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THE SOCIAL CONSCIENCE AND THE FAMILY

CARLE C. ZIMMERMAN

ABSTRACT

Facing crises like those of the present, neither the Greek nor the Roman civilization was able to survive. The modern Western world, unlike its cultural predecessors, has developed the essentials of a system of familial values and preserved them despite their detachment from the real situation. If the family is to endure, the literate minority must assume responsibility for inculcating family doctrine in the social conscience of the masses.

The Western family is rapidly approaching its third violent crisis. The climax will be reached before the end of this century. It will be reflected in extremely high rates of all the symptoms of family decay—divorce, childlessness, disloyalty of family members to each other, and the unwillingness of many persons to burden themselves with families. Even heterosexuality itself will be challenged. This development of antifamilism will be associated with a changed system of social relations in which more and more human behavior will be based on willed contract, compulsion, and temporary selfish interest rather than on family feeling and the voluntary willingness of persons to carry on their daily social duties.

This crisis will be the third such manifestation of mass disregard of the family in Western society. The first occurred between 450 and 250 B.C. in Greece and the second among our Roman forebears between A.D. 300 and 550. Many thoughtful persons, surveying the present development, have been led to ask the question whether familism can persist. Is familism worth while? Does the family system have within itself recuperative forces to help combat the present widespread antagonism to it? Certain despondent persons today openly question the desirability of bringing children into this “brave new world.” Others dream of a world such as that depicted by Aldous Huxley in which the necessary children will be incubated and brooded like poultry. A few, an increasingly smaller few, shut themselves up in the world of the family, hoping that this system which has always functioned in the past will continue to do so. Often unthanked and even “persecuted” by the world at large, these few carry on the burdens of civilization. These have the hostages to fortune, as Bacon said, and are not, like the others, free and mobile persons.

I have chosen to examine the “conscience” of the Western world to learn whether our previous experience with mass family disruption can tell us anything of the probability of a revival of familistic faith. Has there been an evolution of moral and social doctrine sufficient to meet the forces attacking the family?

The term “social conscience” is being used here in the sense illustrated by J. H. Breasted in his Dawn of Conscience. When absolute and universal standards of right and wrong about the family become accepted, and the people come to believe that these rules and standards of behavior are immortal and the basic requisite of civilization, we have a period of conscience and can speak of the “dawn of conscience.”

We can note, first of all, that higher civilization has been associated with the broad acceptance of systems of family faith. The rites of Confucianism, a familial moral system, marked the advent of the Far Eastern peoples into civilization. Since then, regardless of the minor fluctuations in Chinese cultures, the cultivation of the family and high civilization have clung together. The same may also be said of the Hindu peoples since Valmiki’s Ramayana. They have seemed to achieve and retain a
position in higher civilization because of the concurrent emergence of their great civilizations and a clear-cut and, thus far, inextinguishable familial doctrine. Somewhat similar developments appear to have taken place in the Near East among the many different mixtures of civilizations bounded on the west by the Egyptians and on the east by the Persians. All these groups have had a highly developed conception of universal family mores.

As a matter of fact, familial conscience and that which we call modern civilization (of the last five thousand years) have been connected closely in a causal sense. Similarly, deviants and retrogressions in civilization have been associated with the disruption of the family.

THE PROBLEM

The problem is to find out if the social conscience regarding the family in Western society has evolved or developed and if, allowing for temporary fluctuations, this development or evolution has been progressive. This is different from the question of the evolution of the family itself. It could also allow for great periods of deviation of fact from ideal. For instance, from the sixth to the ninth centuries of our era the ideal of family life in the social conscience was the domestic type picture in the writings of Augustine. According to his codification of the moral and social ideal, husband and wife, parent and child, were one. But over and above the domestic institution all men were brothers. In spite of this ideal, we know the peoples were actually ruled by clan or kin organizations larger than the domestic family; and the unity of spouses, of parents and their children, depended almost entirely, when publicly challenged, upon whether this unity served the clans.

We also notice the opposite situation today. Despite the present "moral idealization" of the family, a few dollars and the absence of protest will sever almost any family unit on the grounds of any one of many real or fictitious allegations.

What we are examining here is not the family itself but the virility of its moral ideal. We are trying to determine whether there will be a resurgence of an effective moral or social conscience with regard to the present decay of the family.

LACK OF FAMILY CONSCIENCE AMONG THE GREEKS

When we speak of historical memory, Western life begins with the Greeks. Thus, it is of critical importance to this analysis to examine Greek society in an effort to learn whether there developed in it a permanent moral conscience regarding family life. The answer is not difficult to find because the vital documents necessary in depicting family conditions among the Greeks are available today for the full course of that civilization—from Homer to the cynical satirist Lucian of Samosata.

From about 450 to 250 B.C. the Greek family system decayed, at first gradually and then, as in modern times, with great rapidity. What attitude was taken toward this decay by the more thoughtful among the Greeks?

The Greeks noted the decay of their family system but apparently did not understand its seriousness. With but few exceptions, the leaders who observed this decay participated in it themselves. The serious Plato worried about it and tried to plan an ideal society in which it could be prevented. Aristophanes, the dramatist, displayed their degeneracy in front of the people as much in remonstrance as for entertainment. He even appears in character in one of his plays to point out that he had not, unlike most, been seducing young boys. Except for a few—Polybius, for example—all the prominent Greeks participated in the national riot. Isaeus, the legalist, made the breakup of the family an argument to win suit over possession of property by his clients. Demosthenes used the family situation of his time as a means of defending male prostitution simply because the accused, whom he was defending, was one of his political colleagues.
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Fundamentally, from the time of Pericles to that of Plutarch—a five-hundred-year period from 450 B.C. to A.D. 100—no noteworthy defender of the family appeared among the public figures of Greece. Their sole contribution to Western family conscience was merely that of observing their experience and recording its disastrous consequences.

THE HIGHER ROMAN CONSCIENCE

The Roman world wondered why it had become dominant over the Mediterranean in the face of the older, richer, more civilized, and theoretically stronger cultures of Greece and North Africa. The answer was given them by Polybius, born a Greek but adopted as a Roman. Following the historical tradition of Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon, and having immersed himself in the logic of the "causal" analysis of Plato and Aristotle, he wrote a sociological history which has had a profound influence on Western civilization. Polybius described the decay of family life among the Greeks and attributed the supremacy of Rome to its strong familial system leading to a fine commonwealth and to unselfish devotion to public affairs. It was indeed Polybius who fixed the belief in Western society that the preservation of the family is the first prerequisite to the continuation of a civilization.

This idea seems to have found acceptance in Rome. Thus, family sociology was one of the earliest of the special social sciences in Western civilization. It was preceded, in fact, only by history and the general combination of the social sciences in the Platonic and Aristotelian schools. We no longer have the earliest books, although we know the names of many of the authors, the laws or reforms they proposed, and the actions and beliefs concerning the family of some of their prominent followers, such as Julius Caesar, the dictator, and Augustus, the first Roman emperor (Suetonius Augustus lxxxix, Dio Cassius Roman History lvi).

Thus, when the Roman family began to decay—as it did rapidly in the civil wars before the Empire, during the first century preceding the birth of Christ—the Roman family conscience, in contrast to the Greek, had noted the symptoms of this decline, diagnosed its causes and results as well as its meaning for their great civilization, and suggested a remedial program. This was the so-called Julian legislation, a series of profound modifications of the Roman social system, seeking to preserve, protect, promote, and extend marriages, parenthood, childbearing, and family life in general. The measures require a large volume for explanation and elucidation. Fundamentally, their aim was to make the Romans keep the family by requiring marriage, parenthood, and family life as first requisites to social, legal, political, and other success in the Empire.

During the first hundred and fifty years the Julian reforms were ruthlessly enforced, often to the discomfort of the leisure class who wanted to avoid family ties and to let the common people be the proles, or childbearers. When these measures, because of the lack of a sound educational and propaganda system as well as for other reasons, proved unpopular with the masses, they were found incapable of enforcement. The Roman family system finally wilted, just as ours is doing now, with identical symptoms and the same inevitable social consequences.

The Christians, who had become the dominant force in the Empire after A.D. 300, felt that the cult of the family should result from religious persuasion. Many of them were also convinced during the next two centuries that the world was too frightful and cruel to survive. Judgment day, they were certain, was soon coming! Penalties against celibates and childless persons did not fit into their scheme because many of them wanted to turn completely away from a life of the senses and to devote themselves entirely to asceticism. Consequently, they repealed the Julian legislation between A.D. 325 and 350.
THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CONSCIENCE

The Christians, however, soon were not satisfied to leave the family entirely to exhortation. Scarcely twenty-five years after penalties against celibacy and childlessness had been removed from Roman legislation, the early leaders, under the guidance of Basil, began an elaborate series of private legislation against neglect of the family. These regulations differed from the Julian laws in that they were enforced by the church, applied only to members, and were more extensive than any single system of penalties under Roman law. The family code of Basil dealt with every action—abortion, desertion, abandonment of children, adultery, sexual irregularities of all types (sodomy, homosexuality, bestiality), mistreatment of marriage partners, disrespect to parents, neglect of children—which the religious leaders considered "unfamilistic" or sinful.

Later many of these family regulations codified by Basil were taken up by the emperors and made into public law. Generally the emperors were more strict and severe than the church and inflicted whipping, castration, or the death penalty for flagrant abuses. (The description of the treatment of two alleged adulterers in the first letter of Jerome makes one cringe.) This was contrary to Christian ideas. Christians wanted lighter punishments which gave the individual a chance to repent, reform, and be pardoned. One of the influences of the church on later Roman law was to lighten its severity.

However, all these reforms could not seem to hold the family together sufficiently to preserve the civilization. After the sack of Rome in A.D. 410 and the writing of The City of God by Augustine in 427, things appeared to become worse and worse. By the time we get a new and clear picture of European society the Romans are largely under barbarian tribal rule with a family organization and law much cruder than any envisioned either by the church or by the Roman emperors. The society still had the ideal of the Christian family, that of marriage with proles, fides, and sacramentum as the normal state for the adult. This was launched into the Middle Ages by the last of the early Church Fathers, Isadore of Seville. By the time of Gregory of Tours murder had no penalty if the victim had left no family to avenge him.

This situation lasted for many centuries, sometimes getting better and sometimes worse. In the meantime, the social conscience of the Middle Ages envisioned the domestic family anticipated by Augustine, Isadore, and Thomas Aquinas. Gradually the ideal became more and more the reality until, for several centuries, first Western and then Eastern Europe became increasingly domesticated. The development of social conscience regarding the family and its fixation in Western tradition was amazing. To read modern works on the "mind of the Middle Ages," one would think that there were no family problems then. To read the discussions of problems in canon law, one would think there was nothing else but family life in the Middle Ages.  

THE MODERN CONSCIENCE

Ever since the Reformation and at an increasing rate, the modern individualistic or atomistic family has replaced the domestic family which dominated Western Europe from the twelfth century on. The question is whether this has been a change in the actual family, in the ideal of the social conscience, or in both. In the leaders of this modern change the reality has moved from the ideal, as happened in the Middle Ages, only in an opposite direction. The ideal or social conscience regarding the family is still with us, largely unchanged from its codification by the Christian philosophers in late Roman days.

Space is not available here to give in detail all the different schools of thought from

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3 See Augustine, City of God; Salvian, On the Government of God.
3 Gregory of Tours, History.
4 See the sponsalia controversy regarding marriage from the ninth to the sixteenth centuries.
the leaders of the Reformation through the eighteenth-century rationalists and the nineteenth-century evolutionary philosophers to the modern family sociologists. However, all of them have paid sincere tributes to the ethical ideal of the family. In this respect the modern change differs distinctly from the earlier crises in Greece and Rome. The Greeks recognized the breakup of their family system and seemed to think that the new "unfamilistic" system was "better" than the old. This is typically suggested in the case Against Neaera, in which Demosthenes congratulates the fortunate Greeks for having at least two heterosexual alternatives to supplement child-bearing. The Romans recognized the breakup of their family system, but they never claimed that the family was getting better. Rather, they seemed to feel that newcomers in the Empire would furnish the manpower, whereas the Roman would enjoy himself without the difficulties of family life. This is most typically illustrated by statements of Plutarch on the ludicrousness of parenthood among the Romans, by the sixth satire of Juvenal, and by the attitudes of the wealthy Romans described in detail by Ammianus Marcellinus.

In the modern period the breakup of the family system has thus far been accompanied by a psychological reaction entirely new for Western society. It is being achieved by secrecy and fiction, false hypotheses, misinterpretation of history, and exaggerated piety, seemingly on the theory that beyond us, as an external and constraining social force, there is a permanent system of social values which must not knowingly be violated.

Modern man marries, divorces, and re-marries ad infinitum. He seeks to secure an ethical sanction (church wedding) for each new liaison. This is announced as the perfect and ideal achievement to last unto eternity. In Greece such a person would have had one marriage if it suited his fortune or if, per chance, he might have had a temporary wish for children. His other arrangements (with hetaerae, meretrices, or homosexuals) would have been arranged publicly, merely as conveniences, and without the slightest pretext that he was thereby "improving the family." In Rome, the same person might have followed several courses: He (1) might have followed the Greek pattern, (2) remained an avowed celibate with changing liaisons, or (3) married or remarried within the loose concubinatus form which was purely private and involved no ethical or social sanction. At least, he would have made no boasts that he was improving himself, marriage, or the family by his constantly changing sexual arrangements. This is a simplified statement of the situation, neglecting several amenities to the public forced by the Julian legislation, but it is a true picture. No Roman has left a record in which he claimed the next marriage would be the "ideal" and final culmination of conjugal happiness.

A pat illustration of this is found in the rejoicing at the end of a war in modern society, as contrasted with the Greek custom. Today we rejoice at the reuniting of families (although we know intellectually that many unite only as an interlude before breaking up again). Compare this with a similar period in Greek society as depicted by Aristophanes in his comedy The Acharnians, which enabled the young author to win the highest prize at the Lenaean festival at Athens in 425 B.C. The Greeks depicted by him were pleased, not to be reunited husband and wife, parent and child, but rather to worship Phalé's again:

Companion of the orgies of Bacchus,
Night reveler,
God of adultery and pederasty,
[Whom]
I have not been able to invoke
These past six years [ll. 255–65].

By that time the family system of the masses of Greeks was broken and there was no such thing as a family conscience left.5

There is no space to illustrate this further, but a comparison of marriage attitudes of all social classes today indicates that the modern breakup of the family is an actuality achieved by fictional misrepresentation which has left the original values largely unimpaired.

THE FUTURE OF THE FAMILY

The future of the family in our society is as yet unclear. On the one hand, we must recognize that in reality our system is approaching a crisis. Only twice in all human history, once in Greece and once in Rome, has a large family system approached a developmental extreme as violent as ours. At certain periods Greek and Roman demoralization was more advanced than our own, but in a short space of time we shall resemble them at their worst. On the other hand, while their demoralization was a simple extrovert thing, ours is hidden and introvert.

However, modern society has still preserved the essentials of a system of family values. Previous history of Western society has shown that this system has evolved of itself despite the difficulties of making it generally acceptable to the public.

The acceptance of these values by the public, once it has become used to its temporary freedom from them, seems to have hinged upon two social phenomena: (1) the capacity and (2) the ability of a literate minority by leadership and teaching to re-inculcate family values among the masses.

These two phenomena can occur in modern society. But we shall have to erect a much more sophisticated and honest family sociology than has existed since Voltaire's Encyclopédie.

The future of the family and of many of the important aspects of modern civilization hinges upon whether these two ideas will develop among the literate minority. On the one hand, considering the tremendous changes they will mean in thinking, I should hesitate to say that these will be carried out. On the other hand, considering the extreme seriousness of the problem, I should hesitate to say that they will not be developed.

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