
SOCIETY

“character in the citizenry.”

This more “traditional” (i.e., European) view of government is somewhat at odds with the principles of America’s founding fathers—namely, that people are born with a “human nature,” which prospers when given enough “personal liberty.”

Yet Americans increasingly have come to favor the notion that “in almost every area of important public concern, we [must seek] to induce persons to act virtuously,” Wilson writes. “Not only is such conduct desirable in its own right, it appears now to be necessary if large improvements are to be made in those matters we consider problems: schooling, welfare, crime, and public finance.”

Studies by Michael Rutter in 1979 (*Fifteen Thousand Hours*) and James Coleman in 1982 (*High School Achievement*) demonstrated to Americans that schools can—and therefore should—instill discipline and responsible behavior in their students. And America’s welfare programs have been scrutinized in an effort to alter their negative incentives. Studies of the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program suggest that households receiving guaranteed annual incomes broke up more often than those that did not (36 percent higher for white families, 42 percent higher for black ones). Also noteworthy is the fact that men receiving cash benefits lessened their working hours by nine percent, women lowered theirs by 20 percent, and young males without families cut theirs by 43 percent. Meanwhile, the stigma once attached to being on welfare seems to have evaporated. In 1967, 63 percent of all persons eligible for AFDC signed up; by 1970, the percentage was 91.

What link is there among these disparate events? “The character of a significant number of persons changed,” says Wilson.

The erosion of moral precepts is evident too in the U.S. legislature, Wilson maintains. Whereas borrowing heavily and squandering capital were once thought to be morally wrong, nowadays they are business-as-usual. Wilson even goes so far as to suggest that economist John Maynard Keynes (1883–1946) was a “moral revolutionary,” shattering the traditional constraints on deficit spending.

“Virtue is not learned by precept,” Wilson concludes. “It is learned by the regular repetition of right actions,” especially among the young, whose characters are still forming. This notion—which Wilson attributes to Aristotle—is regaining favor in America. Its payoff will be evident in the long run, he says, since “the public interest depends on private virtue.”

Home Again

“The New Homemakers” by Cheryl Russell, in *American Demographics* (Oct. 1985), P.O. Box 68, Ithaca, N.Y. 14851.

As the 1980s take the “baby-boom” generation closer to middle age, America is once again becoming a “nation of homebodies”—with a difference.

So says Russell, the editor of *American Demographics*. Within a decade, three-quarters of all “baby-boomers” (the roughly 26 million Americans born between 1954 and 1960) will be married, most will have children, and two-thirds will own homes.

SOCIETY



The "all-American" family of the 1950s looks out of place today. Homemaking, the province of women 25 years ago, is now a husband-wife task.

But the mom-and-pop household of the 1990s will bear little resemblance to its domestic counterpart of 30 years ago. Russell suggests that homemaking as a full-time female occupation is on the way out. In 1960, nearly one-half of all American women were housewives; by 1984, fewer than one in five were.

Not only are the majority of American women in the labor force (54 percent) full- or part-time, but housewifery has become so unfashionable that only one in 1,000 female college freshmen, according to polls, now wants to make it a career. Moreover, those wives who *are* at home see homemaking as only a stage in their lives. One-third of all housewives say they plan to hold jobs sometime in the future. And according to a *New York Times* survey in 1983, only one-third of employed wives said they would rather stay home than work.

Such trends among women have changed the nature of fatherhood too. Dads between the ages of 25 and 44 are doing more housework. A University of Michigan study found husbands putting in 14 hours per week on household chores in 1981, up from 11 hours in 1975. In marriages where both spouses work full-time, many husbands share equally in cooking (21 percent), housecleaning (34 percent), food shopping (38 percent), and child care (45 percent).

Oddly, Russell notes, this quiet shift toward domestic egalitarianism throughout America seems to parallel a more publicized revival of the traditional importance of "home"—a notion that has not enjoyed such prominence in the mass media since the 1950s.