



Introduction

The units included in this volume are products of a seminar titled “The Changing American Family: Historical and Comparative Perspectives.” A number of teachers had expressed interest in a seminar focusing on “the family,” and I suspected that they, like many other Americans these days, would be troubled by what is happening to families or to family life and would want to clarify their understanding of what *is* happening and why, the better to be able to impart to their students an awareness of and, perhaps therefore, some degree of control over the forces that are shaping their own lives. The choice of topic was both timely and timeless. Timely because the popular press, much social science literature, and the oratory of politicians is nowadays replete with expressions of concern about the possible imminent demise of the “traditional” nuclear family household and values associated with it; and for the past several years both Houses of Congress have been deliberating a so-called Family Protection Act, proponents of which argue that it would strengthen “traditional” family values that have been undermined by excessive governmental intervention in family affairs, but opponents of which fear that it would actually bring Federal influence more than ever into family decision-making. There are also, however, numerous more optimistic appraisals of what is happening to the American family, according to which it is becoming a more diverse institution, more “pluralistic” and better adapted to contemporary life. The topic is timeless, too, because over the past several centuries every major change in American political economy has brought in its wake major changes in American family life, and every period of change has produced both prophets of doom and prophets of a new and better way of life. Those who have foreseen a better future have not denied that social change may produce temporary “dislocations” and even bitter hardship for many people, but that, they have argued, is one of the inevitable costs of change and the burdens may be alleviated by private or public (governmental) action.

We cannot, however, shrug off our current worries with confidence that, despite the doom-sayers of the past, “the family” has survived and will no doubt continue to do so. Talk about “the survival of the family” is at best obfuscating because it is not and never has been “the family” that is endangered but, instead, in each historical period, a particular form and quality of family life. We can be fairly certain that family life will persist, in one form or another, but we cannot be certain about the quality of that life or about the quality of the persons and citizens that it will be instrumental in producing, and we cannot be confident that the burdens of social change can be alleviated by governmental “pro-family” action. Despite much talk since the early days of the Carter administration about a “pro:family policy,” our Federal government has been unable to formulate and execute a coherent policy toward families, and there are few signs that it will ever be able to do so. The problem is not that anyone is avowedly or even covertly anti-family, but that a particular policy that is “profamily” from one perspective may be seen as anti-family and even as undemocratic from another perspective (witness, for example, the debate about abortion), and is questionable that the two moral perspectives should or can be judged at the Federal or any governmental level. It has, moreover, become

clear that governmental intervention in family affairs, though perhaps beneficial to some people for short or long periods, can have unanticipated negative consequences for the same or other people in the long run.

My aim in organizing the first few sessions of the seminar was to expose the participants to some of the diversity of current views on family structure and its relationship to the larger social context in which families are formed, mature, operate, relate to one another, and are eventually replaced by other families. I stressed that although “the family” is often thought of, especially from moralistic perspectives, as the building block of society, it is as much or more the product of its larger social context, and this context includes theories about what “the family” is or should be, what its “functions” are or should be, and modes of political action intended to shape family life. Two books, Christopher Lasch’s *Haven in a Heartless World* (Basic Books, 1979), and Sar Levitan and Richard Belous’s *What’s Happening to the American Family* (Johns Hopkins, 1981), were read and discussed by all and offered contrasting perspectives on, and radically different evaluations of, recent and not so recent changes in American family life, and of the merits and demerits of various forms of political and economic intervention. In response to the participants’ particular interests, special sessions were devoted to the topics “Teenage pregnancy, causes and consequences,” “Black families, race, class and poverty,” “Parent-child relations,” and “Family violence.” We are grateful to Evan Stark (from Yale’s Health Studies Center) for directing our reading and discussion on the subject of family violence.

The remaining five sessions of the seminar were devoted to “work in progress.” On each occasion two or three of the participants presented brief statements of their units’ contents and of the ways in which they planned to present the subject matter to their students. The presentations and the discussions that followed were always lively and informative in many ways. Because as it happened several participants chose to work on related subjects, each with an enormous literature and many potential sources of teaching aids, there were many occasions for useful exchanges of complementary perspectives and of suggestions for effective presentation of the material of the units. Although the participants were diverse in their backgrounds, in the subjects they teach, and in the kinds of students with whom they routinely work, there was a welcome uniformity in their commitment to high-quality education and to teaching about matters of immediate concern to students with whom they empathize deeply. It was my pleasure to learn from them something of what it is like to work with younger students whose “family problems” are often most pressing, and also to learn much more about what those problems are.

I have taken the privilege of arranging the units into four sets. The first three, by Harrison, Henderson, and London, address some aspects of the problems of teenage pregnancy and parenthood; the authors have all worked for many years with young women, and men, for whom those problems are all too real. The next five units, by Airone, DiGrazia, Natale, Mikolinski, and Cohen, focus on intrafamilial relationships and are intended to enhance young people’s abilities to cope with the routine and not-so-routine difficulties that arise in the course of forming a family or in the course of maintaining one. The next two units, by Dunleavy and Herndon, are more general and historical in orientation; and the final three, by Davidson, Fox, and Bryant, focus on economic aspects of family life, being intended to improve students’ basic mathematical skills while at the same time improving their abilities to manage income and expenditure to the advantage of their families.

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