

The Family as the Fundamental Unit Of Society

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For most of the human record, to say that the family is the fundamental unit of society would be to say something unexceptional or obvious, the equivalent of saying “the sky is blue” or “waves crash on the seashore.”

Only in relatively recent times, and only among certain educated elites in northwest Europe and America, have we heard statements such as the family is “simply an institution for the more complete subjugation and enslavement of women and children” (Frances Swiney, 1918); marriage is “an institution which robs a woman of her individuality and reduces her to that of a prostitute” (Flora Macdonald Denison, 1914); motherhood “is a calamity to be avoided” at all costs (Ernestine Mills, 1919); or “The family goes back the age of savagery while the state belongs to the age of civilization” (Arthur Calhoun, 1917).

These quotations all came from Anglo-American sources, early in the twentieth century during the unsettling years when the Europeans gave the world the Great War and the Bolshevik Revolution, 1914 to 1919. Such ideas receded in most places during the 1920s, but returned again during the tumultuous 1960s and 1970s, when the family once more became a target of social and sexual revolutionaries. As the writer Stephanie Dowrick explained in her book, *Why Children?*, the family is the basic institution of oppression, “with the father at the head and mother and children in a lump together dependent on father’s good will.” Or, as the radical writer Andrea Dworkin explained in her book, *Our Blood*, “Marriage laws [sanctify] rape by reiterating the right of the rapist to ownership of the raped.” Or as another analyst explained in a 1983 article, “The family [is] neither fundamental nor natural.” Indeed, the word “natural,” like the term “normal” is “a word a [social radical] should use with extreme caution.”

Yet, despite these ideological assaults, the truths of human nature could not be long suppressed. When honestly conducted, free from ideological bias, both the social sciences and the natural sciences force us to see the “natural” and “fundamental” meaning of the family.

In the study of social history, for example, even the new historiography of figures, scholars such as Peter Laslett, report that in Anglo-American society, monogamy is still, and has always been, the social rule (*Household and Family in Past Time*, p. 63), and that the family unit built on marriage and supplemented by extended family ties has always been and remains the only significant family form (p. 67). Importantly, Haslett

adds, “Departure from the monogamous ideal of behavior, amongst English people nowadays, and perhaps among their ancestors, has been particularly conspicuous within the elite, and rejected of the beliefs associated with monogamy especially common with the intellectuals. . . .”

Some twentieth century American historians have also claimed that the American people, early on, had moved away from “the ancient structure of family life” toward an extreme individualism, where the family did not count. According to this interpretation, Americans were “a population raised on an economic tradition of land speculation and individualistic venturing,” people who refused to make sacrifices for any cause other than themselves; the morals of Hollywood and Madison Avenue were implicit to the American founding.

Yet again, more recent and complete historical investigations have discredited this view. The new interpretation sees American society, before mass industrialization in the late nineteenth century, as strongly familial in nature. The economy was home-centered, and most productive activities—from furniture-making to the raising and preparation of food—were family based. This ‘family’ or ‘home economy’ rested on a complex web of obligations. Parents saw the ownership of land and other productive property as a kind of trust, held for the perpetuation of the family line through the children. Great attention focused on the terms and timing of the transfer of economic resources to future generations. As a result, the elderly enjoyed care and support from their grown children. At the community level, kinship, ethnic, and religious bonds held America together. These Americans, in historian Barry Levy’s words, were committed to the creation of families and to the rearing of children as “tender plants growing in the truth.” American families during the colonial, revolutionary, and early national periods were large—an average of seven children per married couple—and they were respectful of age, deferring on most important matters to the wisdom of elders. As historian James Henretta has put it, these American parents raised children “to succeed them,” not just to succeed.

Even after industrialization and the rise of large cities, new historians have shown how Americans sought to preserve the family-centeredness of their society. For example, labor leaders worked to craft a “family wage” system that would limit the intrusion of industry into the home economy, preserve some level of independence or autonomy for the

family, and create conditions where the child-rich or larger families might survive.

In short, historians have denied the claims of the social radicals, and have restored attention to the natural and proper place of the family as the fundamental unit of society.

The same rediscovery of the family has come in the fields of sociology and psychology. A quarter-century ago, Western scholars in these disciplines were busy “debunking” the family, claiming that it was oppressive to the human personality, arguing that children did not need an active father to grow up normally, and urging full recognition and public support for what they called “new family forms.”

But here, too, the tide has turned. For the last twelve years, the “New Research” supplement to the Howard Center’s publication, *The Family in America*, has monthly summarized relevant new studies from the professional journals that affirm the irreplaceable role of the family. We now have a database of over twelve hundred such journal articles. Here is just a sample of what one finds there:

—The Summer 1998 issue of the *Journal of Marriage and Family* reports on a seventeen-nation study of marital status and happiness, showing “perhaps the most sweeping and strongest evidence to date in support of the relationship between marital status and happiness.” The strength of the bond between “being married and being happy” is “remarkably consistent in every country studied”; moreover, Wayne State University researchers show that “marriage protects females just as much from unhappiness as it protects males.”

—The 1998 issue of the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* shows women who live in neighborhoods with a high level of fatherless, mother-led families “experience an 85 percent increase risk of dying of heart disease.”

—The May 1998 issue of *Demography* shows that the presence of fathers in the home is vital to adolescent well being. Fathers have particular influence in the areas of children’s subsequent economic success and educational attainment, and in keeping children away from delinquent behavior.

—*Violence and Victims* reports that nearly half of lesbians report “being or having been the victim of relationship violence” from their same-sex partners, four times the violence level reported by heterosexual couples.

—The *Journal of Socio-Economics* reports that the presence of church-attending persons in Swedish neighborhoods dramatically reduces rates of abortion, divorce, bankruptcy, and out-of-wedlock births, even among nonbelievers who live beside Christians in these places.

—An issue of the *Journal of Marriage and Family* reports that while the percentage of all white females, age eighteen, who were virgins fell from 51 percent in 1982 to 42 percent by 1988, the percent of female teens who were fundamentalist Protestants and who were virgins rose from 45 to 61 percent over these same six years. Strong faith translated into public virtue.

The evidence for the need of the family is overwhelming: fathers matter; single parent families suffer from numerous innate disabilities; the intentional out-of-wedlock child is a selfish, anti-social act that puts the child at great risk; cohabitation is a violence-prone way of life; marriage—compared to all the alternatives—produces more happiness and better health among adults, as well as happier, healthier, smarter, and socially more well adjusted children; and religious belief and activity deliver a host of positive social gifts, even to nonbelievers.

The natural sciences chime in as well. In the fields of human biology and biochemistry, for example, dramatic new findings highlight the important effects of hormonal and psychological differences between women and men in everything from the functioning of the nervous system and the brain to emotional drives. The lessons, of course, are not that one sex is “better” than or “superior” to the other; such claims are at once wrong and irrelevant. The true lesson is the remarkable complementarity of woman and man. In the creation of families and in the rearing of children, men and women are designed to work together, each bringing special gifts and aptitudes that make the combination greater or stronger than the sum of its parts.

This is why research by social biologists shows that: children raised outside intact, two-natural-parent families, are forty times more likely to be physically or sexually abused than are children raised within intact families (*Ethnology and Sociobiology*, 1982); “maternal care” of young children provides “a protective factor” in psychological well being that neither fathers nor nonparental caregivers can provide (*Journal of Genetic Psychology*, 1998); and the level of the male hormone, testosterone, goes down among married men, who by marrying become less aggressive and more cooperative in socially constructive ways—that is, they become gentlemen (1998).

The great anthropologists have long told us that marriage and family living are universal to the human species. G.P. Murdoch, in his 1949 classic work, *Social Structure*, defined marriage as existing only when the economic and the sexual are united into one relationship, yet still found it “in every known human society.” Also universal, he said, was “a division of labor by sex,” rooted in the natural and indisputable differences in reproductive function. Another of the great twentieth century anthropologists, Bronislaw Malinowski, also testified to the universality of marriage, concluding that

there is “something bigger in human marriage,” rooted in “the deepest needs of human nature and society.”

Indeed, even the theorists of evolution testify to family living as a defining trait of humanity. In his seminal article for *Science* magazine, paleo-anthropologist C. Owen Lovejoy marshals the evidence that both human survival as a species and evolutionary progress have depended on what he calls “the unique sexual reproductive behavior” of humankind. Lovejoy shows that the human family system, rooted in complimentary pair-binding, reaches back hundreds of thousands of years; he even implies that the very definition of “human” rests on this family behavior.

[B]oth advanced material culture and the Pleistocene acceleration in brain development are sequelae to an already established hominid character system, which included intensified parenting and social relationships, monogamous pair-bonding, specialized sexual-reproductive behavior [by male and female], and bipedality. It implies that the nuclear family and human sexual behavior may have their ultimate origin long before the dawn of the Pleistocene.

Even as the paleo-anthropologists’ early man began to walk on two legs, he was living in a recognizably human family system.

The message in short—to be human is to be familial. Any significant departure from the family rooted in stable marriage, the welcoming of children, and the respect for ancestors and posterity—any deviation from this social structure makes us, in a way, less “human.” That is, I think it fair to say, the true message of modern science.

Revealingly, it is also the message of all the world’s great religions. While differing on many things, the great faiths—particularly those in the Abrahamic tradition—show that the deepest meanings and the greatest satisfactions for human-kind are found in family living. It should be with a certain humility that science, after a century and a half of diligent investigation of human nature, comes to conclusions that, in ways, largely echo—albeit in less poetic style—the explanations given long ago in Genesis 1, chapters one and two,

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.

And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth. . . .

And as that first man met that first woman, the man said:

This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.

Yet this analysis begs another question. If the family is natural, fundamental, and even irreplaceable, how do we account for the occasional success of anti-family ideas? How can we explain the special success of the post-family ideology that has shown considerable influence at the UN?

Certainly, this was not inevitable. And certainly, it was not the intent of the founders of the UN. Rather, I think we can explain this development through the influence of certain intellectuals in certain times and places. People are policy. More specifically, the answer lies in the unusually strong influence at the UN of a socially radical form of Scandinavian democratic socialism during the organization’s formative years, 1945–1955; a story best told, I think, through the work of one early UN official, Alva Myrdal. She was not the only actor here, but she was surely one of the most influential.

During the UN’s first decade, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark exerted an unusually strong influence on its administrative structure. As European peoples largely “untouched” by Nazism, fascism, or colonialism, and with a common commitment to the “middle way” of democratic socialism, the Scandinavians were well placed to implement a new internationalist agenda in the years after World War II. The Norwegian Trygve Lie served as UN Secretary General from 1946 to 1953, followed by the Swede Dag Hammarskjöld through 1961. Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal headed the powerful UN Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) from 1947 to 1955, while Scandinavian functionaries were inappropriately represented in other agencies.

Starting in 1946, the UN structure included a fifteen-member Commission on the Status of Women, originally designed to be a forum on issues such as the extension of the vote to women and the suppression of international traffic prostitution. Yet, in the 1949 to 1955 period, the UN’s engagement on women’s issues underwent a decided shift, under the guiding influence of Alva Myrdal.

Her background tells us a good deal. Raised by her parents in a strong radical socialist ideological environment, Alva Reimers married economist Gunner Myrdal in 1924, launching an extraordinary collaboration. In the late 1920s, she traveled to the U.S. as a Rockefeller Foundation fellow, absorbing new social theories of family decline from socialists such as William Ogburn, and picking up the progressive view of the state school “as a substitute for the family.” In 1932, she planned construction of a “collective house” in Stockholm, where families would turn infant and childcare, food preparation, and recreation over to the professionals.

In 1934, Alva and Gunner Myrdal jointly authored *Kris i Befolkningsfragan* (*Crisis in the Population Question*). Under the pretext of a campaign to raise Sweden’s birthrate, the book advanced an agenda for a new form of social life. The existing family system, they argued, “is almost . . . pathological, rootless, isolated,” and doomed to “disintegration and sterility.” It

must be replaced by a new social model, where women would stand by men “as comrades” in productive wage labor, where children would become a social or state responsibility, and antique notions surrounding “private life” and “home” would give way to state guided social planning and cooperation. Other components of this vision were loosened anti-abortion laws, readily available contraception, sex education as part of regular school curriculum, population targets and controls as a state responsibility, and the elimination of the legal and social distinctions between married and unmarried adults. Alva Myrdal argued that these goals required the conscious dismantling of remaining traditional homes, through law and policy, and even coercive efforts “to eliminate” women’s roles that were incompatible with her vision.

This book, *Crisis in the Population Question*, had a profound influence in reshaping Swedish attitudes and public policy. The Mydrals became important public figures and their own “companionate marriage” won wide praise as the model for the future. The Mydrals’ direct influence spread to Norway and Denmark, where they inspired “Population Commissions” that reordered those nations in line with their theories.

A decade later, however, husband Gunnar grew absorbed in his new tasks for the UN. Alva Myrdal saw her own new-style marriage falling apart, complaining bitterly that the “ECE became everything for Gunnar, the family and I nothing.” According to the testimony of her daughter, Sissela Myrdal Bok, their “full-fledged companionship” as spouses and as partners-in-work “had now been abandoned.” Alva’s marital role “had become nothing but a mask,” and the Myrdal home grew “alien, empty, [and] devoid of love.”

This strain and threatened rupture of a marriage was and is a tragic tale, one not terribly uncommon in the war-ravaged 1940s. The difference was that Alva Myrdal soon gained a unique opportunity to translate her new family ideology—conditioned by her recent personal experience—onto a global political canvas.

In early 1948, she gave a lecture to UN officials based in Geneva on “The Surplus Energy of Married Women,” arguing that global social and economic woes could be countered by moving women outside the restraints of traditional marriage. Such work attracted the attention of Secretary General Lie, who offered her the directorship of the Secretariat’s Department of Social Affairs. In what she felt to be “a period of desperate [personal] powerlessness,” and traumatized by the Swiss women about her who—she said—held, “cow-like,” traditional female tasks, Myrdal accepted the appointment. She left Geneva for New York, leaving behind her troubled marriage and her two daughters, ages fifteen and twelve.

Alva Myrdal was now the highest ranking women in any international organization, and she turned her considerable energies toward institutionalizing two issues at the UN: the

reconstruction of sex roles and population control. These concerns rose steadily on the UN agenda. In summer of 1950, she accepted a new appointment as head of the Division of Social Science at the UN Economic and Social Council, a post that she held through 1955. The choice was curious, for Myrdal had no former training as a social scientist (her university degree was in literature). Nonetheless, she proceeded to rebuild social science institutes and facilities in war-ravaged countries and to create new ones in the post-colonial states. Her control over program funds provided an unprecedented opportunity to pass over or eliminate those social scientists rooted in an historicist sociology, who had emphasized the central role of the family. They would be replaced by those committed to Myrdal’s vision of the family as a social institution needing radical change. In later years, many of these scholars would return to the UN as national delegates, reinforcing the vision of their benefactor. Myrdal also built a division staff compatible with her views, one that remained long after her departure. Myrdal battled regularly against “Catholic governments” and “Catholic scholars” who held that there was no over-population crisis, only a need for social and economic reforms. This conflict was particularly intense at the 1954 UN World Population Conference in Rome.

In the late 1960s, Myrdal also chaired a committee of the Swedish Social Democratic Party on “equality,” producing a manifesto subtitled the *Alva Myrdal Report*. The document acknowledged that the pursuit of equality means a constant struggle by “society” to level those matters “where Nature has created great and fundamental differences.” She argued that the natural complementarity between men and women must be subverted by state action. Equally radical in its implications, the report dismissed the home, the informal economy, and other forms of traditional society as dangerous to the future. Instead, she said, individuals should have a common dependence on the central state. Marriage as a distinctive legal, social, and economic construct need also be eliminated:

No specific form of cohabitation should be rewarded through the tax system, which should be the same for everyone regardless of sex or civil status . . . every adult is responsible for his/her own support. Benefits previously inherent in married status should be eliminated. . . . At the same time it appears important to provide more protection to other forms of cohabitation [instead of marriage].

As these quotations show, “equality” was not even the real issue—the ideological remaking of society was always the goal. Myrdal’s radical vision of a post-family society, formed in Sweden and institutionalized within the UN, has since borne significant fruit.

So what should we do now? It is time to bring to the UN and to other international settings the shared truth of history,

of the social sciences, and of the great religious faiths—that the family is the natural and fundamental unit. It is inscribed in our nature as human beings, and is rooted in marriage, the commitment to bring new life into the world, and in deep respect for both ancestors and posterity.

It is time to move this view of the family as the fundamental social unit to the very heart of international deliberations, so that it might guide the creation of laws and public policies in our respective nations. The radical model of the “post-family” society does not work. It generated violence, disorder, unhappiness, ruined lives, and even premature death. We are all called to do better in and for the future. Given the story that I have told here, perhaps it will be the Africans, the peoples of the Middle East, the Central Americans, and the Asians who will—even must—take the lead.