

A HISTORY OF THE FAMILY



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Love and Liberty: the Contemporary American Family

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Papers about the American family typically start with a paragraph like the following:

The American family has, in the past generation or more, been undergoing a profound process of change. There has been much difference of opinion among social scientists, as well as among others concerned, as to the interpretation of these changes. Some have cited facts such as the high rates of divorce, the changes in the older sex morality . . . as evidence of a trend to disorganization in an absolute sense. Such considerations as these have in turn often been linked with what has sometimes been called the 'loss of function' of the family. (Parsons, 1955, p. 3)

This particular passage dates from the opening years of the 1950s which, in the collective imagination of American social science, as popularized in countless books, movies, television series and newspaper commentaries, represents the classical decade of a real America that does not exist any more, indeed should not exist. The 1950s are the dream that is a nightmare, a pretext for ideological pronouncements that reveal much about the current situation. This is particularly true around family issues, from divorce laws to abortion regulations, from disputes about the distribution of condoms in schools to discussions about what authority to give social workers and others in ferreting out child abuse, etc. At one extreme, 'liberals' say that things are changing, this is good and policies must adapt. At the other extreme, 'conservatives' say that things are changing for the worse, and policies must reconstruct what has been destroyed. There is no consensus about the value of what has been happening, or about the policies to be developed. Indeed some 'liberals' are 'conservative' on some issues, and vice versa. There is however some

agreement about certain facts, and, most importantly, about what is in dispute: in brief, a majority of the population of the United States has now experienced divorce, either through having been through one or through having been brought up in post-divorce families. A large proportion of the population, particularly among the poor, has never experienced living in a household made up of a father, mother and natural children. A vocal minority of the population, especially among homosexuals, demand the privileges accorded to families for their own intimate arrangements. These matters are inescapable, and it sometimes seems that the only questions worth asking should have the following shape: are these developments a good thing? A bad thing? For the adults involved? For the children? Such questions cannot be ignored, but they are not the fundamental ones for understanding what is special about the conditions of family life in the United States, that is, about 'the American family'.

The questions raised by the policy debates appear to allow for an objective answer which could then become the basis for action, and there are many who try to answer them, particularly in sociology and psychology. Others, like myself, wonder about the very source of the questions. What makes them compelling? How are they related to other matters? These questions are clearly of a different order, and they may appear not to have the same urgency and to reflect a detached attitude. I look at the American family as an anthropologist, as a professional outsider who has lived for many years in the United States, but was not born or raised there. There is every reason to believe, however, that much is to be gained by taking a broad cross-cultural view that emphasizes relationships between what may otherwise appear disparate and contradictory facts.

The family and 'family values', are areas of acrimonious debate in the United States. Before these debates can be outlined, along with some indication of why they are so acrimonious, one must first sketch the general principles that structure the American family. Only then can one take an informed moral stance. The presentation will proceed in three steps. First, there is an outline of the ideological foundations of American kinship, proceeding from the central symbols of the 'love in freedom' that justifies relationships and marriages. The act of love eventually leads to children whom parents must also love, but not with the same love that unites them, for eventually parents must let their children go free. In a second step, this chapter touches upon some of the problematic familial experiences that reveal both the power of the ideology and its limitations. There is an American way to divorce, as there is one to the framing of the relationship between parents and adolescents, or to the migration to

Florida or Arizona at retirement. Each of these complex events in the life cycle of the individuals and groups concerned is articulated around the general symbols of love and freedom, but involves different protagonists with different impacts on their lives and those around them. In a third step, the chapter concentrates on the specific difficulties that people in the United States face as they struggle with American culture.

The symbolic framework

Love

In an influential book David Schneider (1980) once summarized the structure of American kinship through three symbols: love, sexual intercourse and blood. Sexual intercourse is the mediating symbol. It concretizes the loving bond between a man and a woman, and, through procreation, establishes the special bond between parents and their natural children. Love, however, is what the family is all about. It is the core symbol around which all others revolve. It is not the passionate love of tragic romances, but the life force at the basis of all new social units: not only families, but also clubs, religious congregations, utopian communities, etc. The famous conservative slogan of the 1960s was so powerful because it played on the symbol: 'America, love it or leave it.' Better to move away than to give superficial adherence to a political system that one does not 'love', that is, a political system about which one is not convinced that it represents what is the best in the world. This slogan was controversial in the political sphere, but it remains at the core of the institutional and interpersonal politics of family life: better to divorce than to remain married when love is gone.

Thirty years later, the pattern of these symbols may have shifted, though perhaps less than it appears. Certainly, it is more and more difficult for conservative forces to argue that families must necessarily be founded in a sexuality linked to the possibility of biological reproduction. Sexuality, it has now been argued with overwhelming political success, is less about reproduction than about pleasure and love. Thus, and this is somewhat new but closely linked to the ideological evaluation that made contraception common sense, the gender of the participants should be considered a secondary, contingent matter, both in matters of sexual pleasure and in married love. Still, a distinction is maintained: pleasure is not the foundation of what remains a special state, that of 'family'. As it may have been for the past two centuries in the middle classes of Europe and America, the foundation of the family is love, a

love expressed through a sexuality purified from reproductive considerations. On this basis homosexual couples, after they have publicly declared their commitment to each other – for example through 'certificates of domestic partnership' as they are known in New York City – should be entitled to all the privileges accorded by the American state to those who are married. Indeed there is a drive to push through the courts a constitutional purge of all mention of sex from regulations relating to marriage. Some think of this as an 'extension' of the concept of family to 'alternative' forms. Others, more accurately, think of the discussion as one that touches the very foundational metaphors that justify not only family life but political citizenship itself. This is too important a movement in American ideology for it not to be explored further before we move to examine its practical consequences and the difficulties which it produces.

The constitution of the couple: freedom, community and solidarity

Love symbolizes what unites people, or, more specifically, fully self-constituted free 'individuals', in a new social entity. This entity had no existence until they came together and committed themselves to pursuing the same goals in what Schneider called a kind of 'diffuse and enduring solidarity', that is one that is bounded neither by contractual limits (as relationships between employers and employees should be), nor by a specified time frame (even in an age of divorce most marriage vows still say 'till death do us part'). The entity of committed partners is more than that formed by a couple together for a few days or weeks of pleasure, it is a 'community' – a unity with others bounded by the personal involvement that first brought the people together.

The history of such a community ideology in the United States is a long one. What was made when English puritans founded villages in the seventeenth century after their transatlantic journey still echoes in a radically amplified manner when new groups emerge, establish their identity and claim their right to a space within the social matrix. In the earliest of American communities, a group of men and women got together and agreed to a set of principles that would rule their association. These principles were set down in great detail in a covenant. Being drawn up by small groups independently of each other, these founding documents differed somewhat, in both theological and economic terms. They were in fact the subject of constant dispute and amendment. These disputes led some to leave, sometimes under threat of violence. After 300 years, conditions have radically changed, but many groups continue to

use the model more or less explicitly. In the 1960s many discontented people created what they called 'communes', and moved geographically to some place where they hoped not to be disturbed. Few communes survived, but new ones keep being established, though they are now most often regarded with suspicion by a public that fears 'sects'. More common are groups of people coming together to establish part-communities. It is not so rare, for example, to see a group of parents create a co-operative school based on educational principles different from those they find in neighbouring schools.

In the modern world, it may in fact be families, or family-like arrangements, that best allow for the realization of the community model on which America was founded. Not that many couples write explicit covenants when they get together. Certain members of the liberal intelligentsia do have very clear ideas about the political principles which organize their common life, and they may refer to them explicitly when sorting out such practical problems as who is to take out the garbage, who is to do the dishes or stay at home with the children. They may even draw up an actual contract – as the wealthy generally do, particularly on their second and subsequent marriages. Most couples find such contracts unpalatable, perhaps because marriage is precisely not a contractual matter. They will however negotiate who is going to do what; this may vary considerably from one couple to the next, and from one period in a couple's life to another. The results of these negotiations are the basis of the uniqueness of the couple, and act out practically the love which husband and wife thereby institutionalize – until such time as one of the partners reopens the negotiations, as a possible prelude to the breaking of the community. Love does not abolish freedom. In marriage one does not really 'give' oneself to the other – as the image may be elsewhere or 'elsewhen' in the Euro-American world. In marriage one 'shares' a self that remains one's own. Love, being about freedom, is also about separation. Marriage is about divorce.

Parents and children: the movement towards freedom

The ideological representation of the parental role is quite simple: parents are just as free to decide how to raise their children as they were when they decided to get married. This freedom, however, has an absolute limit: parents cannot make the choices which children can make for themselves, and the state is entitled, indeed required, to ensure that parents do not overstep this most subtle of boundaries. Parents enjoyed a freedom in the past for which they are now paying with the freedom they must give to their own children.

Anthropologists, of course, approach 'freedom' as a contingent symbol that arose through a process of historical evolution, and of freedom 'displays' as cultural practices that must be taught. It is not enough to be free, or to leave the other free. It is also necessary to teach what is involved in putting this freedom into effect. As much research in early interaction has shown, the first conversations between a mother and her child centre around what the infant 'wants' to eat, what clothes he would 'prefer' to wear. The questions are asked as if the mother expected that the child will choose something different from what the mother would have chosen. As child-rearing manuals emphasize, at birth the child is already a unique individual with a distinct personality which the mother must nurture so that it can develop 'according to its own desires'. These desires are not those of the parents, who must search for the signs that reveal the child's personality, and be careful not to mistake their wishes for his. Not surprisingly, the child soon responds in kind. The first grammatical constructions he learns centre around expressions of choice made in spite of and against parental choices.

A child's freedom is only fully established when he can make a community of friends for himself. To be legitimate, this community or 'peer group' must bring together a number of persons chosen among those known by the child independently of his parents. They will be drawn from school or neighbourhood. This group will be more central than cousins and other relatives, and will become the privileged setting for the rites that mark the various passages from childhood through adolescence. Baptism, First Communion and other religious rituals, even when they are celebrated, are rarely major family events, except in some ethnic enclaves. The major American rites are birthday parties and the graduations that mark the passage from one school level to another. One can thus see mothers celebrate the first birthday of their baby with the mothers of other babies of the same age. In a sense these babies are the baby's own community. As the child grows, he will impose a list of friends and the parents move to the periphery.

It has often been said that, in American families, the child is king. Critics have sometimes said that children in the middle classes of the United States can be quite isolated as parents shuttle them to the side to make room for their own interests while using the need to preserve the child's own freedom as a hypocritical rationalization. Taking all this into account, it would be more accurate to say that the child is a stranger, a respected guest to be taken care of. The fact that the child is not really a stranger in his family only makes the situation more tense. The child has not chosen his parents, and he was not a party to the negotiations which formed the conjugal community. He will probably not be either an active

participant in the other negotiations that may lead to the break-up of this community. One might say that the child does not have a legitimate position within the family made by his parents. The child is not king, he is Other and will be independent.

The family after the departure of the children

The departure of the children to college, marriage, work and separate residence begins a period said to be difficult for the couple. Even if procreation is not quite considered the 'reason why' people get married, questions like 'When will you start your family?' or 'What will you do now that your family has left you?' are still asked of couples before they start raising children, and as their children move away to college and the world of work. Love is not about procreation, but the distinction between a purely lustful relationship and a loving one is a subtle one that children help resolve. After the children have gone, does the couple still form a family? The question may not arise literally, but it underlies a whole set of practices that constitute the specificity of the American pattern. In the best of all American worlds, parents and adult children who are now fully free actors renew the temporary links which united them. Parents and children are now equal and may establish a kind of community of shared interests as friends. Whether this does or does not happen, the next stage in the domestic cycle institutionalizes the separation of the generations. Parents try, and generally succeed, in making a new life for themselves, often after a migration to sunnier climes – towards a new America that is fully their own.

These structures are not merely symbolic; they are also practical. For many years now, a new type of real estate development has appeared both in the Sun Belt and in suburbs: condominiums arranged around an appropriately named 'community centre' with pool, tennis court and various spaces to hold meetings and parties. One of the things that makes this phenomenon interesting is the rules of ownership – actual covenants – which specify who can buy (only people over fifty-five without children, for example), what they can do with their property and perhaps even what will be the style of the community life. Children may come for brief visits but they may not reside there. Thus one can inherit the value of the property but not the physical property itself which thus cannot become the symbol of the continuity of a family. Indeed, to buy this condominium, the parents will probably have sold the house in which the children were raised. This house was not itself either the symbol of a lineage, for the rupture had already been consummated in the previous generation, since the parents did not themselves inherit a house that

could have rooted their memory in geographical space. Nothing had ever obliged them to go for holidays at their own parents' or grandparents' homes, in the provinces, the countryside or even 'the old country'. There is no pressure on the parents to consider retiring where they were born. Any attempt to preserve a lineage is thus broken at each generation. Some among the very rich may attempt to control their children through the establishment of trust funds and the like, but this is tolerated rather than encouraged by the institutional system. No aspect of a family transcending the unit made by the marrying couple is recognized in legal documents: parents are not obliged in any way to leave any part of their estate to their children and may disinherit them. Once children have turned adult, the state loses all interest in the relationship between them and their parents. Love (and thus indifference, if not hostility) can now prevail.

Ideological contradictions

The ideological framework which I outlined must not be mistaken for a statement of statistical averages, or even for a hypothesis about what some people believe. Middle-class families, perhaps more than the families of any other social class, or than those of recent immigrants, may have more success displaying themselves so that they 'look like' the mythical image. It remains the case that constructing such an image is not easy. It requires a certain level of financial resources that many, in poverty or close to it, cannot achieve. One must be steadily employed; one must be able to afford what is significantly known as a 'one-family home' in an area where one can pay the taxes that ensure a good school for one's children, etc. When some of this is not possible, accommodations must be made, and the result may be kin relationships that are quite distinct from the image. This will be discussed in the final major section of the chapter. At this stage, I focus on practical, indeed existential, problems that America presents to the most committed conservative. There are many instances when the prescriptions of the ideology must necessarily reveal themselves to be in conflict with each other. It is ideologically clear, for example, that parents have the authority to organize the education of their children. This has to do with parental independence from the state. Conversely however, the state must prevent the parent from interfering with the child's own freedom. This battle continues to be fought all over the United States on issues of sex education, parental notification of daughters' abortions, etc. Ideologically, both father and mother are equally responsible, biologically and

financially, in the development of their child; legal precedent through the abortion fights appears to have established that the father has very limited rights until the actual birth of the child. This has to do with the 'privacy', that is the radical individual freedom, of the mother, a freedom that may be limited by the love she may feel for the man involved, but not by the biological, 'blood' link that everyone recognizes between the father and the unborn child. This section approaches certain classical problems in American family life as directly produced by the ideological structure.

Independence

In an ideal-typical American family, the growing child has soon affirmed a marked difference in his tastes (music, clothing, hobbies, etc.), but also and above all in his social relationships. These acts of choice are proper and legitimate, but they are rarely easy, whether for himself or for his parents – even though the latter have taught him the need for such choices. And yet, at the crucial moment in his development, the 'teen-age' years, when the child begins to assume his individuality, freedom and independence, the process that actualizes the ideological model creates deeply felt tensions that have attained mythical proportions.

One of the most interesting of the things about those puritan communities of the seventeenth century mentioned earlier was the controversy that arose when the first generation started dying and their children could not quite affirm their own salvation, and thereby become full members and legitimate leaders in what had never quite been 'their' church and community. This was not a 'generation gap' as the phrase was used in the 1960s, but it may have been the first instance of a problem that remains: if children are free, and if adherence to a community must spring from independent evaluation, what are parents and children to do when the latter come of age? In the seventeenth century, the debates had a strictly theological cast while the models for everyday life in families remained European. In the eighteenth century, the question of independence took a political character. Later, with the explosion of industrial capitalism in the north-east, the opening of the frontier in the west, and other possibilities for social mobility, an economic twist was added to the problematics of freedom. The slogan of the time was the famous 'go west, young man!', to prosper far from one's family and all the other ties that keep a person in place. The 'self-made man' is above all the man who has not inherited anything from his parents. By the end of the nineteenth century, the situation had changed. One could no longer escape the products of unrestrained capitalism. One had to worry about the impact

of the massive immigration of populations that appeared more and more different from the earlier ones. From 1900 to 1950, a great debate raged to redefine the place of independence in economic and social matters. Labour unions were accepted, or at least tolerated, a national retirement system was started and Franklin Roosevelt made it politically possible for the state to become directly involved in the economic life of the country.

In spite of these transformations, independence remained the foundation of sociability. One can understand for example the theories of education that sprang up around the work of the great American philosopher John Dewey as an attempt to rethink independence as requiring less a physical than a psychological escape. As the frontier closed, this may have been necessary to preserve a mechanism to realize the ideology. This evolved in an altogether Baroque manner through the popularization of Freudian ideas and the development of clinical and counselling psychology. The intelligentsia of the United States no longer debate divine predestination, but there is much concern with the definition of mental health. A true adult is a person who is 'free' from 'unhealthy' dependencies. Many of these theories affirm that nothing is worse for children than too great a psychological dependence on their parents, and much energy is spent in therapists' offices achieving a separation that a few argue actually goes against the grain of experience, and perhaps even common sense. The recent explosion of concern with child abuse and incest may be seen in the same light: the exercise of parental authority over children is always suspect. A child must make himself.

Such doctrines, particularly as they are inscribed in laws and regulations allowing state institutions to intervene in the household, make an extremely powerful network of constraints. Neighbours, school, church, innumerable professionals, all contribute to the construction of a graven image of 'the family' with which each family must live. Many of these specialists agree among themselves in affirming that the solution to most problems between the generations lies in a greater separation and even in the destruction of these linkages, and then they help their clients actually to realize this separation. In fact, the very persistence of such diagnostics reveals the strength of the familial links, not only among recent immigrants who may not yet be fully aware of the American ideological framework, but even among the most 'typical' of Americans. Thus, the disturbed young man who tried to murder President Reagan in 1982 was the product of a conservative upper middle-class family. His family went against their own feelings as they accepted the advice of a psychiatrist who thought he could be cured if he was expelled from the family circle in order to be independent, and so they literally rejected him.

Everyday-life dramas are rarely so intense. They are deep nonetheless, for there is always a tension between the ideology of independence and its ritual requirements, and day-to-day family relations. In general, American children, like children everywhere, are comfortable at home. But the scene of the car heavily laden with the miscellaneous stuff a child takes as he moves out of his parents' household is a scene which most Americans will play several times, as children and as parents. It is a scene that is placed under the symbolism of negative love, of divorce.

Divorce

On 4 July 1776 was proclaimed what is very significantly called a Declaration of Independence, which established the United States among the nations of the world. This declaration begins with these words:

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bonds which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

One can recognize in these lines the great themes of individualism. The declaration has many of the features of a creation myth told as a triumphant divorce that puts an end to illegitimate dependency, and allows each party to affirm itself in separation and equality. The apologists of divorce picked these arguments up in the middle of the twentieth century when the laws ruling marriage were changed. In the current perspective, divorce is a liberation from a union that was never more than a political act. Divorce is not the sign of a disorganization of American culture. One could say, on the contrary, that it is the sacred act which constitutes America. First, children must divorce their parents. Only then can they marry. For many this first marriage itself is suspect, particularly if it is contracted when the couple is relatively young, 'immature', and the partners are not quite able to discern their true selves. An adult divorce, or the break-up of one or more lasting 'relationships' that have not been formalized, may be actual prerequisites to a fully legitimate, adult, free and independent marriage.

This is simple only in the ideological realm. In everyday life, the experience of separation after enduring intimacy is one of repeated loss, grief and disorientation necessitating major repairs. A whole class of professionals has in fact appeared to help with difficulties that do not have to do with any hostility to divorce. In the middle classes, divorce has

Table 20 Marriage and divorce rate

	<i>Marriages (per 1,000)</i>	<i>Divorces (per 1,000)</i>
1950	11.1	2.6
1955	9.3	2.3
1960	8.5	2.2
1965	9.3	2.5
1970	10.6	3.5
1975	10.0	4.8
1980	10.6	5.2
1985	10.1	5.0
1988	9.7	4.7

Source: US Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1992.

become so commonplace that it forms the context of those who have not divorced. In many schools, the children of divorced families are now the majority. Two recent presidents (Ford and Reagan) were divorced, and so are many of the most powerful politicians. Divorce is ordinary, and the difficulties that accompany it must thus be the product of the ways in which it is constructed by all those involved.

In ideology and law, divorce is made to be something that happens between two persons, and to result in the severance of a relationship. In everyday life, marriage always involves a large number of consociates, and divorce, particularly when children have been born, is only a step in a relationship that, to all intents and purposes, will not be dissolved. Minimally, one of the ex-spouses will have to pay child support (and the other may have to go to court repeatedly to get the money); the ex-spouses will commonly have to accommodate their new lives to visiting rights; in cases of joint custody, the negotiations may be a daily matter. Sociologically, divorce should thus be understood as transformation rather than severance of a relationship. Paradoxically, one may never be so united with an ex-spouse as after the divorce, when it may become necessary to juggle two sets of in-laws, four sets of grandparents and two

Table 21 Marital status of the population (percentages)

	<i>Single</i>	<i>Married</i>	<i>Divorced</i>	<i>Widowed</i>
1950	22.8	67.0	1.9	8.3
1960	22.0	67.3	2.3	8.4
1970	16.2	71.7	3.2	8.9
1980	20.3	65.5	6.2	8.0
1990	22.2	61.9	8.3	7.6

Source: US Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1992.

or three sets of half-siblings of very different ages. Marriages may not last, but the ties of divorce are for ever: they cannot be broken – perhaps because the state is much more active in regulating relationships between ex-spouses than it was before the marriage when the couple could claim a right to privacy that is abolished in divorce.

Evidence is accumulating that post-divorce arrangements are universally difficult. There are tales of successful divorces, but they are rare. Economic struggles are common, particularly for women who often end up quite impoverished if the divorce is acrimonious and the ex-spouse refuses to pay child support. There are emotional difficulties for grandparents, and sometimes even parents, who, because of the vagaries of custodial arrangements and the mobility of the population, lose any realistic access to the children. Above all, there is extensive evidence that children suffer during and after most divorces. There is no solid evidence that, in the long run, they do not adapt to what many of their peers also go through. But there is still a paradox here, given a culture that represents itself as particularly concerned with the needs of children. In fact children are only secondary parties to their parents' divorce: they have no right or claim, legal or customary, on the marriage.

The division of family labour

The great sociologist Talcott Parsons, in the paper mentioned earlier, gave an intellectual sanction for what became known as *the American family* to the American imagination, that later reacted against it. It was the dream for which soldiers were told they were fighting during the Second World War: a house in a suburb which a man leaves every morning of the week to go to work, by which he supports a wife who stays at home to raise a small number of children, all in the hope that the two of them will then retire on the fruits of their hard work. In both scholarly and popular imagination this division of labour was both natural and something to be achieved through legislation when conditions, whether because of poverty or older cultural patterns, were hostile. In earlier generations many women had worked outside the home, and many more did so during the war. But such situations were said to be socially unfortunate and psychologically unhealthy. For 100 years, trade unions had fought to take women out of the workforce so that all could enjoy an ideal that few had been able to afford. By the 1950s, it seemed that the American economy could produce this situation. It turned out that it could not, and that most adults must work outside the home.

Starting in the 1960s under the impetus of early feminism, and gaining strength since, ideological and economic contexts have radically

changed. Women have rejoined the workforce. The modern image of the couple is one of individual workers joining together, with both participating equally in everything. There is no division of labour; all tasks are shared. This can be interpreted as an expansion of the foundational individualism which Parsonian sociology (and some recent psychological theorizing) contravened when it postulated an innate difference between men and women, thereby justifying their differing positions within the family: women were nurturant while men were not; men were particularly well designed to enter the public sphere while women were not. In a democracy based on absolute equality of similarly endowed entities, inequality must be explained through reference to postulated differences in endowment. The feminist argument that was radically successful in the courts and Congress stressed that differences in endowment may exist between abstract individuals, but not necessarily between sexes. Some human beings may not be able to do X or Y, but their right to do X or Y should be determined independently of any consideration of their sex. On this basis, more and more traditionally based male occupations were opened to women, including, recently, fighting combat missions in the military.

Two difficulties have not been resolved. They may even have been exacerbated. One is focused at the interpersonal level, in the midst of families at home. The other is focused at the national political level and may not be quite consequential: the conservative backlash against feminism reveals itself as not quite strong enough to reverse administrative evolution. Various figures, Phyllis Schaffly in the early 1980s, Dan Quayle ten years later, may make a name for themselves by emphasizing what was positive in the older models – generally by pointing to the difficulties contemporary children may have because of familial disruption, and the impact of their behaviour on other arenas of social life. Generally these figures fade away and the polity continues its move towards a greater integration of women in the world of work and political leadership. As feminists will point out when they talk about 'glass ceilings' and the like, there is still some way to go, but the distance already covered is extensive.

At the interpersonal level the situation is murkier. Men, in brief, demonstrate no particular desire to share in the world of the home, and all surveys of their participation in household chores and child-rearing routines confirm that the movement is very slow. At work, the state may regulate relationships, but at home and 'in love', a man and a woman are alone, conducting difficult negotiations according to shifting principles. In spite of all that has been said on the equality that should be established between spouses, it thus seems that, even when the wife works outside

the home, she is the one who directs familial tasks and performs more of them than her husband, particularly when they concern children. She is the one who takes the children to the paediatrician, who talks to teachers, who organizes birthday parties. American women cannot be said to be 'housewives' any more, but they are not quite free from the house either.

Questions of authority

In America, no class or generation has any legitimate authority over another. Nothing may be more foreign than Chinese strictures about filial piety and the necessary respect which the young owe the old. There is no doubt however that, through the simple mechanisms of differential maturity and economic dependence, parents in the United States exercise over their children a definite, though often specifically hidden, power. Most parents have very definite ideas about the future they wish for their children, and, given the necessary economic resources, they implement their plans. American parents may not control the marriage choices of their children. Neither can they directly control their career choices. These are the absolute prerogative of the adult child, and there is little that parents can do, even if they actively desire to resist the ideology, whether on moral grounds or because they are recent immigrants from other lands.

Parental control thus realizes itself indirectly, primarily through residential decisions that in fact proceed from an educational rationale, and are dependent on economic status. On marriage, or at the time of a decision to go beyond a temporary 'relationship', an American couple, it is well known, establishes a new residence rarely related to the residence of either of their parents. The choice of the location of the residence depends on a compromise between what the couple can afford and their perception of the quality of the schools in the town considered. By carefully choosing their residence, parents thus control the set of people among whom their children will start exploring matrimonial possibilities through dating and other mechanisms. Indirectly they control where their children may attend college, and thus their class position and marital choices.

This control is quite indirect however. It is clear that, statistically speaking, a good school district, or a prestigious private school, increases the probability that a child will succeed. But neither ensures it, and one can understand the anxiety of parents during the adolescence of their children. What made the 1960s such a dramatic period for so many middle-class families was the apparent demonstration that the 'children

of privilege' could consider renouncing what their parents had struggled so hard to give them. In the end, very few children actually renounced their privileges. But taking adolescents through school and college applications remains a painful process. Not all children do well in good schools. Teachers and others continually wave the flag of educational failure, or simply of educational mediocrity (not being admitted at Harvard is generally talked about as 'failing' to get into Harvard). Nothing here is experienced as easy.

Statistically – rather than experientially – the middle class reproduces itself in the United States as elsewhere. This demonstration remains a challenge to American ideology. Many cultures, like traditional India, place what Euro-America sees as social inequalities at the very centre of their ideology. In America the situation is quite different: any demonstration of group inequality not based on the talents or achievements of individuals becomes a scandal to be remedied through the strengthening of laws and regulations enforcing democracy. The disputes remain acrimonious even as some of the most glaring are apparently resolved. It is almost forty years since the Supreme Court outlawed school segregation, but in urban areas schools remain segregated, mostly because of residential patterns that are themselves the result of familial choices boosted both by ideological and economic structures. The bussing of children across district lines seemed a plausible solution for a while, but the idea does not seem to make much sense any more. Reformers are pushing instead for a revision of the tax systems that allow certain schools to have access to much more money than others. Others are pushing experiments where entire poor families are moved from inner cities to suburbs. None of these policies however touch the underlying structures that centre on parental freedom, and on schools as the mediating institution in social reproduction.

Diversity in everyday life practices

While the everyday life of American families cannot be understood apart from its institutional and ideological contexts, it is also constructed in an economic context which imposes other constraints. Still, the two contexts are really only one. A great part of the energy used in everyday life is spent in an attempt to put ideology into practice. The mother who asks her infant which of three types of mashed vegetables he 'prefers' must find these on the shelves of her supermarket. The industrial production of the country must be so organized as to place them on these shelves, and the mother must be given the economic wherewithal to buy them. In

general, the realization of independence requires the economic means which allow the children to reside apart from their parents. This residence must be, if possible, the private property of the couple. If the wife stays at home, the husband must find an income that will allow two adults to survive 'independently', that is, without help from parents, friends or neighbours. Seventeen years later, this same couple will have to help the child express his own independence through such things as sending him to attend a university so distant that he cannot continue to reside at home, and major financial sacrifices will have to be made. Even the less well-off may put aside money for many years and even get into debt so that their children can go away to college. An anthropologist may see in this situation an example of early distribution of inheritance. It is also admitted that, even when the parents are comfortable financially, children should earn some money very early, and thereby begin to establish their independence. Thus, starting at thirteen, many young girls spend several hours a week taking care of the children of neighbours, and many boys distribute local newspapers. From sixteen, many adolescents work in restaurants and factories during weekends and holidays. All that can prevent a family who wish to look normal from living this model is thus a challenge.

Middle-class difficulties

Two situations are critical. For the children's independence to be effective they must find employment and housing. Depending on the economic situation of the country, this may be difficult to accomplish, and there have been times when adult children had to continue living at home. In the 1980s, when both the price of housing and interest rates were at their highest, it was common to read about the drama of young adults having to move back with their parents because they could not afford to symbolize their independence. The macro-economic forces that lowered interest rates in the early 1990s and allowed for a resurgence of the construction industry may reverse these trends, though some continue to talk about 'downward mobility' and the possible inability of the current generation to attain the level of comfort experienced by their parents.

At the other end of a family's career, the relationship between aged parents and their children is marked by similar problems. Above all, it is necessary to preserve reciprocal independence. Parents cannot be directly dependent on their children, and this is partly why, over the past sixty years, the social security system was created and continually reinforced. Despite this, Senator Goldwater, Republican candidate to the presidency,

campaigned against it in the 1960s in the name of individual responsibility. For conservative Republicans, it seemed just that one should be poor in one's old age if one had not been careful during one's active life. As late as 1981, President Reagan attempted to limit benefits. He failed, in great part because the Republican electorate, an electorate that included many older people, made it clear that social security was not to be touched: actual independence is more important than intellectual discussions about 'responsibility'. Eventually the system was strengthened, and the taxes paid by younger Americans were increased significantly. In recent years the debate has focused on this burden: children may not have to support their own parents directly, but they are required to support the elderly in general. This is becoming an onerous task that threatens their own ability to exercise their freedom to produce an appropriate family.

Family networks in the working class

In its logic, the American kinship system is a-linear in so far as no mechanism allows for the institutionalization of a lineage. It is also intensely nuclear in so far as it radically devalues the extension of the household to include other relatives. It is not so much that parents and children do not maintain ties. These can be quite strong. It is, rather, that, in a juridical framework which ignores these ties, they must be actively constructed. Each household must maintain a body of familial lore through telephone calls, requests for help, exchange of pictures, reunions specifically designed to bring the family together (rather than the celebration of a rite of passage), etc. Certain households are parts of 'family clubs' that bring together possibly hundreds of people descended from the same couple. These groupings rarely become practically relevant in the everyday life of a middle-class family. There is evidence, however, that they can become much tighter when economic conditions get difficult. I have already mentioned the temporary extension of the middle-class household when adult children cannot get jobs. Such extensions are quite general among those who are perennially at the edge of economic disaster, the poor and the nearly (or working) poor, particularly in urban neighbourhoods.

There, family networks are activated that can associate many people dispersed over the whole country. Many black families have two centres of gravity, one in a large northern urban centre, and another in a rural district of the south where grandparents, and perhaps some of the adult children, are ready to take care of some of the grandchildren when the parents find themselves in trouble or even simply when they decide to

shield their children from the influence of urban schools. In the urban centres themselves, similar kinds of networks organize themselves among parents and neighbours and they fulfil the same functions when unemployment, sickness, addiction, jail, etc. incapacitate parents. In these conditions it is not rare for a child to be informally adopted by an aunt or grandmother for months, even years. Until recently this was an underground pattern which welfare policy is now taking into account. These types of organizations can also be found among the poor southern whites who also find themselves obliged to migrate to the northern urban centres. European migrants generally were not able to build urban/rural networks, as they could sometimes do in Europe. The Irish, Italians and Poles had to settle first in large cities where they constituted for many years the reserve of cheap labour on which was built the economic success of the United States. The person who had just arrived had to construct a family separately from any network. The children of this generation experienced something very different: intense familial networks in tight neighbourhoods that had soon developed, and that helped with survival when conditions got worse – as they regularly did. Economic depressions and wars bring people together. Prosperity loosens ties. Thus, little by little, Irish, Italians, Poles and others moved to the suburbs where they are now mostly found. Through this process, America reconstructed itself.



European immigrant family. Hulton Deutsch.

Poverty and matrilinearity

This last generalization remains controversial as some argue vocally about the continuing relevance of alternative cultures that would be a deliberate challenge to the apparent hegemony of the middle classes. I have touched briefly on the issue of familial fostering, particularly among the black poor, through which aunts and grandparents take care of children for extended periods – a pattern that some would trace to West African traditions. The tendency of black families in poverty towards matrilinearity is sometimes used as another instance. Finally, there is much talk about the persistence of foreign patterns brought by not-so-recent immigrants perpetuating themselves in various ghettos. I expand on this in the next section.

Matrilinearity in the Euro-American kinship system appears to contradict both American institutional bilinearity and traditional patrilinearity (still alive in the transmission of family names). It has however been described as evolving quite regularly under conditions of economic stress, in England for example. This may prove to be related to the peculiar relationship between parents and children which a fundamentally nuclear kinship system fosters. As mentioned earlier, direct intergenerational links are deinstitutionalized, but they are not thereby radically broken. It is just that they must be locally maintained through such activities as keeping track of birthdays, anniversaries and genealogical ties, not to mention the exact relationship of children in a multiply divorced couple. Greetings cards must be exchanged, telephone calls made and family news and gossip disseminated. As far back as we have records for the United States, this seems to have been a female activity: women keep track of the extended family, including that of their husbands. Not surprisingly, in case of emergencies that cannot be handled through the resources of the household, the first relatives to be called will be on the woman's side. It is still more likely for mothers rather than fathers to be given custody of children after a divorce. Since *Roe v. Wade*, legal development has established the absolute right of women on unborn children, and may thus reinforce implicit matrilinearity. A mostly invisible fault line separates the father from the mother-child set. In case of 'family quake', the break will take place there rather than elsewhere. The result is something that looks like the family of American nightmares: the 'mother-headed family' from which the father is absent.

Poor blacks, and also immigrants from Latin America, have always been the victims of the economic conditions which make it difficult to maintain a couple together. One of the most famous and contested

Table 22 Female family householders with no spouse present (rounded percentage of all families)

	White	Black
1960	8	21
1970	9	28
1980	12	40
1990	13	44

Source: US Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1992.

pronouncements in American sociology is that written by Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then professor at Harvard, later counsellor to President Richard Nixon:

At the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family. It is the fundamental source of the weakness of the Negro community at the present time . . . The white family has achieved a high degree of stability and is maintaining that stability. By contrast, the family structure of lower-class Negroes is highly unstable, and in many urban centers is approaching complete breakdown. (Moynihan, 1967 [1965], p. 5)

Despite such calls for action, statistics reveal that the number of households headed by a woman continues to increase. From 1960 to 1990, the number of these households has gone from 8 to 13 per cent among whites, and from 21 to 44 per cent among blacks. One must point out however that what the census counts as a single woman is rarely alone living by herself with one or two children in urban isolation. A young mother will most probably live with her mother (or even her grandmother) and several of her brothers, sisters and cousins. This familial group is generally inserted in an extended network of kin who, to a certain extent, will help. These families then take a certain genealogical

Table 23 Rate of births to unmarried mothers (per cent of total)

	White	Black
1950	2	19
1960	2	22
1965	4	26
1970	6	38
1975	7	49
1980	11	55
1985	15	60
1990	19	64

Source: US Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1992.

depth that is all the stronger when grandmothers and great-grandmothers are themselves relatively young and do not have resident husbands or companions.

The increase in the number of black female heads of households has been accompanied by an increase in adolescent sexual activity and in the number of teenage mothers. These rates continue to increase. Some have tried to explain this increase by hypothesizing a cultural difference between blacks and whites, suggesting that blacks accept such conduct while whites frown on it. In fact, black parents know that a young girl who becomes a mother condemns herself to a life among the poorest. But they are poor themselves, and are often the 'illegitimate' children of a temporary relationship between their mother and a father many do not know. Most will not reject this girl. They may hope for the boy to remain involved with his child without counting on it, and they will not be surprised by a separation. He may himself have children in various households whom he does not regularly support. Later, when the girl reaches her middle twenties she may get into longer-lasting relationships. Some of these may lead to marriage.

From a formal point of view, the picture that emerges is quite different from that of a middle-class family, but this is somewhat misleading, particularly if one discounts the effects of poverty and pays attention to an ideology that may in fact be even more radically individualized than that of the middle classes. What is sure is that the situation is too explosively political to allow for a sorting out of possibilities according to any canon of objectivity. One may say that, even if they do not marry as often as other groups, blacks in poverty do have powerfully structured families. What this structure is remains a murkier matter. In fact no one knows for sure the exact ratios of long-lasting relationships in which adults take extensive care of their children. There is an institutional fact which must make us doubt the accuracy of current statistics about household organization: there is no system in the United States directly to help families with children (on the model of the *allocations familiales* in France) and welfare is given easily only to households where there are 'dependent children' and no resident husband. There is thus no incentive to formalize a relationship that may still be real. Social workers who should report these situations often do not. What is more, the family of a young pregnant girl has no incentive to marry the father. The welfare money she receives can be merged in the family budget. It can also be used by the daughter herself to establish a separate residence if she is in conflict with her mother, or if this mother is herself a drug addict or otherwise unfit.

All this indicates that the increase in out-of-wedlock and teenage births

is not only the product of a pleasure-oriented sexuality. If this were the only issue, the wide availability of contraceptives would have lowered the rate – as many expected it would. It is clear now that years of explicit sex education will not make teenagers use contraceptives when childbearing is socially advantageous. For poor adolescents, fathering or mothering a child is a sign that one has become an adult, and thus entitled to the privileges of independence. It is only for young middle-class whites that one can speak of an orientation towards eroticism, even though, there too, the ideology is that of the love which must come before desire. In any case, only a tendentious interpretation of limited statistics can allow one to speak of 'disorganization' to explain the absence of formal husbands in many households. Finally, care must be taken when generalizing statistics and ethnographies of life among the very poor. There is no doubt that, among blacks as among whites, as soon as material conditions allow, families take a decidedly middle-class shape.

Ethnic traditions

Some scholars insist that aspects of African traditions survive among blacks. Still, it has been more than 150 years since the last African crossed the Atlantic in a slave ship. Blacks are, along with the British, among those who have the longest history in America. The rest of the population is descended from people who made the crossing from Europe in the past century, and the extent of the differences that survive after three or four generations is quite limited. New immigrants are now coming heavily from the Middle East and Asia, and the debates about cultural clashes and a fragmented future have heated up again. These newcomers bring with them familial forms initially very different from European and American traditions. How far, and for how long will material and ideological conditions allow for the maintenance and reproduction of these forms? This is a classical question in the United States that has been essentially answered, as far as European immigrants were concerned: great-grandchildren identify with an ethnic label even when they have forgotten their ancestors' migration experiences, but their everyday behaviour is not very different from that of those who identify with other labels. Thus there are many contexts when people will not say that they are 'Americans', but rather that they are 'Scottish', 'Irish', 'Italian', or that they are 'a mix'.

This evolution was linked to a particular structure of immigration that may have changed. Until recently, the move across the ocean, whether Atlantic or Pacific, could not be reversed. With the development of cheap air travel, it has become easier for migrants to maintain contact with

family members on the other side. Those who come from the Caribbean particularly, often preserve international networks that look like those which urban blacks construct with their kin in the south. Many migrants from Taiwan, the Philippines and Korea may thus find themselves participating in two different systems of institutions and customs with different responsibilities on each side of the ocean. It remains to be seen whether this will strengthen the older generations in their struggles to maintain a kind of authority over their children that is not really allowed by America.

In their first years in the United States, migrants' relationship with America can remain relatively external and limited to the world of politics, education and work. Otherwise, one can conduct one's life in a neighbourhood inhabited mostly by others from one's own old country. Still, external contacts eventually have consequences on everyday life, particularly as children grow up in public schools where they encounter the children of migrants from other parts of the world, fight with them and, not so rarely, intermarry. Only the most exceptional effort can establish the wall that is necessary to prevent this from happening. Mennonites have succeeded. Hasidic Jews may be on the way to doing so. What will happen to the Muslims and Hindus that are now quite numerous is still unclear. But one should not discount a liberal, humanistic, democratic ideology which, through its declared neutrality towards religious (cultural) differences and its massive zeal in attacking anything or anyone who tries to limit individual freedom, has shown itself to be radically corrosive of any pattern that differs much from its own.

The future

Talcott Parsons, in the classic statement that opened this chapter, was arguing against the idea that 'the family' was dying out as an institution. He agreed that it appeared to have lost most of its traditional functions, but he attempted to demonstrate that other, fundamental functions would always be fulfilled within the confines of the family. The onslaught against his understanding of one of these functions, the 'stabilization of adult personalities' through a division of familial labour that would parallel 'natural' differences between men and women, has made a large part of his argument seem rather quaint. The other function he mentioned, 'early socialization of children', may still have some explanatory value if it is broadened. With the closing of orphanages and other such institutions, the collapse of utopian attempts at communal child-rearing has become complete. It may indeed be the case that nuclear-like

arrangements may be the easiest for human beings to construct, and that America, through its emphasis on love and independence, will always make it more difficult for broader networks to institutionalize themselves. There is little doubt that, in the foreseeable future, most children in the United States will remain under the responsibility of a few adults, most of whom are tied by intimate relationships to each other, and one of whom at least is related biologically to the child. There is no reason not to call such an arrangement a 'family'. This picture does not say much about the exact nature of the relationship between the adults, or between them and the child. To the dismay of many, and not simply among the old and conservative, and barring a revolution or other cataclysm, there is no mechanism in sight for the reinstitutionalization of heterosexual marriage as the only legitimate setting for adult sexuality.

This, however, should not be overinterpreted. The picture that is emerging is not quite a romantic one, particularly if one looks at it from the point of view of the ideal-typical life cycle: it will certainly remain common for a young adult to go through a period of 'one-night stands', more or less committed 'relationships' and two or three marriages with the attendant divorces. This ensures a lifetime of loss and mourning, and, for those who can afford it, counselling. Any one of the arrangements may constitute a 'family' in the above sense, particularly when children cohabit in the household. The exact nature of the activities within these households is the interesting question since, as all adults work outside the home, and most children attend day-care centres, nurseries, schools, etc., not much besides sleeping and toileting may be happening there. In large urban centres, the development of cheap restaurants and commercial laundries appears to take even food preparation and clothes cleaning out of the home. This allows for continued talk about the family losing further function to other specialized institutions in an ever more detailed division of labour. There is only one area that strongly argues for continuing to think of the family as a central institution: education in its relationship with the reproduction of social stratification. All evidence points to the fact that this is always mediated by the family through its organizing of the educational experiences of children. Parents do not set school curricula, and they may not have much input on the organization of schools. They are however the determining influence on the kind of school their children attend. Given the enormous diversity of schools in the United States, this is something that is not likely to change soon.

This is profoundly shocking to the American liberal imagination, and signals the need to see children as the ultimate challenge to the realization of democracy. The conception of children is, on the one hand, a moment for the radical expression of the parents', and particularly the mother's,

freedom. The state may not enter the bedroom; it may not regulate abortion. Once the child breathes on his own, however, his reality as a child 'of' his parents becomes a problem, psychically and socially. America is founded on the fully individualized adult, the 'self-made man'. It constructs a person who stands alone, psychologically and financially, and who then enters into informal arrangements with other independent adults while keeping the right to break them at any time. This makes children problematic: they cannot display institutional independence. As human beings they are ideologically 'individuals', separate and different from their parents. As children, they are malleable persons who actively construct those who take care of them as somehow 'theirs'. Their immaturity however does not allow them to be very effective in imposing their will on their parents, for whom they may be, above all, a practical problem to be resolved – through baby-sitters, day-care centres, schools, etc. There is a strong political awareness that this situation may hurt children, so that the further withdrawal of the state in matters sexual and reproductive seems to be balanced by further inroads into what used to be 'private' family matters. Welfare agencies already have extensive authority over the family life of the poor. Schools, starting with sex education, and now through many programmes intended to help children with family problems (alcoholism, abuse, divorce, etc.), are slowly being given authority over middle-class parents. This is and will remain explosive.

This is a multiply paradoxical situation. It will drive institutional change and, in the long run, ideological evolution. Marriages will be even freer, the independence of children will be even greater. The couples will be ever more alone in building their relationship, and they will be further confused. They will be ever more jealous of their rights over their children, and the state will be ever more involved in what will be less and less of a private realm. These tensions, particularly if something major happened radically to challenge the astonishing success of the United States as a world power, could lead to radical transformation. Such moments are rare, however, and it would be surprising if, thirty years from now, the quotation with which I opened this chapter did not still apply. People will marry, and they will divorce. They will have children and worry about them. They will reproduce America, even as they resist it and question an ideology they cannot escape.