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Defending the Family From Its Defenders

by Thomas Fleming

The phrase “family values,” as it is used by politicians, marks one of the official borders between left and right in the United States. The fact is infuriating to Republican moderates who want to turn their party in the direction of opportunity and choice, which—translated into moral terms—mean adultery, divorce, and infanticide, the apparent credo of the Northeastern Republican senators who handed President Clinton his triumph over impeachment. Out here, however, a thousand miles from Sodom and Gomorrah, a man cannot entirely rid himself of the idea that the whole point to economic opportunity is to be able to make enough money to take care of his wife and children. Such a man will never be able to compromise with a party that advocates cheating and infanticide.

On both sides of the moral frontier, there are a few émigrés: leftists like David Blankenhorn, who have made capital (political as well as economic) out of marriage, and conservative Republicans like Phil Gramm and Steve Forbes, who in the 1996 campaign hardly mentioned the family. These exceptions, however, only prove the rule: Blankenhorn is denounced as a conservative by the *Nation*, even though he is a leftist who used to hang out with the communists at Highlander Folk School; and Steve Forbes has had to change his political tune sufficiently to accommodate a few bars of “Mother” and “Sonny Boy.”

For moral reactionaries (a.k.a. “social conservatives”), the problem is the family, whose desperate condition is signaled by high rates of divorce and illegitimacy (to say nothing of the host of related problems of working mothers, daycare, declining birth rates, abortion, and same-sex “marriage”). The family is in crisis, they cry; poisoned by a permissive moral code and undermined by an anti-family tax code that penalizes marriage and children. As their numbers dwindle—even Paul Weyrich concedes they are now the Moral Minority—their hostility to

the regime continues to deepen.

The moral struggle over the family, however, has become too complex for most people to understand. It was simpler back in the 1970’s, when there were leftists who actually celebrated the family’s decline, calling for the government to take over responsibility for children and celebrating incest as a revolutionary attack on the Oedipus Complex. Feminists and culture-critics on the left invoked Freud’s attack on the family as a perverse institution that sexually warps its victims. Some even hearkened back to Engels’ attack on the family as the creation of patriarchal males who also invented private property as a tool of exploitation.

By the 80’s, however, leftists (outside the academy or the pages of the give-away *Village Voice*) had pulled in their horns, and people like Hillary Rodham were giving “pro-family” arguments for nationalizing childcare. The family was a valuable, if fragile, resource, like air and water, that required massive government action to clean it up, restructure it on egalitarian lines, and maintain it as a socially useful institution that mediates between government programs and individual tax-consumers.

In recent years, the conservative response to the problem of the family has followed the line taken by Peter and Brigitte Berger. In an analysis that goes back to Max Weber, the Bergers and their followers lament the passing of the bourgeois family that inculcated the virtues on which a democratic-capitalist society depends: industry, thrift, moral restraint. Many, if not most, take the further step of calling for government actions to restore motherhood and fatherhood to a place of respect, to eliminate the marriage penalty, and to foster a social atmosphere conducive to large families. Some have gone so far as to call upon the United Nations and national governments to save the family, which is a little like asking the Escobar family to curtail the international drug trade.

In most political debates, only the smallest particles of historical truth are allowed entrance—as much as will provide the skeleton for one or another ideological myth. In the debate over family values, historical scholarship on the left and right has emphasized the uniqueness of the bourgeois family, and although I am doing violence to the differences among ideologically diverse social historians like Philippe Ariès, Lawrence Stone, Edward Shorter, and Lloyd de Mause, their impudent contempt for human experience, tendentious arguments, and hasty generalizations deserve no better treatment.

Though leftists may deplore what conservatives laud, their socioeconomic premises are often quite similar. The family may have always existed, so the assumption runs, but it took bizarre forms, even in Europe, where several generations were crowded into one peasant cottage. Conjugal affection was difficult, if not impossible; chastity, an impossible ideal; and parental authority, typically abusive. Leftists might denigrate the bourgeois household as a hotbed of Freudian complexes, but conservatives celebrate it as the seedbed of all virtues.

Like the Marxists, conservatives link the development of the family to a specific economic class structure; both see the family as an essentially social invention; both look back to earlier ages—classical antiquity, the Middle Ages—with something like revulsion (admittedly for somewhat different reasons); and both point their fingers at the dark ages past, when men abused their wives and children, whom they treated as chattel or objects of sexual exploitation.

Capitalists and Marxists disagree on the solution, but they are remarkably close in their analysis—another example of the left's increasingly complete triumph over the conservative mind. The problem with this approach should be obvious. If the family is a fragile historical construction, parents cannot be trusted, and families must be propped up artificially by government agencies—the very agencies that have been undermining the family for a hundred years. Even if the Marxist/capitalist myth of family history were true, it would provide a dangerous incentive to erect a labyrinthine bureaucracy out of the ruins of the family authority usurped by socialist governments. But it is not even partly correct: It is simply wrong.

To prove it is wrong, I might assemble a team of social historians who could muster the evidence that no one would ever read. Instead, I shall briefly discuss one or two extreme cases, beginning with the Roman father's celebrated *patria potestas* (paternal authority), which included a life-long power of life and death over his dependent children and, to some extent, over his wife. Yet even under these circumstances, concludes historian Susan Treggiari, Romans considered a "particularly close relationship between man and wife" as "normal and desirable." Prof. Treggiari did not limit herself to literary evidence but also examined funerary inscriptions.

Similar studies of inscriptional and testamentary evidence confirm what we already knew from literature about Roman fathers. The ideal of paternal authority was described by Seneca as "the most restrained . . . putting the child's interests before his own." Once a Roman child was acknowledged, the father could take its life only under certain circumstances, e.g., if a daughter were found guilty of fornication or if a son committed acts of treason against the commonwealth or violence against the father or had sexual relations with his mother or stepmother. These were all capital crimes, by the way, but Roman law (in principle) assigned responsibility for punishment to the fa-

ther (who was supposed to consult a council of the family) rather than to the state. One father who flogged his son to death was torn to pieces by a mob; another, who summarily put his son to death (for sleeping with his stepmother), was sent into exile by the Emperor Valentinian.

We have to quit talking about what governments can do to save the family and concentrate on undoing all their massive efforts to impoverish families and undermine their autonomy.

The ideals of Italian family life have not changed enormously from the families described by Livy in the first century B.C. to Renaissance tracts written by Alberti and Tasso down to the current time, when Italian men who pretend to rule their little world are in reality nothing but *mammori*—mama's boys. Obviously, there were bad husbands and bad fathers in ancient (and Renaissance) Italy, but the European ideal of man and wife as partners in life who dote on their children owes rather more to the Romans (and much less to the Bible) than is commonly supposed.

The ancients were civilized people who might be expected to lead quiet domestic lives, but our barbarian ancestors—Germanic, Celtic, and Slavic—also lived in close-knit families bound by affection. Even the notoriously cold-blooded English give evidence in every age of conjugal affection, and Barbara Hanawalt's careful examination of parish records in the later Middle Ages, while it turns up evidence of quarrels and abuse, reveals a set of marital norms that bourgeois Protestants would be proud to claim. "The majority of marriages," she says, "do not fit Shorter's dismal picture of the 'Bad Old Days' in which wives were dispensable or, at best, servants to their husbands. . . . Partnership is the most appropriate term to describe marriage in medieval English peasant society." Hanawalt takes pains to point out the problems in these peasant marriages, but quickly adds that we moderns have no reason for smugness: "It is not necessary to paint a foul picture of traditional peasant marriage in order to suggest that marriage is somewhat different in the modern period. Certainly, our high divorce rate gives us no grounds to consider the modern mode of marriage superior."

In diaries, letters, and documents, children, too, are spoken of in affectionate terms, and leftist historian John Demos has suggested that child abuse, so far from being a long-standing problem that we are just beginning to address, is far more prevalent today than it was in pre-modern England or colonial New England.

There are differences, undoubtedly, between ancient and

medieval families, and even in the ancient world Greeks, Romans, and Jews practiced differing marriage customs and pursued somewhat different styles in rearing children, but one of Aristophanes' characters—Strepsiades in the *Clouds*, for example—could have swapped stories with the patriarchs or with the father of the Prodigal Son, and both might come to appreciate, after a few weeks of observation, the affection that lies beneath the bizarre rituals of family life in New Guinea or New Jersey.

There is, in fact, a wealth of solid information, from historians and anthropologists, on non-Western cultures, and despite the creative richness and ingenuity men and women have displayed in devising exotic forms of marriage and family, they converge upon a human norm of a monogamous pair mated more or less for life and dedicated to the happiness and well-being of their children.

The keys to understanding this universal phenomenon are not hard to find. Human children require prolonged care and socialization, which necessitates a degree of parental commitment not required even of chimpanzees. Although the contours of the male/female division of labor may vary slightly from age to age and tribe to tribe, they are far from arbitrary: Men, being bigger, stronger, and more aggressive, are universally hunters, warriors, and statesmen; women, who are hormonally and neurologically programmed for nurturing and compassion, have charge of the softer side of life (which often involves the harder work).

There may be specific biological differences in human beings that nudge us in the direction of marriage, but even if there were not, the sexual dimorphism of our species, when combined with the extended care needed by our children, would make the institution inevitable in all but the most desperately sick societies. I know there are young men and women who have concluded that ours is one of those sick societies, but cheer up. If they are right, we shall simply disappear, and good riddance.

The family is universal, an inevitable institution created out of our very nature. Governments did not invent it, and most, if not all, state interventions into the family are destructive. This is clear not just from policies that undermine family autonomy—compulsory schooling, laws on delinquency and child abuse, no-fault divorce—but even more from tax policies that confiscate (in my case) over half the family's household income to waste on pernicious follies like "Star Wars" defense systems, free infanticide, and the subsidies for drugs, crime, and illegitimacy which, in polite usage, are called "welfare." We have to quit talking about what governments can do to save the family and concentrate on undoing all their massive efforts to impoverish families and undermine their autonomy.

The family is not some rare exotic art form, like stained glass, whose secrets must be preserved and drilled into generation after generation of human beings. Two dumb kids stranded on a desert island would reinvent marriage and family without any prompting. Marriage and family are natural institutions, and although they can be corrupted, distorted, and damaged by human arrogance and folly, the results will always be the same: social collapse followed by a renewal of all the ancient and beautiful things without which human life is impossible. If we could ever succeed in lifting the dead hand of government from our everyday lives—cutting taxes and rolling back virtually all the social legislation of the past 100 years—we should not have to worry about the family. American families would take care of themselves, as they have always done. ◊

DICTATIONS

Values Clarification

"Family values" is one of those political slogans that promises much and delivers nothing. It is a first cousin of such equally meaningless Bill-bennetisms as "Western values" and "Great Books." The primary problem with such expressions is that they are, well, value-free.

At least in the case of "Great Books," there are actual books to lie about. When we come to the word "values," however, it is generally a lie from start to finish: The primary and legitimate meaning of "value" in English is price or worth. I don't know how "values" came to be used as a vaguer synonym for words like "principles" and "beliefs." Perhaps the origin lies in the use of values as an aesthetic term, e.g., as in the color values of a painting, or it may have descended the slippery slope from 19th-century economics to Max Weber's social theories to Nietzsche's "transvaluation of every value." Isaiah Berlin seems to have popularized the use of "values" in the dishonest modern sense. Berlin claims to have believed in "objective values"—which, logically speaking, should be a contradiction in terms. As any Misesian can tell you, value is the subjective importance you attach to something or, in crude terms, what you are willing to pay. But Berlin, playing upon the subjective and objective meanings, goes on to talk about the incompatibility of values and opens up the whole debate on "values."

To understand the difference between a value and a principle, consider "family values." When we speak of various moral principles of family life, we know what we mean: that, for example, abortion is homicide or that a man who divorces one woman and marries another is guilty of adultery. When, however, we speak of "family values," we mean only that families are good things, that children are nice, and that stable marriages are worth having.

There is nothing judgmental about values. You have your values, I have mine, and so long as each of us sticks to his set of values, everything is—as we used to say—"copacetic" (another meaningless word). In the global marketplace of prices and values, there is room for Western values and Eastern values, family values and rugged individualist values, and when we go down into that marketplace, we exchange ideas and presumably swap values. It is no doubt very convenient for politicians and undersecretaries of education who want to base their campaigns on "Christian values" without ever letting on what they actually stand for, but anyone who seriously uses "values" without the quotation marks is probably trying to pass counterfeit money in the marketplace of ideas.

—Humpty Dumpty