

CHAPTER 2

APOLITICAL ACCOUNTS OF THE FAMILY

INTRODUCTION

This Chapter is both historical and observational, setting out a cross section of major approaches to understanding and theorizing ‘family’ in contemporary society. My interest lies in identifying the unarticulated presumptions of form and function of ‘family’ underpinning these major framings, presumptions which flow into institutional and public discourses. Interestingly, when the key approaches to conceptualising family are set out, it is possible to identify a division in the way ‘family’ is understood. This can profitably be conceptualized as a division between *apolitical* and *politicized* understandings of family. *Apolitical* approaches are those that represent the nuclear family as natural and universal. Rather than developing an analysis of the ideological and political contexts in which various family forms occur and operate, these accounts choose to represent the family as an apolitical site. Some reference themselves to God, others to the natural evolutionary progress of human societies, while the more recent make use of the terminologies and understandings of psychology and psychoanalysis. Generally speaking, these are approaches characteristic of the 1940s through the early 1970s, situated solidly in the economic, political and social phase of Fordist capitalism. By contrast, *politicized* approaches to conceptualising family assume that the family is a site of political manipulation and exploitation. While tempting, it is important not to imagine a linear progression from apolitical to politicized positionings of family. Many of them existed—and exist—contemporaneously. These diverse approaches coexist and intersect in various ways with other historical currents and with each other and to represent them in isolation is merely an analytic mechanism directed at identifying key aspects of each.

Historical positioning

The period between the two World Wars saw the disciplines of psychoanalysis and psychology gain credence, attracting both researchers and clientele. At the same time, methodology became increasingly ‘scientific’ and unreflectively objectivist, paving the way for a paradigmatic division between qualitative and quantitative methodologies. In this climate, the relevance of psychologically-based approaches to human behaviour which emphasised empirical and observable data was established, reflecting the hegemony of Modernist realities. As a consequence, the interwar period was dominated by the Modernist perspectives of Freud and by the social

psychology of The Chicago School⁵. At the same time, the theorists of The Frankfurt School were developing a critical philosophical project questioning many of the inherent presumptions of Modernist theories of individual and social development. Their work pre and post-World War Two represents one of the key politicized understandings of family and will be revisited in the next Chapter. This movement towards more 'scientific' and individualized approaches to the family gained momentum in the post-World War Two period—a time characterized by an emergent US technological and cultural hegemony. These newer approaches did not replace already existing dialogues about the family. They were added to the simmering pot of research, theorizing, moralizing and exploitation that became associated with the family.

America had not been under direct threat during this war and emerged in a stronger economic position than when it began its campaign. Assuming what it now believed to be its rightful place in the world, the United State was the driving force behind the Bretton-Woods agreements which established international economic institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, set the US dollar to a fixed price of gold, and which outlined a set of global economic principles. As well it was the architect of The United Nations Charter and of collective security systems such as NATO and ANZUS which, according to Clark (1997), "constituted an interlocking network of security arrangements extending across much of the globe" (p. 133). The United States unrelentingly used its post-war economic power to secure its geopolitical agenda as the Cold War unfolded and was played out. It took its role in international relations, and itself, very seriously. The Cold War world was a place of tension and global insecurity as the new world order slowly took shape. Internally, there was a perceived need to construct a strong American social and moral order in order to maintain economic, spiritual and technological advantage over the Soviet Union and the threat of communism. Enter the need to establish and maintain the strong, durable nuclear family.

Mirroring the Modernist vision of a victorious America, the social sciences experienced the emergence of a systematic theory development approach increasingly focussed on the creation of accurate and valid systems of measurement. This approach developed an appetite for the empirical data and verifiable results characteristic of psychology and other cognitive sciences, results that are visible and easily interpreted by governments and other would-be clientele. As a consequence, new measurement techniques and new methodologies were developed which effectively shifted the research focus to the individual. In this climate, the family became a site for investigation rather than a site of investigation and since this time the family has been increasingly seen as the social site in which individual

⁵ What became known as The Chicago School of Sociology was one part of the collaborative social science research agenda founded by the University of Chicago in the early years of the twentieth century. The emphasis of this school was on the accumulation of first-hand empirical data—a move away from social philosophy, historical investigation and general theory (Bulmer 1984). It represented the first collective American sociological project (Bulmer 1984) and its impact is still felt today, particularly in applied social analysis of urbanization, poverty and the welfare state.

personalities are formed. Common to these approaches was a movement towards 'scientifically-based' analyses, increasingly premised upon sophisticated measurement procedures and controlled sites and carried out by 'experts'. Reflecting the concerns of psychiatry and psychology individual function and malfunction was the core concern and the family was allowed to become the required context for the development of well-formed individuals who, in turn, contributed to a moral and strong society. In this rush to measure and ideologically valorize, political analyses of the family were sidelined. At the same time, and as part of the same process, the nuclear family narrative would increasingly become a normative principle against which behaviour—both individual and group—could be measured. It was in this climate that apolitical approaches such as Structural Functionalism and Systems Theory flourished. This is the historical context in which these approaches developed and they should be understood accordingly. Evolutionary theory contributed in no small way to this climate—the constructions of linear development at its base impacted on studies of human life, contextualizing our views of individual and society.

SOCIAL DARWINISM

Social Darwinism legitimates the proposal that the modern nuclear family is the inevitable outcome of progressively more sophisticated human organisms and social organization. By this account, this evolution has taken millennia, moving humanity from Pre-Hominid to Modern social and cultural organizations. Fundamental to this view were presumptions of linearity—the notion of developmental stages through which human society and the family form have moved, from early primate-like groupings characterized by sexual promiscuity, through group marriage, polygamy, and finally the development of modern monogamous marriage and the nuclear family (Engels 1972; Morgan 1963).

What took shape within these framings of progress was a seemingly self-evident biological and social human hierarchy. The developmental continuum constructed within this hierarchy reinforced a polemic between primitive and modern societies which became the 'us' of sociology and the 'them' of anthropology. Although this dichotomy has been challenged (Goody 1971, 1983), there has continued to be a disciplinary divide between an anthropological focus on primitive, traditional cultures and an attendance by sociology to modernity, and ostensibly progressive societies. What are *different* social systems are perceived, via this dualist epistemology, as equal, and consequently available for scrutiny, comparison and measurement (see, for example, Parsons 1977; Zelditch 1955). This symmetrization of relations renders ideologically imposed valuations such as the equation of modernity with a higher degree of social, cultural and even intellectual development invisible. This allows the establishment of a set of us/them, modern/primitive value judgements which are taken to be value-neutral. They are, however, in no way neutral. Their equation of nuclear family with an evolutionary highpoint requires a particular interpretation of difference—one that positions non-Western, non-



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