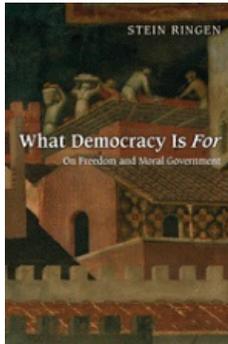


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Democracy and the Family — Setting the Record Straight

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Can democracy exist without the family? Stein Ringen, Professor of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Oxford, suggests that it cannot. In his new book, *What Democracy Is For: On Freedom and Moral Government* [Princeton University Press], Professor Ringen also sets the historical record straight in terms of the historic role of the family.

In the foreground of Ringen's analysis and arguments is the concern that democracy, often thought to be advancing on the global scene, might actually be far weaker than might first appear. As he explains:

In this book I look inside the democracies that are usually thought to be the most robust and find them wanting-and possibly on the decline. Even those that are best by a comparative measure, such as the Scandinavian ones, do pretty poorly by an absolute standard. If we think democracy is now assured, we are mistaken. Democracy is strong in quantitative terms, in the number of democracies in the world, but weak in qualitative terms, in how well those democracies perform.

This is no dispassionate observation from a sociologist. Professor Ringen believes that democracy is a social foundation for human thriving. The loss of democracy, seen in a reversion to anti-democratic regimes, would be a great loss. In his words:

If democracy should decline, the loss would be immeasurable. It would be in the freedom and security of ordinary women and men and children and families to live their lives by their own ambitions and aspirations. It would be in our well-being.

That is a sobering analysis and it comes with Ringen's warning that democracies may appear to be stronger than they really are. The same is true for the family. Professor Ringen observes that some believe that "the family is an old-fashioned institution and ill-suited for survival in a modern society."

He traces this argument back to Friedrich Engels, who argued that the family in its (then and now) current form was a result of industrial capitalism. As Engels saw the future, the traditional family would pass away along with industrialism and capitalism.

Sociologists and other theorists then suggested that this industrial-age family was to be called the "nuclear family." This small family was constituted by father and mother and their children — an island of privatization in the midst of mass society. This "nuclear" family was thus criticized for its privatization and dedication unto its own needs.

In *What Democracy is For*, Ringen sets the record straight. As he explains, the family has always been identified, first and foremost, with the married parents and their offspring. The Industrial Revolution did not create that notion of the family, and it did not fundamentally change it. We should note that though urbanization and modernity tended to separate this "nuclear" family from its extended relations, the same often occurred due to the tumultuous events of previous eras. Professor Ringen wonders why so many academics have fallen into the trap of believing their own arguments about the emergence of the "nuclear" family in the Industrial Age:

Still, the idea persists that modernization gave birth to the small nuclear family, that the nuclear family is the family of its age, and that we are now entering a new age and that the nuclear family's time is up. Modernization, we often believe, means an increasingly sophisticated division of labor between increasingly specialized institutions. While the traditional family—so the story goes—did both production and private life, the industrial age did not need families for productive purposes. The economy had become a market economy and production was lifted out of families, leaving them to concentrate on what remained and hence reduced to satisfying social and emotional needs only. The family was “marginalized” because it had fewer functions to perform.

However, the family as an exclusively social institution is a myth. The emergence of the nuclear family was a myth, and so is its passing. In fact, any story that is told in the language of the family is likely to be mythology. It is true that families today are on average smaller than, say, a century ago, but that is not because they are no longer “extended”; it's just that there are fewer children. Families remain what they have been: versatile and relevant for the satisfaction of a range of human needs.

As Ringen argues, these modern scholars have bought into a “fairy tale” about the family — and a particularly dangerous fairy tale. This idea that the nuclear family is a modern development (and thus an institution that can be transformed at will) is subversive of the very functions the family must perform in a stable and free society.

As he argues:

These little communities of two, three, four, and very occasionally five or more persons, in which people are engaged in nothing more dramatic than going about the business of daily life together, and some in periods of having and raising children, are in fact remarkably productive institutions. The story is about that this is no longer true, that the family that in olden times had many functions to fulfill has now become marginal because it is bereft of functions. But that is a fairy tale.

“Where there are children there are families,” Ringen explains. And families function “as the sites of children's lives.” Ringen explains this with flourish:

Then families provide for those children. They feed, clothe, and give them a place to live. They give them a home, a place where they can usually be safe and protected.

Families tell children who they are: where they come from, who their grandparents and ancestors are, of what kind they are, where they belong, and what their identity is.

Families teach children values and norms. From parents and in the experience of family cooperation, children learn about the difference between good and bad and right and wrong and acquire the ability to believe in that knowledge.

Families teach children to learn. They teach them how to work and how to be social. The family experience is the basis for success in schooling and formal education. It is in the family that children first learn about discussions, negotiations, and shrewdness; about give-and-take, cooperating and fighting; about what it takes to get on with others; about the combined ability to be flexible and to stand one's ground. Each family is a political academy where children get their grounding experiences of citizenship, of rights and duties, of freedom and responsibility. It is in the family that children learn the elementary virtues of manners, politeness, civility, and charm (or do not learn it, as the case may be).

Families educate children. They teach them to walk and speak, to dress and eat, to wash and brush their teeth, to behave—the thousand and one skills that make up daily life and that all who have learned them perform with intuition and obviousness (and make those who do not know them intolerable people).

All these things these ordinary little institutions provide for. Different families do it in different ways, some do it better than others. They are not alone in these jobs. Families share the raising of children with kin and friends and the training of children with schools and nurseries. But to the question of what families are, one answer, also when we see families from the point of view of children, is that they are institutions of production.

The modern academy produces the professions and the professionals, and this class increasingly (and menacingly) sees the natural family as an obstacle to its social and ideological ambitions. We are in Professor Ringen's debt for setting

the record straight on this matter. Christians will want to say more about the family than is found here, but we dare not say less. For, from a biblical perspective, something even more important than the survival of democracy is at stake.

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