

AUNTIE SAM TO THE RESCUE

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I am an avid pro-natalist. That is, I am interested in a society that makes it easier for adults who want to have children, to have children.

So, too, is Ann Crittenden, author of the angry and interesting new book "The Price of Motherhood: Why the Most Important Job in the World Is Still the Least Valued." Alas, after agreement on the central pro-natalist precept, our views diverge in many ways.

Ms. Crittenden, a liberal neo-feminist, sees that the recent wave of feminism didn't work out as expected. It is very hard for a woman "to have it all" -- great kids, great job, great family. Instead, they are victims. Who's at fault? Crittenden frequently blames conservatives, men, America and history. She says it's a view that's spreading.

Her central question is: Should mothers be paid for being mothers? Her answer is yes. Who will pay? Guess. The government will pay. (Who pays the government? That question is not asked, but I know the answer.)

Crittenden is no mindless old-school feminist. She says raising a child is the most exciting, interesting and important job in the world. She understands that, come what may, with all the rhetoric about sharing and joint parenting, child-rearing usually ends up as mostly women's work. She knows that women, no matter how sophisticated and fem-trained, fall deeply in love with their babies.

Her big problem with child-rearing is that it is not honored, and she says that's one reason that fertility rates are so low in America, where 19 percent of potential mothers will remain childless, compared to 10 percent a few decades ago. The way to honor such labor is to pay for

it. Female caregivers, she says, have been the world's cheap labor for too long. Money would change that, redressing the male-female power balance in the process.

In the course of dissecting child-rearing in America, Crittenden talks at great length about women, married women, wives, mothers and unmarried mothers. She says they feel under-appreciated and work too hard.

But she is almost silent about the problems of men, married men, fathers, husbands and unmarried fathers. Yet, consider: When educated moms decide to stay at home, where does the minivan, the house, the orthodontist and summer camp come from? Who works overtime to provide it? Crittenden says many women feel under-appreciated. Flash! So do many men.

She is mostly silent, too, on "couples," as in married couples. They typically reach an agreement as to who does what, regarding child-rearing and money-earning. That arrangement may well engender a discussion or an argument for the rest of their natural lives. But they typically live together as a family. When they are old they retire together. Typically, the man dies first and the woman inherits the estate, which will then be passed along to the joint heirs of the husband and wife.

Now, it doesn't always work out this way. There is divorce and separation, which Crittenden almost always describes as set in motion by men seeking action elsewhere, which, pity, is probably genetically programmed. They also drink too much, the slobs. But such splits are rarely a cavalier act, certainly not when young children are involved. Most divorces are initiated by women. But Crittenden suggests that it is women who are left high and dry, tossed on the mercy of a heartless court.

Many men see it differently. There is a vast constellation of marital law to protect women,

including "marital property," "community property," "alimony," "custody" and "child support," about which there are arguments, and courts to resolve the arguments. In addition, there are "paternity" actions available to unmarried women.

Crittenden asks: What should we do about women's low status? Mostly, look across the ocean to Europe, she says. That's where you'll find a "family wage," fully shared pension plans, lots of flex-time, paid parental leaves, a four-day work week, a six-hour work day option, a 35-hour work week, long vacations, pro-rated benefits for part-time work, equal pay rates for part-time workers, universal pre-school for 3- to 5-year olds and, most important, a salary for every mother -- paid for by the government. Unmentioned is the fact that such a panoply of services raises taxes -- on women! -- whom she feels are already overtaxed.

There are some ideas over there that we pro-natalists find worth exploring. But European fertility rates are far lower than American rates, often catastrophically so. One thing these programs haven't done is encourage birth.

While the individual ideas deserve consideration by pro-natalists, the totality of Crittenden's proposals are stark. Give the dough to Uncle Sam. He'll turn it over to his sister, Aunt Samantha. Auntie Sam will provide the cash for women to raise children. It takes a village to raise a child, and the whole federal government.

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