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Does the Family Have a Future? Part 1

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The culture war that America has experienced since the 1960s now strikes at the very heart of civilization itself—the family unit. The issues surrounding the family are now the hottest fronts in the war for the soul of the culture. As sociologist James Davison Hunter comments: “One might be tempted . . . to say that this field of conflict is the beginning and the end of the contemporary culture war, for the issues contested in the area of family policy touch upon and may even spill over into other fields of conflict—education, the arts, law, and politics.”

Why is this so? How could it be that something as basic and precious as the family unit could now be a matter of such controversy and division? Two developments demand careful attention. First, an ideological campaign pushed by moral revolutionaries threatens the sanctity of the family within the society. Second, powerful changes within the society and culture threaten to subvert the family, with or without any intention of doing so.

The ideological campaign against the traditional family unit has been underway since the 1960s. The reason for this is clear—those who would transform the society must transform the family unit as well. For, as goes the family, so goes the culture.

Ideological critics have included Marxists, who identified the family as a bourgeois institution impeding the development of communism and true socialism; feminists, for whom the traditional family is hopelessly patriarchal; the sexual liberationists, for whom the family is frustratingly restrictive; and now the homosexual activists, for whom the privileged status of the heterosexual family is a final obstacle toward full equality.

These critics have aided, abetted, and applauded the decline of the family in recent decades. The statistics tell the story. The escalating rates of babies born out of wedlock, the incredible explosion of divorce rates, and the number of single-parent homes demonstrate a record of social change unmatched in human history, except in times of global war or the great plagues.

The most recent statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau indicate that, for the first time in the nation’s history, a majority of babies are born to unmarried women. Each year, about one million children experience the divorce of their parents. The age at first marriage continues to rise, and co-habitation has replaced marriage among many in the society.

Some openly celebrate the change. Judith Stacey, for example, is thrilled that the family is not “here to stay.” “Nor should we wish it were,” she concludes. “On the contrary, I believe that all democratic people, whatever their kinship preferences, should work to hasten its demise. An ideological concept that imposes mythical homogeneity on the diverse means by which people organize their intimate relationships, ‘the family’ distorts and devalues this rich variety of kinship stories.” As Stacey further explains, the traditional family promulgates “class, racial, and heterosexual prejudices.” They would replace the natural family with diverse “kinship preferences” and “kinship stories.”

Her logic is clear. The traditional family, ideally comprised of a husband and wife, plus their children, is now just another “kinship preference,” and a potentially dangerous one at that. According to Stacey, a well-known professor at the University of California, all right-minded persons should seek to destroy the family unit as basic to our society.

Former National Organization for Women [NOW] president Patricia Ireland recently argued that the traditional heterosexual family, based upon heterosexual marriage and marital fidelity, should be replaced with any kinship system individuals may choose, so long as these arrangements are based in “love, loyalty, and long-term commitment.”

Similar arguments are now used by homosexual activists pushing for state-recognized homosexual “marriages.” The redefinition of marriage to include virtually any form of relationship is a major goal of the social revolutionaries, who see the heterosexual family as a formidable obstacle to their social engineering. Western societies have always privileged marital unions, granting rights to married couples that are denied to others. This has been understood to be essential to social stability and the raising of children. The state has thus had an interest in maintaining the dignity and integrity of the marital bond, and centuries of legal precedent stand behind this tradition. Some homosexual activists and feminists admit that their primary motivation is not to achieve a homosexual version of heterosexual marriage (with the obligation of marital fidelity), but to strip the traditional family of its privilege and cultural prestige.

This movement is based on what Stacey calls “the postmodern success of the voluntary principle of the modern family system.” This voluntary principle is another way of describing the desire to revise the family structure as any individuals or “kinship” relationships may desire.

Behind all of this is the great cultural revolution in favor of the autonomous individual. Americans now accept the idea of the individual as autonomous, and thus central to all issues. Individuals are described in terms of rights, rather than obligations or responsibilities. This great shift explains the development of “no-fault” divorce and the weakening of the marital bond.

Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, a perceptive cultural observer, describes America in the 1990s as a “divorce culture.” As she remarks, “divorce has become so pervasive that many people naturally assume it has seeped into the social and cultural mainstream over a long period of time. Yet, this is not the case. Divorce has become an American way of life only as the result of recent and revolutionary change.”

Whitehead demonstrates that the divorce revolution has come entirely since the 1960s. “As a consequence of this sharp and sustained rise, divorce moved from the margins to the mainstream of American life in the space of three decades.” This radical transformation of marital expectation has altered the family structure in remarkable ways. A majority of American children will be without a father in the family for at least part, if not all, of their childhood.

As the society has championed individual rights rather than responsibilities, the result has been not only the liberation of women from traditional role expectations, but also the liberation of many men from any sense of obligation to marital fidelity or parental responsibility. The nation’s “father crisis” is an inevitable result of the weakening of sanctions against sex outside of marriage and restrictions against the casual “no-fault” break-up of marriages.

No-fault divorce laws (or “divorce upon demand” policies) have been a great economic boon to irresponsible men, who almost always experience financial gain when leaving family responsibilities. The flip-side of that equation is that the same laws have meant poverty for millions of women and children, abandoned in the name of personal fulfillment and individual rights.

With this has come the inevitable confusion of blended and re-blended families, with various step-relationships and associated challenges. For many Americans, the family tree is fast becoming too confusing to trace.

The ideological battles fought since the 1960s have devastated many families, and greatly weakened the family as an institution and unit of society. But other forces have also been at work, and these go back much further in our history.

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