
SORTING OUT THE FAMILY

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Conservatives complain that the break down of the traditional family has badly affected the upbringing of children and the general moral fabric of society. We are told that the idyllic family where kids were given the right mix of nurturing and discipline to put them on the right track in life has been shattered. Liberalised divorce laws and the condoning of extra marital sex have undermined the long term commitment to marriage and to marriage as the basis of child rearing. Now we have kids being brought up by single mothers who cannot cope adequately with the task of parenting. Even where the marriage is still intact kids are packed off to child care while the mother heads off to work.

Hopefully this is a reasonably accurate characterisation of the 'family values' point of view. Now how should progressives respond to it?

Lone mothers

Let's start by looking at lone mothers. This refers to both mothers who were single from the start and those who have separated from the father.

At their most emotive conservatives claim that society is being overrun by unmarried teenage mothers and that they have taken this wicked path because of a general decline in moral standards and the financial inducement of welfare entitlements. The main flaw with this argument is that the vast bulk of society resists this 'temptation' and that the problem is mainly confined to underclasses (eg ghetto blacks in the USA) where a range of particular social pathologies are at work. It boils down to whether you see the solution in controlling the perverse behaviour of people living in sub-human conditions or in eliminating those conditions.

We are told that couples do a better job of child rearing than lone mothers. This is obviously a silly generalisation to make. For example, one can easily imagine an economically well established and mature women doing a better job of parenting than plenty of traditional couples. As for the epidemic of divorces, the point is often made that a broken marriage is generally better for the kids than a festering union.

No doubt there are benefits in having more than one person with the status of parent. However, a sensible and loving single parent is better than a couple where one or both are monsters.

Gay baiting

Often glorification of the family is part of a gay baiting exercise. Homosexual relationships are said to be 'unnatural' as opposed to the traditional heterosexual marriage. Perhaps homosexuality is unnatural from the point of view of reproducing the species. However that does not seem to be a problem given that the human race is not in danger of being underpopulated. If homosexuality is genetic, it is 'natural' in a very real sense. If it is not genetic, well I guess it is 'unnatural', like most things in human life - houses, clothes, cooked meals, cars, aeroplanes, language and so forth.

Is the family falling apart?

Is the family falling apart? Not really. It is just being transformed. The traditional family is being superseded by a new type based on greater sexual equality and sequential monogamy. This will not be as stable as the traditional family of old, but it will be more stable than many marriages of the past 20 years that were collapsing traditional ones.

This new form of marriage has the potential to be a much better environment for child rearing. Working women make better mothers than domestic drudges. And men who participate in family life rather than sitting in an armchair reading the newspaper make better fathers.

Of course the transition from the old to the new family is not a smooth process. The new does not emerge at the same pace as the old crumbles. Women find themselves taking on a double burden of work within and without the home while men are slow to take on domestic responsibilities. This is a matter of breaking down entrenched habits and values, and also changing labour market arrangements to ensure greater flexibility in working hours for both sexes.

Feminists and single parenthood

Feminists often challenge the claim that the two parent family is typical. While this may be prompted by the laudable desire to ensure that lone parents are recognised as an established and legitimate part of the social landscape, it is still nonsense.

In its most extreme form we have the claim that the two parent family is now in the minority. This is possibly based on looking at two parents families with dependent children, as a proportion of *all* family units, including those *without* dependent children. In Australia they are only 44 percent when measured this way. However, if you take out the families without dependent children - most of whom are aging couples with 'empty nests' - the picture is very different. If we look just at families with dependent children, 82 percent have two parents while only 16 percent have one parent.¹

Furthermore, there are two reasons why even this figure of 16 percent overstates the extent that single parenthood is considered an alternative option.

Firstly, in most cases single parenthood was not a first choice but rather the result of a separation. According to the Australian 1986 Census, only 20.5 percent of the 324 171 lone parents recorded were never married. By the same token, unmarried mothers only made up 18.9 per cent of recipients of sole parent pensions in June 1991.

Secondly, for most lone parents their current position is a "transitional" form of family unit, not a permanent alternative to a two parent family. They do not stay lone for long but remarry. There is a high rate of remarriage among divorced persons and an increasing number of 'blended families'. The average duration of the lone parent pension in Australia is only two years and the main reason for discontinuation is the formation of new relationships.

Conclusion

Marriage and the family is a field of study badly needing the attention of sensible and rational progressives. At the moment it is dominated by all sorts of nonsense both from conservatives and from the politically correct.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics (1991) *Labour Force Status and Other Characteristics of Families, Australia, June 1991*, Cat. No. 6224.0.