

The Commodity Frontier

*Essay in Honor of Neil Smelser
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An advertisement appearing on the Internet on March 6th 2001 read as follows:

(p/t) Beautiful, smart, hostess, good masseuse -\$400/week.

Reply to: exec606@lycos.com

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, un-attached, 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 exec606@lycos.com¹

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

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 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 shall use the ad above as a cultural Rorschach test. What, I have asked upper division students at U.C. 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 try to 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 but they were disturbed by it.

So how did the ad disturb the students and why? After all, family history is replete with examples of family arrangements, which 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,

* This essay was written for a Festschrift volume in honor of Neil Smelser.

personal tasks – especially those performed by women – are become monetized and 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 which 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 the way 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 domestic life is fast becoming a fashionable, of 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 which 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”).⁴

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 (\$150 an hour) so we're not talking a shoulder rub. But even the beautiful interwinement 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.2kforawife.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 cross-overs 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.

How Was the Ad Disturbing?

For most of these young educated Californians, the ad seemed to strike a raw nerve, and the first question to ask is: 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 above referred to the "beautiful intertwinement (sic) of loving, caring, spiritually connected partners in love making." Second, it bothered the students that this taken-apart wife/mother role was now associated with varying amounts of money. Travelling together was to be worth 300 dollars a day. Managing home affairs, 30\$ a day. Thus, the divisibility and commercialization were offensive. But perhaps it was 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 short cut around other principles of giving --long term 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 focus directly on his emotional capacity 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, apparently not in jest, “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 emotion work – to work on 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, nor the commodification of each part that posed a problem so much as it was the fact that – partly because of these – the emotional experience of being together, which was supposed to be *enchanted* 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 which 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, but 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 that couples do together.” He was disenchanting fun.

In sum, the man’s money buys him freedom. It buys him the right to depersonalize a relation. The man wanted to pay the woman instead of owing anything else to her in any other kind of way. He didn’t want to have to feel anything toward her. He exempted himself from

family feeling rules. He doesn't want to even *have to* have fun. He wants to feel free to have to a relationship – impersonal or personal – as he wished and on the terms he wishes. Money *liberates* him, as 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 chose between were themselves stripped of meaning by a) 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 non-committal stance toward the emotion work and feeling rules which 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 to he would to Simmel, as if he were trapped by what many would call “liberation.” And as Smelser would observe, 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 they sound this alarm? The answer is not, after all, self-evident. History is replete with examples of family patterns which illustrate each of the various ways in which this ad offended these students. For example, in traditional China, and many parts of Africa and the Moslem world, polygamy challenges the idea of the unity of love with sexual exclusivity. In Europe, the tradition a maintaining a bourgeois marriage and a mistress – sometimes paid for by allowances or gifts, though not through salary – also disrupt 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 such as that of nanny, cook, chauffeur, therapist, tutor, camp counselor, to mention a few. In the ante-bellum South, slave women cared for and nursed 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 romantic love ethic and the enchantment created by these. 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 hyper-symbolized but structurally weakened core of the modern American family.

The Commodity Frontier

The commodity frontier, Janis-faced, looks out on one side to the marketplace and on another 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 which in yesteryear, formed part of unpaid “family life.” On the other side it is a frontier for *families* which 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*, Michelle Conlin 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, kiddy 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) or 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 the 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.¹⁰ Lynn Corsiglia felt she had moved, one might say, to the cultural edge of the commodity frontier as her daughter defined that edge.

This expansion of market services applies mainly to executives and professionals – both single men and 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% and bottom 20% of the income scale, more rich can afford such services, and poorer and marginally middle class people are eager to provide 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 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 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, we can perhaps say that modernization has recently altered the character of the commodity frontier. 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 merger between service and server. An 18th century white Southern aristocrat who buys a slave buys the person, not the service – the ultimate 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. It is purely the services, classified and priced that are up for purchase, at least apparently. 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 jazz-like improvisation. As in jazz, the ad plays with the idea of dividing and recombining, suggesting different versions of various combinations.¹⁴

Especially in its more recent incarnation, the commercial substitutes for family activities often turn out to be better than the "real" thing. Just as the French bakery may make bread better than mother ever did, and the cleaning service may clean the house more thoroughly, so therapists may recognize feelings more accurately. Even child care workers, while no ultimate substitute, may prove more warm and even-tempered than parents sometimes are. Thus, in a sense, capitalism isn't competing with itself, one company against another. Capitalism is competing 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.

There is a counter-trend 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 lessons needed to "do it yourself."

Still, the prevailing tendency is toward relinquishing family functions to the market realm. And various trends exacerbate this tendency. Most important is the movement of women moving 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, the work day 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 3550 to 3685, 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% 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.

If there are fewer helping hands at home, the state has done nothing to ease the burden at home. Indeed, the 1996 welfare reforms reduced state aid to parents with dependent children, responsibility devolving to the states which have in turn, reduced aide, even for food stamps. Many states have also implemented cut backs 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?” 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 care of the wife and mother, the more hyper-symbolized the remaining sources of care seem to become.¹⁷ 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 which once adhered to an entire community – were in the course of industrialization, gradually transferred to the family.¹⁸ Now we can add, within the family, these symbolic meanings have been increasingly directed toward the figure of the wife/mother.

The hyper-symbolization 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.¹⁹ 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 the highs of economic life and to take 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.²⁰ In addition, divorce not only creates a greater need for supportive community, it tends to reduce the size of that personal community, as the research on networks by Barry Wellman suggests.²¹

Like other symbols, the symbol of mother is “efficient.” That is, it is not the family farm, local community, or even whole extended family – which one can not transport from place to place – which does the symbolic work. Rather, all the meanings associated with these larger social entities 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 hyper-symbolization of the mother, these have probably grown in tandem with the 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 which had become a psychological “holding ground” while trends in the family seem to them to deplete domestic care and to reduce a sense of certainty about the nature and source of it.

The attack on this symbol, as it is seen, may create 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, documented by Juliet Schor in The Overspent American, the commodity frontier seems to chip away at just this enchantment too. Is it the wife-mother complex that is enchanted, the student may be led to wonder, or is services which 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 important analysis of the myth of California, every myth has an element of reality. At the same time, it has an emotional element as well –located somewhere in our mental life between daydream and ideology.²²

We have a “myth” of the American frontier, and of course, there really was a western frontier, which over the course of three hundred years, many Americans moved to extend. 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.

Attached to this real geographic frontier 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 strike out to seek one's fortune on the emotional frontier. American heroes from Daniel Boone and Paul Bunyan to the "restless cowboy" analyzed by Erik Erikson start somewhere and end somewhere else. At the end of Samuel Clemens's 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 (sic) and I can't stand it."²³ This is the myth of the individual's quest for liberty.

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 the point of focus is a location in a world of goods and services.

Instead of "going somewhere," the individual "buys something" which becomes a way of going somewhere. If on the geographic frontier, the individual seeks to discover a land of milk and honey, so on the commodity frontier, he or she hopes to purchase and control the emotional equivalent of this. In either case, the frontier represents freedom and opportunity.

In the past, the commodity frontier the fantasy of a perfect purchase might more often center on some feature of external reality. One might dream 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 Magazine for "Titan Club, an Exclusive Dating Service" illustrates this:

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, sexy 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 ad promises a great deal about ambivalence. It promises to get rid of it. If Titan delivers “exactly what you are looking for in a relationship” and if KinderCare delivers exactly the personality you want in your own 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 which 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.

One further word about the relation between the commodity frontier and ambivalence – a topic central to Smelser’s thinking. One way we “go west,” I’ve suggested, is to buy goods and services which promises a family-like experience. But in doing so, we also pursue the fantasy of a life free from ambivalence. The very act of fleeing ambivalence also expresses it. 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 seems to avoid entanglement with her. That’s the other side of the ambivalence. Indeed, the man be curtailing his conception of what it is he “needs” to fit into the narrow window of what he can purchase. One might say, then that one latent function of an ad like this is to stake out a moral territory which allows for intimacy at a distance.

The Ricochet of the Commodity Images

The Frankfurt school of sociology and more recent scholars such as Schor and Kuttner have criticized consumerism without focusing on the family, and family scholars such as Goode, or Mintz and Kellogg have focused on the family without attending much to consumerism. Indeed, with the exception of Zelizer, Lasch and Dizard and Gadlin, few scholars have focused on the relationship between these two realms. Perhaps this is because the two realms, once structurally differentiated, are assumed to be culturally free of one another 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 separate. Culturally speaking, they ricochet off one another 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.

We like to think of home as a haven in a heartless world, a safe, benign sphere safely separate from the dangerous and hostile world outside, or – a related formulation – we see the family as a place of emotional expressivity separate from the emotionless, depersonalized world of the marketplace. (Home takes one side of the pattern variables; the marketplace takes the other.) As Viviana 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, splitting. 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 run their homes “smoothly.” 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 marketplace often become benchmarks for the appraisal of roles and relationships at home. For example, one married mother of three (whom I interviewed about patterns of care in her life) 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 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 – an entrepreneur managing a bed and breakfast – as a measuring rod to appraise the demands asked of her as a daughter-in-law and relative. 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 felt 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. Her life in the market world was with her in her imagination, as part of a potential self even when she was far outside that world.²⁷

Other women whom I’ve interviewed for a forthcoming book felt overburdened at home. Some 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 from now, it may come to pass that remarks passed at home will refer to new hybrid roles – “I’m not your paid hostess/masseuse” – as if that role was as normal and ordinary as any other was. 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. Though no one intends it to, the market influences the norms that guide our lives at home.

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.

Finally, we can wonder what might cross through the heads of those who replied to the shy millionaire's ad? Five of the 60 students from my class at the University of California, Berkeley said they were tempted to reply to the ad. 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 others in the class would probably happily answer it. "The worst part" said one, "is that someone who needed the money probably 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.

Notes

1. Ad found on the Internet, courtesy of Bonnie Kwan.
2. On the topic of the meaning of money and purchasing, see the foundational work of Viviana Zelizer (1994, 1996 and 1996) In “Payments and Social Ties” she makes a persuasive case that money and the market realm (eg shopping, buying) can be assigned any number of meanings. Our job, she argues, is to study, not pre-judge them. This is what I’m attempting here.
3. On the point of discerning the “edge” please see Eviatar Zerubavel’s The Fine Line. While many theorists wouldn’t question this ad or the “wife and mother industry” a good number see it as problematic but on very different grounds. In The Minimal Family, Jan Dizard and Howard Gadlin argue that the commodification of former family activities takes the familism out of families. In The Overspent American, Juliet Schor critiques American over-consumption of natural resources, as a troubling model to be emulated by the rest of the world. In Everything for Sale, Robert Kuttner critiques the retreat from government protection of the “public good. Veblen, Schor and Ehrenreich critique it from the vantage point of status seeking.
4. One person argued that the man tried to make this proposition “sound” like a normal transaction. But he wondered how (the man) could explain (his hireling’s role “in his life to his business partners”). One suspicious student remarked, “ This is a crazy man who wants a sex slave. Why else would he say ‘no sex’ while also stipulating that the woman has to be beautiful and unattached.” Another noted “ You don’t know what’s behind the screen.” While a number were suspicious of the man’s motives, very few suspected the veracity of the ad itself. I myself believe the ad is real. Even if it were a hoax, the ad is so close to reality that virtually all the students took it as real, and so it might as well have been real.
5. In “Depth Psychology and the Social Order,” Smelser distinguishes between four categories of ego defense, each with its corresponding relevant affect and object. At one time or another, people doubtless appeal to all of these types of defences in the course of confronting the threat of commodification and the cultural incongruities it introduces. But one ego defense stands out – depersonalization.
6. Rochelle Sharpe, “Nannies on Speed Dial” Working Life, *Business Week*, September 18, 2000, pp.108-110. The president of a Massachusetts-based agency Parents in a Pinch Inc. reported that rather than grandparents themselves helping working parents, she found that frequently grandparents bought the service for a busy working daughter as a gift. Presumably many of them were themselves also working and too busy to help out.
7. A radio announcement made on commercial radio in southern Maine, July 2000.
8. Sharpe, *ibid.*, p. 110.
9. Internet notice, found under “craigslist.org” “Part Time Personal /Assistant Available”

10. Sharpe, *ibid.* p. 110.

11. Saskia Sassan (2001) "Global Cities and Circuits of Survival" in Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie R. Hochschild (eds.) Global Woman (in progress). Sassan argues that globalization is currently creating new social class patterns. The professional class in rich countries now draws more exclusively on female immigrant labor which, she argues, is itself a product of economic dislocations which stem from globalization.

12. Mintz and Kellogg 1988.

13. It is not that the "old" commodification does not occur today. In Disposable People, Kevin Bales shows how globalization is giving rise to a "new" slavery every bit as serious as the "old" one. But slavery in the modern era is different from slavery in the past, for it strikes the modern Western mind, not only immoral, but also as old. Kevin Bales 1999, Disposable People, New Slavery in the Global Economy, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

14. See Neil Smelser, 1959, Social Change in the Industrial Revolution, Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Dividing up wife/mother role as implied in the ad is "structural" in the sense that a person in a given role (a paid hostess/masseuse outside the family) carries out a function a wife might be expected to perform inside the family. But it is also psychological and cultural, for this role is also the focus of strongly felt beliefs. And these in turn are strongly related to the *gemeinschaft* side of the Parsonian pattern variables – affectivity, diffuseness, ascription, particularism.

15. John Doohan, "Working Long, Working Better?" *World of Work*, The Magazine of the International Labour Organization, No 31, September/October 1999. A *New York Times* September 1, 2001 report suggests that Americans added a full week to their work year during the 1990's, climbing to 1.979 hours on average last year, up 36 hours from 1990. Steve Geenhouse, "Americans' International Lead in Hours Worked Grew in the 90's Report Shows." *New York Times*, Sept 1, 2001.

16. Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur, 1994 Growing Up with a Single Parent, Cambridge, Harvard University Press.

17. See Sharon Hays (1996) The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood. New Haven: Yale University Press.

18. In A World of Their Own Making : Myth, Ritual, and the Quest for Family Values, the historian John Gillis points out very different assumptions about the public/private divide, the degree to which the private was thought to need protection from the public. We can also distinguish between different "band widths" of commodification. So, commodities which are chipped off from family life, vs. commodities chipped off from nature, etc.

19. Certainly, American life before the advent of industrial capitalism was unstable, and there are some ways in which industrial capitalism has, through the creation of a middle class removes many people from the hardships of poverty, and in so doing stabilized family life. See Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg *Domestic Revolutions*, 1988. At the same time, the dynamism of capitalism coupled with a state which – by European standards – does little to protect workers from market fluctuations, changing economic demands and which offers few provisions to aid in family care, makes America a somewhat harsher, if freer, society in which to live.

20. See Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, (2001) Cambridge, Harvard University Press. As Claude Fischer has pointed out, geographic mobility itself is not new to Americans. While rates of long distance mobility has remained relatively constant since the mid- 19th century, mobility within local areas has actually decreased. Professor Claude Fischer, Talk, Center For Working Families, U.C.Berkeley, April, 2001.

21. Barry Wellman et al. 1997, “A Decade of Network Change: Turnover, Mobility and Stability,” *Social Networks*, 19 (1):27-51; Barry Wellman (ed). *Networks in the Global Village*, 1999, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.

22. In Smelser’s insightful essay, “Collective Myths and Fantasies:the Myth of the Good Life in California” he notes that a myth is a ‘pschodynamic blending of fiction and fact to complete the inevitable logic of ambivalence in myth. ...there is no happy myth without its unhappy side. So, too, with the myth of infinite commodification, there is the bright side – the fantasy of the perfect “wife-like employee” and also the dark side – the fear of estrangement and existential aloneness. See *The Social Edges of Psychoanalysis*, 1998, pp111- 124.

23. Samuel Langhorne Clemens, (Mark Twain) *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, (1962) p 226.

24. Dating services and mail-order bride services commodify *the finding* of wives, of course, though not the wives themselves (New Yorker, June 18,25, 2001, p 149.

25. The Center accepts children six weeks to twelve years and provides a number to call for the Center nearest you. *The Time Bind*, p 231.

26. Heard on Maine Public Radio, October 14, 2001.

27. For a discussion of the “potential self” see p. 235 of *The Time Bind*.

28. This example was reported to be by Allison Pugh, Sociology Department, University of California, Berkeley. (Personal communication.)

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Endnotes

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