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### The Polygamous Heart?

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## Reviews

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# The Polygamous Heart?

ARLIE RUSSELL HOCHSCHILD

*THE TIME BIND: WHEN WORK BECOMES HOME & HOME BECOMES WORK*

HENRY HOLT & Co. 1997

*Katharine Silbaugh*

WORKERS, particularly women, are increasingly vocal about the poverty of family time that their jobs allow them. But what if a company responded by offering family-friendly policies that would reduce work hours, like job-sharing and part-time work, and no one signed up for them? What if instead workers signed up for “family-friendly” services like long-hour on-site day-care that made it easier to stay at work longer? Sociologist Arlie Hochschild seeks to explain this puzzle in *The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home & Home Becomes Work*. She portrays the modern workplace as carefully engineered to be friendly, relaxed, supportive, appreciative and enticing, particularly when it comes to work relationships, and the home as increasingly unappreciative, rushed, tense, and exhausting. We spend more time at work because we are following our hearts. We vote with our feet, even as we believe that we’d like

to be at home more.

She respectfully but briskly dismisses the most obvious explanations for long hours: that we need the money, we need job security, or we doubt the sincerity of the employer in offering part-time options. Her arguments for rejecting these relatively straightforward explanations conflict with her own evidence as expressed in the case studies and testimony she presents throughout the book. Although she documents emotional ties at work at all income levels, her maneuver around the conventional explanations is fairly inattentive to variations in income. Since higher-wage people spend at least as many hours at work as lower-wage people, she presumes that money isn’t decisive in the urge to work for either set of workers. She gives no attention at all to variations in savings. In any case, she devotes only a few pages of a 300-page study to contending with the popular theories about why

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we work long hours, and her treatment fails to undermine the wisdom of these conventional explanations. Her alternative explanation is more interesting, in part because of its novelty. The fact that she greatly overstates the phenomenon she describes, on her own evidence alone, makes her work slightly less appealing. But she persuades on this critical point: *something is wrong with the conventional story that work is impersonal and the home is emotionally and physically restful.*

Hochschild's 1989 study of dual-earner marriages, *The Second Shift*, which concluded that women do the lion's share of household labor even when both spouses work full-time in the paid labor force, would probably make a top-ten list of cited works in the subsequent family law literature. Her intimate account of family workloads popularized discussion of the difficulties women face in a culture inattentive to the burden of housework for women who have chosen paid labor. Her qualitative research showed a "stalled revolution" in which women have assumed conventional male roles in the workplace, but men have not taken up much traditional woman's work at home, leaving most women in effect with two jobs. She became a hero to legal scholars interested in the family economy, particularly feminists.

On one view, *The Time Bind* presents a less comfortable thesis for feminist legal scholars: parents spend more time at work than they need to because they find work more pleasant than family, and they deliberately minimize the suffering this choice inflicts on their children. This is the interpretation of her thesis that brought her book to the covers of *The New York Times Magazine*, *Newsweek* and *U.S. News and World Report* this spring. *The Time Bind* has received as much popular attention as

an academic could possibly hope for, but Hochschild professes to be "mortified" that the book has been embraced mainly by conservative commentators.<sup>1</sup> She had intended it to be a critique of capitalism and of the devaluation of child-rearing. She carefully explores the way employers consciously cultivate the emotional appeal of work to extract these long hours. She says employers are responding to the work-family conflict by deliberately competing with the family itself for the worker's heart, rather than competing with other employers to attract employees using genuinely family-friendly policies. How did the thesis become unwieldy for the author once it was released? The answer lies in part in her surprising failure, given her focus and her findings, to challenge the conventional understanding of a separation between work life and emotional life.

Hochschild takes as her abstract starting point a world where industrial workers find wage labor a dehumanizing grind and the home is an emotional haven of tender feelings and nurtured relationships. At one point she puts a 1920 date on this baseline family, but she uses it throughout as the abstract norm from which the world has departed. What she finds is progress toward a complete reversal of those spheres. In her reversed world, people feel that work has been engineered as a family-like haven with its worker empowerment, constant recognition ceremonies, gossip, flirtations and friendships. Home is a dehumanizing grind of rushed and thankless caretaking and management tasks as relationships deteriorate and family members, both children and spouses, develop demanding behavioral problems for want of time. She pursues this switcharoo device with zeal and explicitly rejects a more mundane depiction of these worlds as

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1 Peter G. Gosselin, *Lightning rod in the storm over work and home; Arlie Hochschild agghast as conservatives embrace her book, liberals bash it*, BOSTON GLOBE, May 28, 1997, at F1.

“blurring.”<sup>2</sup> “The emotional magnets beneath home and workplace are in the process of being reversed” (p. 44).

It is the reversal in this theory that may appeal more to conservatives than would observations about similarities between work and home. Having argued that today’s work and family life have switched rather than that they have similar characteristics, she naturally views the change as a pathology. Her rallying cry is for a social movement to correct the pathology by encouraging people to spend more time at home and to make politicians enact shorter hour legislation. In this call for action, she has made it more clear than she did in *The Second Shift* that she thinks housework is difficult because it is combined with full-time wage labor and it is not shared among family members; activities within the home could be deproblematized with a little more time there. But there is no concrete history of home labor that suggests that this is so. During those periods when fewer women were in the wage labor market, for the most part their days were still filled with hard labor, not rest and relaxation. The emotional benefits of the idealized home may have been and may still be common, but not because there’s no hard work being done there.

The major weakness of the book is her desire to frame separate and distinct work and emotional spheres. She relies on the same divide between the nature of work and home that feeds conservative pro-family rhetoric, even as she reverses them. Finding in *The Second Shift* that home is not the idealized haven of leisure, but a more complicated mix of work and relationships, she seems to have set out in this book to find out where the “haven” went. At work she is surprised to find people in-

vested in their personal relationships, and so she decides that the haven has moved there. She doesn’t entertain the notion that perhaps there is no haven, at least not as idealized in her baseline story, and for women there probably never was one. Nor, in American culture, is it obvious that the abstract opposite of the haven, the dehumanizing automated workplace where people are in no way themselves with coworkers, is anything but exceptional. It is in part this idea – that an activity is either work or pertains to relationships, but not both – that has placed so much strain on women whose experience of their various roles never quite meets the ideal.

Unfortunately this emotional divide between work and home is well-supported by law, as I have argued elsewhere with respect to home labor.<sup>3</sup> The delicate harmony of relationships is invoked again and again to prevent home labor from leading to the kind of status and security that wage labor brings, whether in family law, social programs such as social security and the former Aid to Families with Dependent Children, or private law fields such as tort and contract. The image of home as at least potentially sacred constantly trips up our ability to make good family policy. But it isn’t just the notion that home is sacred that causes the problem. It is the notion that the sacred cannot be hard work, and that hard work cannot be sacred. We are unable to rationally address the home labor aspects of family life as long as we fear that doing so insults the family’s emotional significance. Meanwhile, home laborers are without health care, pensions, disability insurance, training, money, or the other incidents we associate with the “working” world.

Perhaps those in the employment law field

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2 See Arlie Hochschild, *Work: The Great Escape*, N.Y. TIMES MAGAZINE, Apr. 20, 1997.

3 Katharine Silbaugh, *Turning Labor into Love: Housework and the Law*, 91 NW. U. L. REV. 1 (1996); Katharine Silbaugh, *Commodification and Women’s Household Labor* (forthcoming in YALE J.L. & FEMINISM).

should ask whether the separation of labor from emotions also prevents employment law from responding to the value of work relationships. *The Time Bind* may make its biggest contribution to those who would make that case, if they are able to see beyond Hochschild's fewer-hours solution. In that respect, *The Time Bind* might do for employment law what *The Second Shift* did for family law: provide a description of social life from which legal scholars might better design their own policy proposals.

Hochschild's pair of books do a great service in highlighting two sadly unintuitive realities: the emotional ties to work and the laboring aspects of home. But Hochschild is unable to break out of the notion that a purely

emotional sphere must be out there somewhere. Perhaps *The Time Bind* has called up so much popular sentiment because it rescues us from the impending conclusion that there are no completely uncomplicated havens and delivers to us a thesis about a haven shell game that simply requires more diligence to uncover. This search reveals a vision of an ideal where personality is very different in different places, and should be so. But the alternative we might explore is one where neither work nor home are the site of base, exploitative work roles, but neither are they entirely safe from complicated work-like responsibilities and motivations. Such a view might permit us to deal more rationally with the world we live in, not the one we idealize. 