

CHAPTER 3

THE PRE-1970S POLITICIZED FAMILY

INTRODUCTION

The previous Chapter described and positioned *apolitical* approaches to the family. Unlike apolitical frameworks, politicized approaches are those that view the family, in the first instance, as a site of political and ideological activity. Of significance here are Marxist approaches, and relatedly, The Frankfurt School uptake and critique of the basic tenets of psychology and psychoanalysis. Feminist approaches, in all their theoretical diversity, also understand the family as the site of power relations and political struggle. These critical approaches to the family uncovered the connection between this social form, the social construction of identity, and larger political and economic processes. These approaches do not follow on temporally from apolitical theories of the family—their distinction lies in the way in which they view the role of family and its link to broader social, economic and political processes.

PATRIARCHY AND THE WESTERN NUCLEAR FAMILY—A GIFT FROM GOD

Erich Fromm (1955) tells us that Western culture is founded upon the ancient Jewish and Greek cultures, both of which were patriarchal. According to Fromm the Christian Church played a dominant role in transmitting Jewish and Greek culture, and, along with it, patriarchy, to Europe. The outcome was the rise of rational science and the emergence of the secular state, both enabling conditions for the emergence of the modern nuclear family narrative. The Judeo-Christian tradition generated the moral aspects of patriarchy while its intellectual roots are to be found in Greek culture. In this vein, the predominant European religious ideology, Christianity, clearly chronicles the arrival of humankind in Adam and Eve and their offspring—the first nuclear family. This family, of course, mirrors the patriarchal relationship between God and his people. As Fromm notes (p. 53):

The crowning and central concept of the patriarchal development of the Old Testament lies, of course, in the concept of God. He represents the unifying principle behind the manifoldness of phenomena.

And, just as the meaning of human existence drew from the existence of God, the nuclear family drew its meaning from the patriarchal male role. Drawing from the model presented by God and recreated in Adam and Eve, the nuclear family has been depicted as the natural human formation, consolidating a belief in the universality and unchanging nature of this family across time and in its hierarchical

and patriarchal design. As noted earlier, this coincides nicely with Social Darwinism's notions of the nuclear family as the high point of social evolution. This narrative cum myth has been institutionalized in the dogma of the varieties of Christian Church that have taken Creation as their prime 'truth' and attached to it a normative moral order.

Historical evidence suggests that the Christian Churches, their advocates and employees have long been proactive in ensuring the connection between nuclear family, religious affiliation and the State. As early as the fourth century, Christian religious institutions manoeuvred to replace extended kinship attachments with fealty to the Church itself—God, Church and individual became the pivotal relationship. Rather than loyalty to extended family, the Church required loyalty from each individual unto itself. As part of this shift, marriage and inheritance procedures were formalized in line with Church doctrine, legitimizing and naturalizing a patriarchal nuclear family formation that coincided with economic changes heralding the arrival of capitalism. These new avenues of inheritance acted additionally to diminish the legal and social rights of women and wives, putting them increasingly at the mercy of male family members (Ariés 1962). In this same period, the changes wrought by industrialization and waged employment acted to lessen the pressure for relatives to cooperate in order to work joint pastoral or agricultural holdings and sent increasing numbers to urban centers in search of employment. The increasing dependence upon written records that accompanied this process ultimately benefited the literate male clergy and the institution they represented in terms of social power and in relation to material wealth, particularly the acquisition of land by the Church (Goody 1983, 1996; Haralambos et al. 1996). Indeed, the hand of God had little to do with the Church's eleventh century position as the biggest landholder in France and Britain. Thus, the Church has, for its own purposes, actively sought the maintenance of the nuclear family form, both in terms of social narrative and state legislature. Embedded within this ecclesiastical and State promotion of a particular family form is a prescriptive description of appropriate internal relationships that fed into and reflected the sociocultural and economic environment of the times. Thus, what became an idealized family form was consistently patriarchal in form and function, embodying the persistent ideological commitment to a hierarchical social relationship of sex (gender) role domination and subordination. This, in turn, was tied to particular political agendas, both secular and ecumenical.

Ariés (1962) makes a connection between the need for privacy and space in the shift toward the modern family. He paints a picture of a cramped and public existence as the norm until the end of the seventeenth century—not until the eighteenth century did housing which allowed the development of the modern family become widely available. In its infancy, the modern family was a social form restricted to the nobility and the well-to-do. Ariés suggests that the modern family has remained unchanged from this time to the present, spreading out to other social classes to the point at which "family life finally embraced nearly the whole of society, to such an extent that people have forgotten its aristocratic and middle-class origins" (1962, p.

404). Interestingly, he links the modern family with “intolerance towards variety” and “insistence on uniformity” (p. 415)—this homogeneity is a key and often-unremarked characteristic of the nuclear family. Crucially, ‘childhood’ as a concept can also be traced to this time. Ariés (1962) argued that the emergence of the concept of the modern family coincides with that of childhood in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. What Ariés gives us is a weave of influences—changes in housing, economic change and increasing class differentiation, the emergence of childhood—which came together in the emergence and dissemination of the nuclear family form throughout the various social classes. As we have seen, accompanying and enhancing these changes were the political manipulations of the Church and emergent secular nationstates. And, resting behind these processes was an emerging capitalism, gaining momentum and influence. The nuclear family was rapidly becoming a primary interchange point, holding all these currents together.

MARXIST APPROACHES

Focussing more directly on the impact of industrialization, a Marxist lens on the family made direct links between the reconceptualization of individuals in terms of labor and the emergence of an exploitative social system based around commodity production. Prior to the mid-1800s, family research was characterized by an extended ‘preresearch’ period featuring non-empirical compilations of family genealogies, household budgets and unemployment assessments by interested amateurs and historians. However, the publication of Engels’ *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1972) marked a watershed in studies of the family. At this point, interest in family moved from a practical measurement of its characteristics or appeal to a moral order to its position as a social site within an industrializing economy. Engels perceived the family as a highly politicized social organization and his deliberations regarding the family within industrial society precipitated ongoing research interest in the origins of this formation along with the connections between family and the major social institutions.

Of particular importance was his insertion of the value of labor into discussions of human evolution. These theorizations coincided with the spread of Social Darwinism, fed by both evolutionary theory and widespread intellectual interest in notions of social revolution. His interest in the family was at its sharpest when he turned his attention to a consideration of the patriarchal, monogamous family. Drawing upon his own investigations and those he carried out in collaboration with Marx, Engels identified:

three principal forms of marriage which correspond broadly to the three principal stages of human development: for the period of savagery, group marriage; for barbarism, pairing marriage; for civilisation, monogamy supplemented by adultery and prostitution (1972, p. 138).

It was, however, only for men that monogamy could be supplemented; for women the modern marriage was monogamous, a monogamy enforced by social subordination and legal sanction. Engels, drawing upon the works of Lewis Morgan



<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4020-0481-0>

New Times: New Families

Carrington, V.

2002, IX, 161 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-0481-0