Service" asks:

Who says you can't have it all? Titan Club is the first exclusive dating club for men of your stature. You already have power, prestige, status and success. But, if "at the end of the day" you realize "someone" is missing, let Titan Club help you find her. Titan Club women are intelligent, diverse, and beautiful. With a 95% success rate, we are confident that you will find exactly what you are looking for in a relationship.²⁴

The fantasy of the perfect relationship is linked to the fantasy of the perfect personality with whom one has this relationship. Consider an ad for KinderCare Learning Centers, a for-profit childcare chain: "You want your child to be active, tolerant, smart, loved, emotionally stable, self-aware, artistic, and get a two-hour nap. Anything else?"²⁵ The service will produce, it implies, the perfect child with whom a busy parent has a perfect relationship.

This sort of ad promises a great deal about ambivalence. It promises to get rid of it. If Titan promises "exactly what you are looking for in a relationship" and if KinderCare promises exactly the personality you want in your child, they also deliver a state of unambivalence. And this is the hidden appeal in the marketing associated with much modern commodification. Thus, the prevailing myth of the frontier, commodification, and the subjective realm have fused into one—a commodity frontier that is moving into the world of our private desires. And to do so it borrow or steals—only time will tell—from the sense of enchantment earlier reserved for the home.

A word more about ambivalence. One way we "go west" is to buy goods and services that promise a family-like experience. But in doing so, we also pursue the fantasy of a life free from ambivalence. But the very act of fleeing ambivalence also expresses ambivalence. For commercial substitutes for family life do not eliminate ambivalence. They express and legitimize it. To return to our example of the shy millionaire, we might say that he is trying to act on two impulses. On one hand, he seeks the perfect woman to be by his side for many different purposes. This is one side of the ambivalence. On the other hand, he seeks to avoid entanglement with her. That's the other side of the ambivalence. Indeed, the man may be curtailing his idea

of what he "needs" in order to fit into the narrow window of what he can purchase.

THE RICOCHET OF THE COMMODITY IMAGES

The Frankfurt school of sociology and more recent scholars such as Juliet Schor and Robert Kuttner have criticized consumerism without focusing on the family. Family scholars such as William Goode or Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg have focused on the family without attending much to consumerism. Indeed, with the exception of Viviana Zelizer, Christopher Lasch, and Jan Dizard and Howard Gadlin, few scholars have focused on the relationship between these two realms. Perhaps this is because the two realms, now spatially divided and functionally separated, are assumed to be culturally free of each other as well. And perhaps this is why we tend to dissociate our ideas about the family from our ideas about the commodity frontier.

But these two realms are not at all separate. Culturally speaking, they ricochet off each other continually. As a cultural idea, commodification bounces from marketplace to home and back again. We buy something at the store. We bring it home. We compare what we have at home with what we bought. That comparison leads us to reappraise what we have at home. We make something at home. We go to the store. We compare what we think of buying with what we make at home. The reappraisal works the other way. In this way, events on the "frontier" are continually having their effect back home and vice versa.

We like to think of home as a haven in a heartless world, a benign sphere safely separate from the dangerous and hostile world outside or—a related idea—we see the family as a place of emotional expressivity separate from the emotionless, depersonalized world of the marketplace. As Zelizer has so beautifully shown, we have clearly different images of each. At home we act out of love. We are not cold and impersonal like people in the marketplace. And contrariwise, in the market, we say, we judge people on professional grounds. We don't let personal loyalties interfere. Each image is used as a foil, as the negative, as the "not" of the other—as in the ego defense of splitting.

Yet in my research on a Fortune 500 company, reported in *The Time Bind*, I discovered a number of managers who said that they brought home management tips that helped them smoothly run their homes. And sometimes people described themselves using work imagery. One man, humorously, spoke of having a "total quality" marriage, and another, seriously, spoke of a good family as like a "high productivity team." One man even explained that he improved his marriage by realizing that his wife was his primary "customer."²⁶ The roles and relationships of the office became benchmarks for

those at home. For example, one married mother of three described the following:

I had my husband's parents and aunt and uncle for a week at our summer cabin. It's rather small, and it rained most of the week except for Saturday and Sunday. And my mother-in-law offered to help me make the meals and helped me clear the dishes. But you know the real work is in figuring out what to eat and shopping. And the nearest store was at some distance. And I began to resent their visit so much I could hardly stand it. You know *I don't run a bed and breakfast!*

This woman chose a market role—manager of a bed and breakfast—as a measuring rod to appraise the demands made on her as a kinswoman. She measured what she did as an *unpaid relative* against another picture of life as a *paid employee*. On the family side of the commodity frontier, she felt she was doing too much and had a right to resent it. On the market side, she imagined, she would have been fairly compensated. In this way, she was tacitly measuring the opportunity costs of not working. She carried the market world with her in her imagination, even as she was cooking in the cabin.²⁷

Other overburdened wives whom I've interviewed have said to their husbands, "I'm not your maid." One very well-to-do grandmother said about spending "too much" time with her own grandchildren, "I'm not their babysitter, you know."²⁸

In twenty-five years, it may come to pass that remarks made at home will refer to new hybrid roles—"I'm not your paid hostess/masseuse"—as if that role were as normal and ordinary as any other. Or even "I'm not your half-wife," as if it had attained the moral weight of "wife" on one hand or "secretary" on the other. The market changes our benchmarks.

Through this borrowing from one side to the other of the commodity frontier, society itself expresses ambivalence about the family. Indeed, commodification provides a way in which people individually manage to want and not want certain elements of family life. The existence of such market substitutes becomes a form of societal legitimation for this ambivalence.

To return to the shy millionaire, we can't know what crossed through the heads of those who replied to his ad. But we do know that five of the seventy students from my class at Berkeley confessed that they wanted to be among them. As one confided, "Since this [questionnaire] is anonymous, I feel like I'd like to respond to this ad. It's a good deal, I think [crossed out, and over it written "maybe"]." Another said, "I am almost tempted to apply to this ad, except I don't meet the qualifications." Yet another replied, "If it's real, I'd do it." A number of people disparaged the ad but predicted that some others in the class would happily answer it. "The worst part," said one, "is that someone who needed the money prop-

ably took him up on his offer." In his essay on ambivalence, Smelser points out that sometimes we're ambivalent about our inner fantasies and impulses, and sometimes we're ambivalent about the real world outside ourselves. The commodity frontier is real, and maybe it's a good sign if we feel ambivalent about it.

3 GENDER CODES AND THE PLAY OF IRONY

In his book *Gender Advertisements*, Erving Goffman shows us the "look" of women in modern American advertising. Through his five hundred or so photos of women and men in advertisements, he shows us women pictured like children on or near the floor, or in whining or begging postures. He shows us women in clowning or pouting poses and men not in such poses. He shows us how, like children, female models hold a man's hand from behind. Goffman points out how women models show more emotion than male models ("flood out," as he puts it), expressing emotion since they are not expected to be in charge of anything. He shows how women are depicted listening intently to men talk, or how women look at men who point authoritatively to some distant object. He shows a female model, winsome and wide-eyed, revealing a bashful knee-bend, choreographed with a strong, protective male. In the details of such looks and scenes, Goffman shows us latent rules for how to "look feminine." And these rules suggest to him an analogy: man is to woman as parent is to child. Men and women are implicitly unequal in the apparently natural way that parents and children are unequal. Goffman suggests that this simple, apparently nonideological "look" is a sly way of reaffirming patriarchy. So *Gender Advertisements* concerns what a gender display displays, and how a display reaffirms what it reaffirms. In his articulation of these points, Goffman is our most observant observer.

In what he shows us, we can note several points. First, as Goffman talks about them, the models portrayed in *Gender Advertisements* do not seem to consider and decide how to pose; they know intuitively. The woman in the little-girl-bashful-knee-bend pose in *Gender Advertisements* thus differs from Goffman's description of Preedy at the beach, a self-conscious fictional character in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. The female model seems to know what to do; she does not seem to consciously choose. On the other hand, Preedy, a vacationing Englishman on a summer beach in Spain, is a conscious and strategic actor. As Goffman describes:

By devious handlings he gave any who wanted to look a chance to see the title of his book—a Spanish translation of Homer, classic, thus but not daring, cos-