

STUDY NOTES

Classic Texts: Eli Zaretsky "Capitalism, the Family & Personal Life" 1976

Zaretsky's Marxist analysis of the role of the family in capitalist society provides a fascinating contrast with the work of Parsons and Delphy & Leonard. He concluded that the family worked in the interests of capitalism.

Zaretsky argues that in society today, there is an illusion that the family is a private space, separate from economics and capitalism. Zaretsky argues that the nature of capitalist society means that this is not really true: in fact it helps to keep capitalism going.

Zaretsky was interested in psychology and the idea that the family might perform a psychological function. That is, that people could be nurtured, supported and have their individual needs met by the family. A similar concept to Parsons' warm bath. However, Zaretsky said that the family was unable to perform this function under capitalism. This was because, rather than helping and nurturing individuals, the family cushioned the damage caused by capitalism. The working class were exploited at work. Traditional Marxists argue that the working class needs to have a revolution and overturn capitalism and establish a socialist system. However, Zaretsky says that one of the things that stops them doing this is the family! Parsons argued that the family helps relieve the stress of the working day and prepare an individual to function the next day and Zaretsky agrees. However, Zaretsky sees this as a negative thing: people need to recognise that they are being exploited in order to be able to do something about it. The family doesn't really compensate for the bad effects of capitalism, it just seems to. It also helps support capitalism in other ways too: it provides lots of free labour. Women (housewives) work for the capitalist system for free, keeping the workers fed and clothed and reproducing the next generation of exploited workers by having children. Also, workers who have families are less likely to rebel against their bosses (e.g. go on strike) because loss of earnings does not only affect them, but also their dependents.

For Zaretsky, the family could only really start to provide psychological support for its members when there is an end to capitalism.

Zaretsky's ideas now seem rather outdated as the nature of both work and families has changed, particularly in relation to women's role in the workplace. Also, some feminist sociologists, such as Delphy & Leonard argue that it is the patriarchy - a male-dominated social system - that benefits from family life, rather than capitalism.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER (MAKE SOME NOTES FOR DISCUSSION IN CLASS)

- 1. What does Zaretsky think the family unit provides for society?**
- 2. What does Zaretsky mean when he says the family plays a psychological function?**
- 3. Why do you think Zaretsky sees capitalism as negative? (some additional research on Marxism may help here)**
- 4. What is the benefit of women's role in society, according to this article?**
- 5. Bring ONE question to class prompted by this article. This could be something you want to know more about, a point of confusion, or a question which examines the article on a deeper level.**