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Work and the Moral Woman

A good woman is hard to find. Either she's threatening a lawsuit because she was denied a promotion. Or she's expecting the taxpayers to subsidize her illegitimate children. Or she's neglecting, even foregoing, children in favor of a career. Or perhaps she wants it all—work, children, love, leisure, and a flexible schedule—making her entirely unreliable.

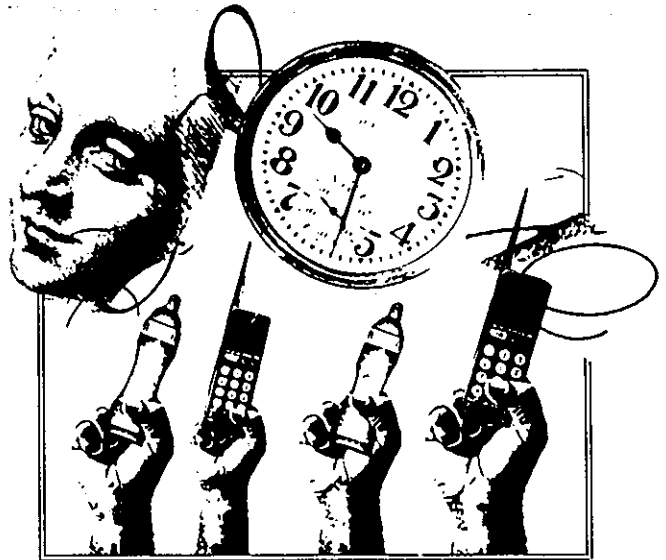
If women seem confused about what they want, society is even more confused about what it wants from women. Social philosophers have long pondered the meaning of work and its place in our moral lives: whether it is ennobling or degrading, whether virtue requires hard work or hard work inculcates virtue, or whether, in an ideal world, there should be more or less work. But when the worker is imagined as a woman, philosophy goes into a new key and both the questions and the answers are of a different tenor. About women, the questions concern whether they ought to work outside the home, whether they are capable of many kinds of work, and whether tending home, family, and community count as work at all.

Such philosophical questions have always been at the heart of

both labor politics and gender politics. Protective labor legislation in the U.S. finally got off the ground with assistance from women's reform groups and widely accepted ideas about women.

In 1908, after years of striking down protective labor laws, the Supreme Court finally upheld a state maximum-hours law because the law applied only to women; and women, everyone knew, needed special protections to fulfill the "benign and noble office" of motherhood to which history had "destined" them. Driven by passionate philosophical views, politics in turn piled shifting layers of contradictory norms and imperatives on women, and created a legacy of inconsistent cultural ideas, practices, and policies.

Let's start with an old chestnut: Is work stultifying, or is it fulfilling and uplifting? [See Alan Wolfe, "The Moral Meanings of Work," *TAP*, September-October 1997.] Ask that question assuming the worker is a man and the implied comparison is other kinds of jobs



or other ways of organizing work. When the worker is a woman, the implied comparison is with unpaid housework and child care, so the measure of work's effect on the female worker has a different yardstick: Compared to dusting and diapering? Compared to rearing the next generation of citizens, soldiers, leaders, parents? And the question has a different moral valence in a world where many people, both men and women, have thought that women should not do certain kinds of jobs or engage in paid work at all except in dire necessity.

Since marriage and motherhood have been treated as moral obligations of women, if not sacred callings, the question of whether virtue consists in performing disciplined, paid work is shaped by the alternative moral

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woman is a giving soul. If she gives at the office, she'll have less to give at home. In the eyes of child-rearing experts, a woman who works while her children are young, who cannot turn off her career interests and aspirations, or presumably, her desire for the luxuries her earnings afford, is morally stunted.

WOMAN'S PROPER WORK

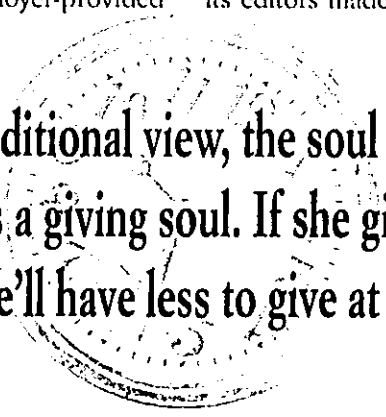
One of the ironies of women's history is that the leading white women social reformers of the Progressive Era sought to keep women in the home (despite their own enjoyment of careers as social workers, nurses, teachers, and political activists). They advocated higher wages for men so families could survive on one income, and they submitted every proposed social reform to the litmus test of whether it would encourage women to work or stay home. They opposed child nurseries and employer-provided

be full-time mothers. Black reformers, by contrast, understood the necessity for women to work, and focused their energies on creating the preconditions for women to be wage earners and community leaders.

Women's magazines and a new profession of home economists in the early twentieth century provided another source of cultural authority on the questions of women and work. *Ladies' Home Journal* and its advertisers promoted consumerism as an identity and way of life for women, but, as Jennifer Scanlon argues in *Inarticulate Longings*, the enterprise was full of contradictions. The editorial line had to be that women were better off—and better women—if they stayed home and consumed all the products that would improve their womanly skills. Yet much of the magazine was written by women, and the magazine frequently recruited female staff, so its editors made an exception for

younger, single, working women, fought a rearguard action to portray the nobility of the homemaker. Writing under the moniker of "A Plain Country Woman," between 1905 and 1918, Juliet Strauss steadily exhorted women to avoid paid employment. "God loves you if He lets you know that the plain is the great. The dish washed, the skillet or the dinner-pot scoured, the hearth swept, the bed made up, these are the great accomplishments." (No one is telling mothers on welfare anything of the sort today.) The magazine's editorial staff and many of its older readers castigated younger women for shunning the "humdrum." Indeed, the *Journal's* motivating story of societal decline (all social and political magazines have one) was a tale about younger women who hadn't the moral backbone to do society's vital drudge work.

The old-fashioned virtues of *Kinder, Küche, Kirche* might not have held much appeal for the *Journal's* more urban and educated readers. For them, the magazine offered the more modern challenge of household engineering: Apply the principles of industrial efficiency to housekeeping, turn it into a science, and thereby professionalize the job of the homemaker. Christine Frederick, a contributing editor much influenced by Frederick Winslow Taylor and his scientific management ideas, promoted a philosophy of housekeeping as both a science and "the greatest business in the world." She advised women to take up home canning "not because you love your family but because it's good business to do so." As a complex science, she believed housekeep-



In the traditional view, the soul of a woman is a giving soul. If she gives at the office, she'll have less to give at home.

maternity insurance for working women—policies dearly sought by current advocates of family-friendly employment—because they didn't want to encourage women to work. They established state Mothers' Pensions and later federal Aid to Dependent Children to allow widowed, abandoned, and divorced mothers to

the kind of clerical, sales, and office work it offered.

The larger contradiction, Scanlon notes, was that by promising women "better living through purchasing," the magazine made paid work more necessary and more desirable. Scanlon has unearthed how the magazine, against mounting pressures from

on child care arrangements, not to mention parent-child relationships. The magazines are full of stories of women committed to combining work and motherhood who get shipwrecked on the shoals of work.

The more interesting—and sobering—explanations of why women work or don't are cultural

empty or both, so they reclaim their values by cutting back, quitting altogether, or making a career change.

While McKenna calls for the usual panoply of family-friendly policies and reformed fathers, her book is mainly an inspirational how-to guide for people who want to step off the tread-

in turn perpetuate the notion of the "maternal sculptress."

From the psychologists and pediatricians, the torch of "mother-blame" is picked up by social scientists, politicians, pundits, and lawyers, who blame working mothers for just about everything that can go wrong with children and society. Riots, delinquency, crime, drug addiction, homelessness, even terrorism have been pinned on single mothers, divorced mothers, welfare mothers, teen mothers. Note that women in any of these categories almost always have to work to support themselves and their kids, so they are guilty from the get-go. They can't possibly be the dedicated, full-time, by-the-book, meet-your-child's-every-need mothers the culture reveres. Even as politicians are telling them that they are irresponsible and not entitled to public aid just for taking care of their kids, the scientific establishment tells them they are bad mothers if they go to work. The courts are even more threatening, what with judges occasionally removing kids from a mother on grounds that her work prevents her from taking adequate care of them.

The tensions between being a good mother and a good worker affect different social classes differently. A minority of affluent women can participate more intensively in their children's lives or balance work and family with the aid of domestic help. But the vast majority of working women can't purchase their way to balancing work, family, and personal fulfillment. Perhaps this explains why business and political elites have so little sympathy for the cross pressures on work-

A low-income mother often has to violate one moral code to comply with another.

rather than structural. Elizabeth McKenna, who inhabits a world of professional women in relatively high-powered jobs, sees a trend for some of these women to quit because they find their work unsatisfying. In her book, *When Work Doesn't Work Anymore*, she says that a clash of male and female value systems is what sends these women packing. Women brought up under the influence of postwar feminism still carry the traditional expectations of their mothers and grandmothers; they want to have a personal life, a family, and a community role. They find themselves in a male work system, where work comes before personal life and personal success is equated with work success, and before long they're judging themselves by their boss's standards—attendance, long hours, productivity, and ability to suppress their feelings. By the time they hit their professional stride in their thirties or forties, they're fed up or

mill ("Stop trying to be so successful" and "Live by what you treasure" are two of her "new rules for success"), not a blueprint for reforming work. McKenna's rules might offer some directions for a cultural change, however, and that would be all to the good. Unfortunately, many of her rules are practical mainly for women who have high earning power, big savings, or a husband to fall back on.

For Diane Eyer, author of *Motherguilt*, it's not the attractions of a female value system that draw women out of the workforce, but rather a culture of blaming mothers that drives them out. Blame starts with academic psychologists, some of whom transformed the idea of maternal-infant bonding into a requirement for healthy child development that could be met only by exclusive, maternal, stay-at-home care. This dubious scientific claim undergirds the child-rearing manuals, and they

ing black women were domestics. But to a people inspired to wrest genuine freedom from a still-paper victory, the kind of domestic work everyone else considered drudge offered important moral possibilities. Work was the means to a precious self-sufficiency and a concrete bridge to the abstract

am] gwine to be cook ob dis ere house, and I'se want no white woman to trouble me. . . . We done claned dishes all our days, long before ye Yankees hearn tell of us, and now does ye suppose I gwine to give up all my rights to ye, just cause youse a Yankee white woman?"

People make their own moral meanings in their work. Workers pursue autonomy, even in the most inauspicious conditions.

ideal of freedom. Hunter demonstrates just what was at stake in a bundle of dirty clothes: "Black women's success or frustrations in influencing the character of domestic labor would define how meaningful freedom would be."

Fought at every turn by their white employers, black domestics made their own rules about work—their schedules, their total hours, their duties, their pay. Through what was quaintly called "pan-toting," they adjusted their compensation to accord with their own sense of justice. Cooks took leftovers, perhaps even a few staples, from the kitchen. Laundresses held onto a client's dressy outfit for an extra week so that they or their children might wear it for a special occasion. Most importantly, domestics claimed their expertise and authority by maintaining control over their methods. One cook, accustomed to the detached kitchens of southern homes, disagreed with her Yankee employer's order to wash the dishes in the sitting room. "[I

In America after the Civil War, the job of laundress was relatively autonomous, and since it was typically done in the woman's own home or at communal washtubs, it was rather more accommodating to women's child care responsibilities and community activities. Perhaps for that reason, laundresses were able to form a trade union, stage a strike, and credibly threaten a general strike of domestics on the eve of Atlanta's 1881 International Cotton Exposition. Laundering was still drudge work, still backbreaking, demeaning, and unremunerative, but these laundresses found their dignity and mustered deep personal and collective strength in washing on their own terms.

Much of social theorizing about work holds that different kinds of jobs impart different moral possibilities to workers, and that dignity and control are mostly inherent qualities of occupations. Hunter's depiction of black domestics reminds us that to a

large extent, people make their own moral meanings in their work, and that autonomy is something workers can exert, even in the most inauspicious conditions.

As Hunter shows, even the worst kinds of jobs can be "good work" if people make them part of a struggle to achieve larger ideals. In *The Time Bind*, Arlie Hochschild explores another way work can be good: It might come to take the place of home and family in people's emotional and moral lives.

Hochschild studied employees of a large company that offered about as many family-friendly work options as you're likely to find anywhere. She wanted to solve a puzzle: Why do employees eligible for such options gravitate to those that help them spend more time at work (such as on-site child care, child and elder care referral services, and emergency backup child care) and make scant use of family leaves, part-time work, job sharing, and other programs that enable them to spend more time at home? And why do so many people who otherwise complain about being stressed out by the demands of work and family request so much overtime?

For all of the company's lip-service to its "Work-Life-Balance" program, top and middle managers continued to judge employees by their willingness to put in long hours. Even those people most staunchly committed to more balanced lives knew that reducing their work time would be a certain career killer. But why didn't people put up more resistance to the company's pull on

usually portrayed as something that can be ameliorated by adjusting work schedules and providing services to cover for adults, especially women, while they're on duty at work. Hochschild sees a more profound dilemma. It is not so much about having enough time, using it more efficiently, better balancing demands on one's time, or finding ways to get family tasks accomplished. It's about how we live in time, whether we are present in our acts and our relationships, and who or what we're present for.

Hochschild is all in favor of family-friendly policies and she thinks more employers should have more of them, notwith-

ideas from every corner—academics like Juliet Schor and Lotte Bailyn, the “voluntary simplicity” movement, the old “eight-hour day movement”—she drafts a blueprint for a national “time movement.” Her ideas won't solve the dilemma anytime soon, but they are the stuff of which important change is made.

It's hard to find a good woman because we live with a whole series of incompatible moral constructions of women and work. Deeply embedded in our history is a traditionalist view that assigns women a life project of cultivating domesticity. Add an overlay of scientific child rearing

the view that it would be better if poor mothers didn't have to work with a theory that the poor, women included, would benefit from the discipline of hard work. Add a recent welfare reform that tells poor mothers they had better be good providers—but not neglect the kids. Juxtapose the reverence for dull and dirty jobs with the stigmatization of people who do them.

The books discussed here all illuminate some aspect of these moral constructions, but they're mostly at a loss about what to do with women. Meanwhile, beyond the bookshelf, we have calls for women to balance their time more effectively (balance is the predominant metaphor in the whole work/family discussion) and calls for employers to balance their needs for competitiveness with respect for employees' family lives. We have calls for poor women to work and work harder, and to be more responsible mothers, and to become mothers less often or not at all, and to put off becoming mothers until they can be good providers.

The over-arching lesson of these books is that women are still subject to conflicting moral imperatives. In addition to advocating changes in government and corporate policies, maybe we—experts, philosophers, and activists, men and women—ought to work on making a big cultural tent in which it's possible to be a good woman and a good worker. Maybe we can accept that different women have different needs and different goals, and aim all prescriptions and policies at helping them figure out how to live well by their own moral lights.□

We live with a whole series of incompatible moral constructions of women and work.

standing that they may “serve as little more than fig leaves concealing long work-hour cultures.” But she's smart enough to see that without a cultural transformation in our values about time, changes in scheduling and assistance with family care cannot change the ways we are deeply diminished by the cult of efficiency. And she's historically grounded enough to know that cultural transformations don't come out of nowhere. They are always the result of political agency, however inchoate and unforeseen the causal chain might be. So, borrowing good

that declares women are selfish and will destroy their children if they work while their children are young. Add that pregnant women have been deemed unsuitable workers and women generally have been considered unfit for a whole variety of occupations. Add the claim that women's most important work is motherhood, and then reverse it to insist that motherhood doesn't count as real work. Add a feminist revision that says women are the equals of men and real women ought to prove their mettle in challenging careers and community activities. Reconcile