

Transcript from chapter 6 in S. Skirbekk (2000): *The New Liberal Ideology*. ISS, University of Oslo.

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Family structure and functionality

I - A weakened marriage

It is easy to find statistics to illustrate how western countries have undergone major changes in the family in the space of a few short decades. Statistically speaking, this can be read out from marriage figures. Fewer people are getting married, and more getting divorced. It is hard to deny that this belittlement of marriage is related to notions about sexual morality; but is also due to changes in societies institutions.

Unlike previously, the duties and obligations of marriage are not being counterbalanced by the rights of marriage as the only universally accepted and legitimate framework for sexual conduct. As an extension of our earlier analysis, it is only natural to ask whether this change can be understood as a functional adjustment to new community relationships, with scope for individual freedom, or whether it is more likely that we are dealing with a dysfunctional adjustment, one that seeks legitimacy for our times with the aid of ideological manipulation.

To answer this, we must confront the issue of whether the family, even in today's society, has important functions that cannot be assumed by other institutions, whether these necessitate a specific marriage-regulated family structure, or whether other institutions and perhaps other forms of the family could have assumed these tasks satisfactorily, in a functional sense.

We may begin by determining what constitutes a family. The *US Bureau of Census* has offered the following definition: "A family consists of two or more persons who are living together and who are bound to each other by kinship, marriage or adoption." Others have given more comprehensive descriptions of what may rightly be called a family. Family researcher Dolf Zillmann of the University of Alabama has listed nine characteristics as the most important, the most durable and the most valuable traits of the family 1] : (1) A couple consisting of a man and a woman constitute the core of a family. (2) This couple commits itself to live together for an unlimited period of

time, potentially for life. (3) The couple intends to have children, and ultimately do so. (4) The couple is prepared to care for their children. (5) The couple will support their children with a view to their mental, emotional, moral and financial independence. (6) couple contributes to a common future financial goal. (7) The couple accepts sexual exclusivity. (8) The couple accepts the fact that family happiness depends on a constant investment of time and initiative. (9) The couple accepts the fact that it must resist temptations that would disrupt the family and cause potential conflicts and violence.

The first of these definitions could be called a "minimum definition" without moral aim; the other could be called a "maximum definition" with moral aims. But even with the minimum definition, it is not always meaningful to speak of a family in every instance where we find several people living together – let alone instances in which individuals constitute a housekeeping unit.

It is easy to see that both the form and the ideal of the family vary in different societies, and that these have changed over time. This does not imply, however, that all forms of the family are equally functional for all societies and population groups. Nor does it imply a boundless breadth of variation. Those forms of the family that we can study – in practice, this means a selection of forms that have been functional enough to have survived to our day – all share a number of similarities.

In the first place, every society regards family belonging as an important aspect of an individual's identity and sense of belonging. Establishing and joining a family has been universally ritualized. Further, these marriage rites follow rules determined by the community; they are not something that couples just decide to do. In these rituals, representatives for the couples two families will normally be present. In addition, a priest, a medicine man, or a representative of the community at large will officiate at rites which mark the status transition of the couple. This suggests that the establishment of families is universally perceived as a community matter, not just a private matter.

In the middle of this century it was customary – in social anthropological circles, at any rate – to claim that most "societies" on this planet permitted polygamy, even though the vast majority of people lived in societies that only permitted monogamy. In fact, the majority of those who lived in societies that *did* permit polygamy, chose to live as monogamous families. In a functional context it is interesting to note that every prominent modern society conforms to the monogamous norm. Social anthropologist George Peter Murdock, who was the first one to count "societies", found *the core family* in all the 250 societies for which he had been able to amass any data 2]. The forms of the family could vary, as could the obligations of relatives outside the core family; but the father-mother-child relationship was universally held to be a distinct social unit with important tasks. This meant that the core family is not a new family form, nor just some bourgeois concoction.

This background suggests that something quite dramatic might be taking place in our day – and in our part of the world, in particular – if what has always been the most fundamental social cell in all previous societies has become a private matter in a market for couples, while the authorities and our cultural life and institutions consider themselves neutral when they strive for as much equality as possible between the different types of inter-sex relations.

Historically, there have been many kinds of relations between the sexes; but many of these have never been accepted – much less enjoyed the same status. Kingsley Davis has compiled a list of different types of sexual relationships, which he placed on a sliding scale, from loose to steady relationships. His list looked like this: liaison, cohabitation, concensual unions, common law marriage, and marriage 3]. It is the latter that have been regulated by law and for which specific obligations and functions have been prescribed. And it is primarily these which have been in decline.

It is always a question how far back it is appropriate to go in order to gain a comparative perspective on the developments in our society. Family historian Carle C. Zimmermann has felt that this process in our modern western civilization can be compared with processes in ancient civilizations 4]. As for the Greek and Roman civilizations he felt there was justification for claiming that the decline of these nation-states was due to fairly similar changes involving the institution of the family. Zimmermann listed eleven hallmarks of the decline 5]: (1) the spread of quick divorces; (2) a decline in family birth rates coupled with an overall decline in population; (3) the elimination of the true meaning of entering into marriage; (4) support for negative interpretations of heroes and virtues of the past; (5) the spread of theories which claimed that comradeship or loser forms of the family would solve the problems; (6) people who had been married under older family traditions were not allowed to continue these traditions, while younger people shirked the obligations of their elders; (7) the spread of anti-familism by urbane and pseudo-intellectual circles; (8) the breaking down of most barriers toward divorce; (9) the revolt of young people against their parents, making parenthood more difficult; (10) the spread of youthful deviation; and (11) the acceptance of different forms of sexual perversion.

Before we jump to any drastic conclusions, we should proceed with caution. The number of present-day divorces could suggest that marriage does not enjoy the same status today that it once did. The annual decline in the number of marriages in a population with no major differences in the size of the various age groups is yet another measure of a declining status. Marriages have become more unstable. More people are living in relationships that do not enjoy the same degree of stability as marriage.

In the mid-1990s, British demographers had registered that 56% of all English women over the age of 16 were married, 23% were single, 14% were widows, and 7% were divorced. These same demographers estimated that by the year 2020, only 48% would be married, 25% would be single, 13% would be widows, and 14% would be divorced 6]. The Norwegian demographer Bjørg Moen wrote, as early as 1981, about Swedish birth cohorts of the time, and estimated that only half of the youngest Swedish cohort would ever get married, if they followed a parallel behavior pattern to that of older cohorts.

This development, which can be illustrated by different kinds of data, can be explained in several ways. Some have been inclined to see this as an expression of positive values such as liberation, equality and tolerance. Others have regarded this development as a general moral decline. The responsibility can thus be spread among culturally radical spokesmen as well as commercial players 7]. Part of the development can be seen as unintended effects of measures taken for noble purposes, such as a desire to reduce the discrimination of illegitimate children.

Changes in the family's status can be viewed as one aspect of a general disintegration of tradition. Economic differentiation, political democratization, and cultural rationalism were bound to result in a decrease in the authority of traditionalism. However, as we have seen in the analysis of frameworks of meaning and moral perceptions, several forms of adjustment could have been the potential answers to these challenges. The fact that various countries have provided different answers to these challenges is due to differences in their cultural forms. There is little point in trying to regard all variations in getting married and getting divorced as evidence that some societies had made greater economic progress than others. In 1965, Canada had 46 divorces per 100,000 inhabitants, while the same year the United States had 250 divorces. This difference cannot be explained in terms of minor differences in economic structure between the United States and Canada.

Analytically speaking, there is little reason to assume that those forms of cohabitation which have spread the most in recent years represent a future pattern for a modern adjustment, or represent the most rational and functional answer to the challenge of modernity. Interpretations that take this for granted, exclude comparative analyses.

Changes on the family front have been topics of heated discussion. In every country that has permitted open discussion, the predominant forms have been subject to criticism. Research has certainly not spoken with one tongue in these discussions 8]; nor have the people, for that matter. Only rarely has the majority rallied in support of change at the outset of a development, even though most people have made the adjustment. This suggests that we might regard the general liberal interpretations in the media and in various organizations primarily as an expression of the strength of specific cultural codes.

It is tempting to interpret this as a sign of neo-liberalism's appeal to the mind. But the processes are more complex. The early liberals took the marriage-regulated family as a matter of course. A liberal philosopher such as Herbert Spencer, argued in favor of strict family morals as the most functional for a leading society 9]. Nor have modern social liberals or social democrats operated on the assumption of some original program to privatize or deinstitutionalize the family, even though certain Leninist pronouncements could be interpreted in that light. A study of the Social Democrats' family policy in Sweden can tell us more about how the deinstitutionalization of the family acquired political legitimacy. Sweden has long been a pioneer in this development, and people associated with the Social Democratic Party have been a driving force in the development.

References

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4 Zimmerman, Cale C. (1947): *Family and Civilization*. Harper, NY.

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6. Cf. *British Stationary Office*, Jan. 1996.

7 Cf. Lasch, Christopher (1977): *Haven in a heartless world*. NY. Basic Books.

8 Cf. Berger, Brigitte and Peter L. Berger (1983): *The War over the Family*. Doubleday, NY. Anderson, Michael (Ed.) (1980): *Sociology of the Family*. Penguin, London. Popenoe, David (1988): *Disturbing the Nest. Family Change and Decline in Modern Society*. Aldine de Gruyter, NY. Mount, Ferdinand (1992): *The Subversive Family*. Free Press, NY.

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