

THE FAMILY CONCEPT

From Cultural Conservative to Liberal Perspective

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In this essay the author discuss two concepts of definition the family which are linked with two different ideologies, cultural conservatism and liberalism. At the end of the 20th century they are recognised as the concepts who, although from different position, are fighting the same battle: for the family.

Special reflection on Wartenbergs interpretation of “transformative power” shows an incapacity of the feministic theory of domination and power based on classical male-female, family-society dichotomy to see that power and power-over has not only the negative essence.

“Transformative power” used by parents is in essence positive power because it helps those who have no power to become autonomous beings what leads to its own elimination.

KEY WORDS: family, cultural conservatism, liberalism, power, transformative power

Basic Concepts

“You know that the first government that ever was in this world was in a Family; and the first disorder that ever was in the world was in a Family; and all the disorders that ever fell out since sprung from Families. If Families had

been better, Churches and Commonwealths all along had prospered ... Had young, and old, been right set before they entered into a Family: had the Family been founded in marriage in the Lord. Had relations betwixst wife and husband, children and parents, servants and masters been holily carried out according to the rule of Christ. Had the house been furnished with a wife ...; had it been furnished with a just getting and giving, it had been a thousand times better with Church, Commonwealth and Family, than it hath been, or is yet."

This quotation from the seventeenth-century writer Robert Abbot (*A Christian Family Builded by God*, 1653) typifies the importance that has been and continues to be placed on the family. It also illustrates the manner in which the family is seen as an institution carrying major responsibility for "the commonwealth" but missing the social forces external to itself which profoundly influence to its destiny. The assumption in this quotation is that the family is "the basic unit of society", that if all is well with families all will be well with society, and that "bad" families create "bad" commonwealths.

This assumption of a one-way traffic between the family and society cannot be explained through sociological research on the family at that time which would have analysed different and complex forces arising from social relations outside the family.

More than a three hundered years later, Clifton Wharton in his book "The Family: Preserving Americas Future" (1986) says:

"Many of us have begun to ask again about the role of the family and the critical importance of the values embodied in strong families - discipline, hard work, ambition and self-sacrifice, patience and love. It is easy enough to mock such values as burgeois. But middle-class or not, they appear to constitute the spiritual foundation for achievement - the psychological infrastructure, if you will, for both personal growth and full participation in the world around us."

On the same track Amitai Etzioni points out that there never was a society through all of history without the family as the central unit for launching the education of children, for character formation and as the moral agent of society (1983).

From a culturally conservative perspective, the traditional family - husband, wife and children - is the ultimate expression of the dictum, "form follows function". The family is stronger than all other forms of human organization because it is rooted in the most powerful and universal human needs: the need to give and receive personal attention, especially in the form of love.

The Basic concept for today's cultural conservatism is to make the case for the traditional family because it is *disappearing*. The most common

arguments are that people no longer marry, or marry but choose to have no children - a choice frequently made because of economic pressure. The divorce rate is running about 50% for the generation now under thirty. Illegitimate birth is common, especially among inner-city poor; such births have increased by 450% as a percentage of all births in the past 30 years. Almost half of non-white babies are born out of wedlock. Forty-one percent of all mothers work outside the home full-time; close to half of the working women with small children - and almost one-quarter of such women now working full-time would prefer to stay home to care for their children but cannot afford to. "If we continue to dismantle our American family at the accelerating pace we have been doing so since 1965, there will not be a single American family left by the year 2020" (Etizioni, 1983).

What forces have been tearing the traditional family apart?

- Stagnant or falling living standards. Despite reassuring government statistics that show rising income, more and more families have found they need two incomes to maintain a middle-class standard of living - even while accepting reduced standards of housing, transportation, and education for their children.
- The loss of social sanctions against permissive sex. Premarital sex lies behind the explosion of illegitimacy and abortion. Extra-marital sex is a prime destroyer of marriages and families.
- Government action. In the past two decades a series of court decisions have attempted to deny the family a legal existence. Parental rights to guide their children's upbringing have been undermined by government rulings. Taxes on families have risen tremendously, between 1960 and 1984, the average tax rate for a family with two children climbed 43%.
- Abortion. The growing demand for abortion expresses a morality in which the highest good is short-term personal convenience. When that morality invades other aspects of family life, such as behavior toward a marriage partner, values inculcated in children and acceptance of responsibilities toward aging parents, it is highly destructive.
- The definition of the family by some government leaders in a metaphorical rather than a concrete sense. A careful reading shows that, in a number of cases, the "family" being defended is a metaphorical "family of man" or the community as a "family". While such sentiments are noble, they are sometimes misleading, in that those espousing them continue to support policies destructive to actual, concrete families under the cover of their "pro-family" rhetoric. This confuses and diverts the movement to support and restore the traditional family.

- Cultural conservatives believe that marriage and children have vital social functions and that divorce is therefore a public evil, however understandable or inevitable in some cases. If divorce is in fact a public evil, the concept of fault must be reintroduced into divorce law in the states. In addition, and perhaps the most urgently needed reform, divorce should stop being routinely available to a single partner. Because lifelong marriage and the traditional family are good, society should return to a policy of making divorce difficult, and the partner who provokes it fully accountable by law.
- Pornography. By portraying women and children as mere objects for the gratification of lurid desires, pornographic materials have blinded many people to the nature of the male-female relationship and to the basic dignity of the human person.

All of these factors have contributed and continue to contribute to the dissolution of the traditional family. In view of the family's vital role in society, that dissolution must be stopped and reversed (Cultural Conservatism, 1983).

Role and function is a frequently used concept in sociology though its use varies considerably. Whether conservative or liberal, both concepts assume that love is the basis of family and also the family's first function. "Love unites husband, wife and children into a single unit. It provides the strongest possible underpinning to the self-sacrifice and service to others that a good marriage and the raising of children require. It enables individuals to overcome the friction inherent in all personal relationship, and so provide a stable home, so necessary to the well-being of both parents and children. The nature of man is such that no other institution - no commune, no professional service, no school, no church, nothing can possibly substitute for the family" (Wharton, 1993).

A study published by the U.S. Department of Education, notes that love is also the family first function. Without love, few individuals are able to find life rewarding or satisfying. The complex interactions that build among individuals permanently united as husband, wife and children allow love its greatest scope. A society in which the family is weak will be a society in which few individuals can find or give the love they need for fulfilment. But it is not the family's only vital function. Another is the education of children. The reason the family is so central to education is that the family, more than any other agency, instills virtues and molds child's character. The child's ability to achieve, in school as well as in later life, depends heavily on his values and character.

It's interesting to remark that conservatism interprets the educational role of the family in a very specific way. They point out two particular aspects: the first is that education helps people to escape from poverty. "The child who is reared in a stable but poor family is much more likely to be able to rise out of poverty than is a child reared in an impoverished single-parent home. The stable family is more likely to be able to assist the child to develop a sound character, functional values and marketable work habits and skills. A second key educational role of the family is developing a sense of civic virtue and citizenry. "The framers of our Constitution saw clearly that only those societies strong in certain civic virtues could sustain an experiment in representative democracy. The family is the primary training ground for individual responsibility, for self-sacrifice, for seeking a common goal rather than self interest. Without those virtues, democracy breaks down in an unrestrained battle of each against the other. Only strong families can build a society strong enough to make representative democracy secure" (1983, 35).

The family's third vital function is "both broad and deep", it is the basis of a civilized society. The motivations which drive men and women to do what must be done if society is to prosper - to work, to produce, to delay gratification, to save and invest, to create pleasant, safe towns and neighborhoods, to fight crime and corruption, to defend the nation when it is attacked - are rooted primarily in the family. The family is, in this sense, the bedrock of civilization.

Again, in the NEW NATIONAL AGENDA, the conservative gives the best formulation:

"It is time to reaffirm some "home truths" and to restate the obvious. Intact families are good. Families who choose to have children are making a desirable decision. Mothers and fathers who then decide to spend a good deal of time raising those children themselves rather than leaving it to others are demonstrably doing a good thing for those children. Countless Americans do these things every day. They ask for no special favors-they do these things naturally out of love, loyalty and commitment to the future. They are the bedrock of our society. Public policy and the culture in general must support and reaffirm these decisions-not undermine and be hostile to them or send a message that we are neutral... Neither prosperity nor freedom can be sustained without a transfusion, from generation to generation, of family values: respect and discipline, restraint and self-sacrifice, interdependence and cooperation, loyalty and fidelity, and an ethical code that gives to individuals, however lowly, a transcendent import" (ibidem, 36).

These arguments in favor of the traditional family brought liberals and conservatives to the same table. The lost ideal of the nuclear family had such a

tight grip on the late -20th century western mind simply because it became an emblem of two other ideals: the notion of romantic love as the only publicly acceptable basis for marriage and the celebration of both child-rearing and childhood. Once again, however, for better or for worse, most conservatives and liberals did not labour under these two burdens.

Liberal perspective: what is the family?

The family is probably the most flexible and adaptive institution and gradual change is one constant throughout its history. In Western societies, especially in USA, rapid changes have taken place since 1950s. Those changes include a sharp decline in overall childbearing, a huge increase in the labor force participation of married woman, a robust growth of nonmarital cohabiting, a dramatic rise in divorce, and a stunning increase in the labor force participation of married woman both with and without children. These changes in turn have set into motion secondary changes such as the changes in the division of labour between husband and wife which are often recognized as liberalization and egalitarianization of family roles. Taking into consideration all the mentioned changes in contemporary family in Western societies, American sociology offered a fairly good sociological definition that includes the vast majority of family forms:

“A family is a *relatively permanent* group of two or more *individuals* related by blood, marriage, or adoption who *ordinary* live together” (Gallagher and aut., 1995).

Although this definition tries to “cover” American contemporary life to most conservatives and even traditionalists in sociology it is provocative and challenging. Especially in the sense that it leaves behind the heterosexual conception of the family which is so understandable for traditional definition of the family. Putting aside the ethical and moral principles of the Judeo-Christian religion and tradition of American society it opens a possibility for homosexual and lesbian couples to be regarded as family as those with “specific sexual preferences” which is in fact a private choice.

The next important issue in the liberal concept is that the family is to be seen as constituted by the processes of role-taking, role-making, role-conflict and conflict resolution. These processes do not, of course, take place in a vacuum. They proceed and develop as a result from the individual needs of family members, social norms, social goals and family identity.

Conflict theory is one that emphasize that families are not just "social machines performing set functions" but are *battlegrounds* where all sorts of groups compete for dominance.

"In this last decade of the twentieth century the war over the family has such a high media profile that you probably already know who is fighting whom and why. Husbands and wives wrangle over such matters as gender roles, sex, child care and the second shift, divorced spouses duel over property and children, parents battle their children over the later socialization, autonomy and marriage choices; groups fight to impose their own vision of the ideal family on society, contesting issues such as abortion and alternative lifestyles; and so on. With all this fighting going on, it's a wonder that the family gets anything accomplished" (1995, 484).

Recent sociological research shows that family battles are not always metaphorical. There is an astonishing amount of violence between husbands and wives, between parents and their children and between all other possible combinations between family members. Most of them agree that conflict occurs in great part because of change in traditional gender role stereotypes of male dominance and female subservience (Miller, 1991).

From a conservative standpoint conflict is often taken as a measure of the decay of a morally responsible individual and morally responsible society. Others, of quite a contrary outlook, such as liberals or non-traditionalist, welcome it as an argument for the view that the family is essentially a repressive institution. (this standpoint was recently developed by radical feminism) But a more plausible interpretation of the dissolution of the family would be that contemporary developments represent the very triumph of "affective individualism" as a guiding principle of domestic life. It needs no great insight to recognise that raising rates of divorce may indicate, not a deep dissatisfaction with the marital state or with the family as such, but an increased determination to make of these rewarding and satisfying relationships (Giddens, 1987).

Giddens and Preston note that affective individualism is the consequence of the modernization processes and that divorce has risen dramatically because of the increased prevalence of a world view that legitimizes calculations based upon individual self-interest. Affective individualism is defined as the recognition of the self as a unique being with the right to pursue selfish goals (Cherlin, 1983). That is why Bumpas said that people who hold such individualistic values are less constrained by the well-being of a spouse or children to remain in an unsatisfactory marriage or even in a satisfactory but less than optimal one. The individualization process significantly changed the basic concept of family functions as they were performed and understood in

pre-industrial societies. It was a self-sufficient economic unit that provided most of its own security, passed on to children necessary knowledge and skills, taught children religion and performed religious rituals. The modernization process which changed the family from an extended to a nuclear family linked with the individualization and liberalization of many social and moral standards has also changed the interpretation of basic functions of the family. New sociological standards suggest that these functions are (1) regulation of sexuality, (2) reproduction, (3) socialization, (4) material security, (5) social placement and (6) affection and companionship.

Although the modern family institution has lost some of the functions performed in the pre-industrial era by sharing them with other social institutions it is getting new functions as well such as the function of coordinating the roles that various specialized agencies play in their lives and the lives of their children. The family has become a more specialised agency than before, probably more specialised than it has been in any previously known society, as Giddens put it (1987, 115).

Although from a different standpoint, conservative and liberal concepts strongly defend the continuing significance of the family and marriage in modern society. The nuclear family remains the focus for the procreation and upbringing of children and more than ever before is a source of emotional support and love.

Recent trends in reevaluating mothering

One of the primary tasks of feminist theory is uncovering and thematizing the nature and extent of male domination within contemporary society. Liberal feminism, radical feminism and social feminism with most influential authors like Kate Millet, Bety Friedan, Juliet Mitchell and Sulamith Firestone shared at least one common view - to demystify motherhood. "...Far from being an idyllic haven in a heartless world, the family appeared to ...subordinate and oppress women on a daily basis" (Dietz, 1985, 19).

Thomas Wartenberg in his famous study on power tries to show that the concept of power should not be identified with that of domination. There are uses of power-over that do not amount to the domination of the subordinate agent by the dominant one. These uses of power-over can be designated as "positive" in that they serve to benefit the agent over whom they are exercised (1990, 183).

The one positive form of power which he had discussed is paternalism. A relationship of power-over between two agents is paternalistic when the

dominant agent uses his power to *benefit* an agent who is not fully capable of rational determination of his actions. Parenting is one example of power that is paternalistic. Parents make judgments about what is best for their children and use their power over their children to enforce these decisions. Such a use of power is paternalistic, points Wartenberg, in the sense that the children are assumed to be incapable of fully determining what is best for themselves. There are many other sorts of relationship that are paternalistic in structure, including treatment of the retarded and those with severe psychological disturbances. In each case, the paternalistic use of power-over is legitimated as based upon the subordinate agent's inability to judge his own interests rationally.

Although the paternalistic use of power-over has many serious problem associated with it is not *ipso facto* dominating..

As the author notes, the distinction between dominating and paternalistic form of power-over, which he calls *transformative power*, is one that has general significance for social theory. Specifically, recognition of the transformative use of power provides the means for the fundamental break with theories of power that see power-over only as a negative force in social relations. The concept of a transformative use of power provides a means of conceptualizing a positive use of power that shows power's importance as a constitutive force in human social relationship (1990, 184).

Contrary to femisit theorists of power and male domination, Wartenberg interprets power as a positive capacity that human beings have. Women, as they are the primary caretakers of human beings, posses a special type of power which he entitled *transformative use of power*. This type of power is not being used to dominate another human being but to help another person to reach a more autonomous stance. and it is constituted by such a goal. Whereas men have used their power over others in order to dominate them and thus to enhance their own welfare, in their predominant social roles women have used their relation to others as a means of benefiting those others. "The power relationship between the two must constitute itself as self-transcending - that is as bringing about a situation in which it will no longer be necessary. The mother, to be a truly nurturant mother and thus to exercise power in a transformative way, must seek to develop her child into a full-fledged person, the sort of individual for whom such a one-directional power relationship is no longer appropriate" (1990, 191). Transformative power seeks to transform the child into an adult and thus to bring itself into obsolence. Once the relationship has been successfully implemented and used, it will gradually bring about its own dissolution into a more egalitarian relationship between two agents.

The idea that transformative power relationships envision their own supersession is not only a unique contribution to the theory of power but also a significant attempt in reevaluating mothering. Mothers need to use power over their children because only through the use of power can a child be created as a truly social creature. But such use of power is not merely the disciplining of the child for the sake of acceptability as might be thought when power-over is seen solely as a means of domination, says the author, since the child emerges as an independent creature. This use of power has a positive function in terms of the individual's life. In the transformative use of power, the goals of social acceptability and autonomy work hand in hand to create a socially viable and individually mature human being. As the primary characteristic of the transformative use of power is that it seeks its own elimination the problematic features of paternalism is that it has a tendency or drive for stability. The feminist theorist who based their analyses of women and family on the theory of dominations and male-female dichotomy missed this very important distinction in Wartenbergs theory of power and power-over.

Although there is much to be said for the authors conception of the distinction of paternalism and transformative power which is inherent to mothering and parenting as such, once again in the absence of quite profound transformations in the broader society, the family is likely to remain riven by opposing tensions - liberation and oppresion, hope and despair.

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A p p e n d i x

Glossary

- family** - a relatively permanent group of two or more individuals related by blood, marriage, or adoption who ordinary live together.
- nuclear family** - one or two parents living together in a a household with their natural and/or adopted children.
- extended family** - three or more generations living together.
- family of orientation** - the family into which individuals are born.
- family of procreation** - the family formed by individuals when they marry and have or adopt children.
- marriage** - a socially and legally approved mating relationship.
- legitimacy** - being born to a married couple.
- kinship** - a social network that links individuals with best ties based on blood, marriage or adoption.
- traditional family** - a family consisting of a bread-winning husband, a stay at home wife and their dependent children.
- Census Bureau family** - a group of two or more persons related by birth, marriage or adoption and residing together.
- household** - all persons who inhabit the same housing unit.
- random mating** - the situation in which an individual has an equal probability of marrying all eligible mates.
- assortive mating** - the situation in which an individual has a higher probability of marrying similar or dissimilar mates than would be the case if random mating were in effect.
- assortive narcissism** - the tendency for individuals to marry someone who is similar to themselves in almost every physical and personality variable.
- affective individualism** - the recognition of the self as a unique being with the right to pursue selfish goals.

concept - an abstract category for classifying aspects of reality.

conflict theory - a major theoretical approach in sociology that focuses on the conflict among the social structures in a society.

conservative movement - a movement that seeks to retain the status quo and resist possible change.

monogamy - a marriage consisting of one spouse of each gender.

functionalism - a major theoretical approach in sociology that focuses on how social parts contribute to society as a system.

symbolic interactionism - a major theoretical approach in sociology that focuses on the meanings that arise from the interactions among individuals in society.

subculture - a group that stands apart from the larger society by supporting different values, language, religion, traditions and the like.

(Source: JONES, GALLAGHER, McFALLS (1995): *Sociology: Micro, Macro and Mega Structures*, New York, Haracourt Brace & Company.

Erma Ivoš: OBITELJSKI KONCEPT

Od kulturno-konzervativne do liberalne perspektive

S a ž e t a k

U ovom radu autorica obrazlaže dva pristupa u definiranju obitelji, koja su nastala pod utjecajem različitih ideologija: kulturnog konzervativizma i liberalizma. S kraja dvadesetoga stoljeća oni se prepoznaju kao koncepti koji s dijametralno suprotnih pozicija vode istu bitku - onu za obitelj.

Poseban osvrt na Wartenbergovu interpretaciju "transformativne moći" omogućava uvid u nedostatke feminističke interpretacije moći i koncepta dominacije, koji je, sveden na dihotomiju muško-žensko, društvo-obitelj, moći pripisao uglavnom negativna svojstva.

"Transformativna moć" - kojom se koriste roditelji pozitivna je dimenzija moći, kojom se pomaže da ne-moćni u obitelji postanu autonomna bića, dokidajući u tom procesu samu sebe, za razliku od paternalističke moći koja ima tendenciju stalnosti.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: obitelj, kulturni konzervativizam, liberalizam, moć, transformativna moć