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Review of *The Neutered Mother, the Sexual Family*. Martha Albertson Fineman. Reviewed by Janice Wood Wetzel, Adelphi University.

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tion efforts fail. In contrast, the middle class affirms its standing and relative efficacy through its participatory tradition.

What is new about Vidich's assembled writings on the middle class? To answer this question, one must appreciate his historical and sociological orientation. While Croteau focuses on post-modern middle and working classes, Vidich builds a depiction of a modern middle class with special emphasis on the middle classes that emerged in Weimar Germany and in the post-war U.S. Classic statements by Lederer and Marschak (1926), Mills (1951), and Giddens (1975) are reprinted along with more recent essays by Vidich himself (1982), Burris (1986), and Hughey (1982). The most contemporary essay is a reprint of Evans' (1992) article on the black middle class. The utility of the collection is that it brings together classic and more contemporary writing on the middle class. Other than Evans' paper, however, the reader does not learn much about the condition of the middle class after the early 1980s.

Does the middle class have a future? Neither of these volumes treats the existence of the middle class itself as problematic. Like many writers, the authors here tend to assume that the middle class is a constant even as they describe finite resources and declining abundance. The strong points of the two books are the depth and breadth of their depictions of emerging and entrenched classes. These same strengths could also be a basis for articulating a theory of middle class decline. Indeed, it may well be that this genre of work shifts from theorization of emergence to explanations of decline.

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Martha Albertson Fineman, *The Neutered Mother, the Sexual Family (and Other Twentieth Century Tragedies)*. New York: Routledge, 1995. \$16.95 papercover.

The Neutered Mother, the Sexual Family (and Other Twentieth Century Tragedies) is a book that presents convincingly a legal argument for an innovative, revolutionary definition of the family. The ideas articulated are far removed from the usual progressive

conception of "alternative families" that encompass a broad spectrum of possible relationships. Advocates of such a perspective contend that the provision of supportive and loving relationship should be the measure of acceptance, not simply a male-female marital dyad, regardless of inequity and/or abusiveness. While supportive of this viewpoint, Fineman maintains that it is limited. Most nontraditional elective dyads are modeled after the sexual union as the primary intimate connection. "The new family formations," Fineman maintains, "merely replicate old concepts and beliefs and there is little fundamental challenge to the ways we think about the institution of the family and its relationship to society (7)." Her book is predicated on this premise, challenging the reader to think in radically new ways.

The neutered (ungendered) mother is defined as a contemporary legal oxymoron, a contradiction in terms generated by negative images of motherhood and mothering. While the gendered, mother-centered lives of most women continue in real life, the law renders children and the values of mothering (nurturing and care) suspect, based upon traditionally restricted notions of intimacy and connection reflected in the male/female sexual dyad. Presently, the paradox is being played out in the reformulation and reinforcement of historic control of fathers over children and families. The casting of single motherhood as pathological, a social disease and core cause of poverty, is a case in point. Speciously comparing the idealized nuclear family with those of troubled single mothers who were troubled even before they had children is the name of the game. The repudiation of this disingenuous "family values" perspective which is reshaping policy today lies at the heart of Fineman's thesis. Poverty and dependency are not caused by single motherhood, but by the conditions of women's social reality. Fineman makes a strong case that women's reality is clouded by the egalitarian family myth which is belied by statistics reflecting the way women and men *really* live.

Within the pages of this ground breaking book, Fineman refers to ideas she cites as *passee*, such as non-marital births regarded as illegitimate offspring, and the correlation of divorce with fear of impoverishment and social condemnation. Given the relatively short timespan between submission of the final draft and the date of publication, the reader is struck by the tenuousness of

women's place in society, as the country fast regresses to the stigmas of yesteryear. We have returned to the land of the "undeserving poor," if indeed we ever left. The reason, according to the Fineman hypothesis, is that the power men implicitly enjoyed within the context of indissoluble marriage and patriarchy has been threatened, as the norm of the male-defined, male-headed nuclear family, with heterosexual union at its center, is threatened. One would be hard pressed to refute either her premise or its ramifications.

Fineman points out that the nuclear family, with its sexual marital union, is the natural family under the law, thus dependency within that traditional structure is legally sanctioned, and the family entitled to legal protection and freedom from state control and intervention. Single mother families, on the other hand, do not constitute a complete or real family under the law, thus dependent or not, its members are not entitled to privacy, protection and the right to make demands upon society for certain accommodations and support.

Fineman calls for a re-visioning of family law whereby the primary legally sanctioned intimate connection is the Mother/Child dyad, rather than the sexual male/female union. She uses the terms, Mother and Child, metaphorically, maintaining that men and women can be Mothers (an idea not at odds with that of many feminists), and that the Child in the dyad stands for all forms of dependency that require physical caretaking, whether elderly, disabled, children, or people who are ill. She proposes two recommendations for legal reform and policy development in support of caretaking: " 1) the abolition of legal supports for the sexual family [and the abolition of marriage as a legal category], and 2) construction of protections for the nurturing unit of caretaker and dependent exemplified by the Mother/Child dyad (228)" With the law supporting the caretaking unit, rather than the sexual union, a healthier more just society for all (women, men and children) would be more likely.

Given the reality of the power structure and the formidable forces it can muster, it is difficult to think, even dream, of the radical restructuring of society that the coupling of Attorney Fineman's professional knowledge and feminist ideology has created so convincingly. But a sliver of light shines through when one

realizes that some semblance of the U.S. scenario is played out in every country of the world, and that the women of the world, bonding together to fashion a more just society for themselves and their families, are teaching well educated and indigenous illiterate women alike to learn about their existing laws, to assess them, and to develop new laws that better support the advancement of women and their human rights. Perhaps at this time a century from now, the world will not need another Martha Albertson Fineman to write about the family tragedies of the 21st century.

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