

---

## BACKGROUND BOOKS

---

### THE AMERICAN FAMILY

Ever since Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels called for its abolition in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), the family has been the subject (sometimes, the target) of scholars, reformers, and ideologues.

In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884; International, 1972, paper), Engels contends that the family evolved from communal group marriages in prehistoric times to the competitive (read capitalist) male-headed households of the 19th century.

French historian Phillipe Ariès emphasizes personal rather than economic relations in his influential *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (Knopf, 1962, cloth; Vintage, 1965, paper). Drawing on such clues as 16th-century aristocrats' family portraits and 17th-century middle-class clothing, he finds that the concept of "childhood" is a relatively recent one.

In the medieval world, children worked and played with adults. The introduction of day schools in the 15th century took children out of apprenticeships and returned them to the home. There they became the hub of new self-contained households consisting solely of two generations—the parents and their offspring. These "nuclear" families were, by the 18th century, commonplace among the bourgeoisie of northern Europe. Change came later to the lower classes.

The exploitation of child labor during the Industrial Revolution was, suggests Ariès, an anachronistic continuation of medieval practice.

Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Carl Degler picks up the story in the mid-18th century, where Ariès leaves off, and brings it to this side of the Atlantic in *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (Oxford, 1980).

Caught up in the ferment of the colonial Revolution, and emboldened by the responsibilities they shouldered while their husbands were away at war, American women began to demand a greater voice. During the 19th century, their efforts took the form of "social feminism" (e.g., the Women's Christian Temperance Union); in the 20th century, militant females first launched the women's suffrage movement and then the recent women's liberation movement, with its calls for absolute equality of the sexes.

This evolution has not, however, weakened the family, Degler argues. With both parents relieved of the need to provide the services now offered by teachers, bakers, doctors, and tailors, the family, he says, is able to concentrate on what it can do best—fostering affection between husband and wife and raising children in an atmosphere of love.

Not all scholars are so optimistic. In *All Our Children: The American Family Under Pressure* (Harcourt, 1977, cloth; Harvest, 1978, paper), MIT psychologist Kenneth Keniston and the Carnegie Council on Children survey the troubles that undercut some contemporary American families. Extreme poverty increases by two-thirds the odds of a baby dying during its first year; the aver-

age American child spends more time watching television than he does with either his parents or teachers; one in 20 teenagers has a "drinking problem." Keniston proposes strong government programs to remedy unemployment, redistribute wealth, and expand family health and legal services.

Some social critics see Keniston's solutions as part of the problem. University of Rochester historian Christopher Lasch is one. He maintains, in **Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged** (Basic, 1977, cloth; paper, 1979), that the state and the "helping professions" have usurped families' authority. Psychiatrists tell mothers how to care for babies; educators raise and train children, and social workers advise on just about everything else. The result, says Lasch, is parents unable to direct their own lives or those of their children.

French sociologist Jacques Donzelot provides a variation on Lasch's theme in **The Policing of Families** (Pantheon, 1980, cloth & paper). After the post-medieval family withdrew its children into the home, he relates, modern society followed it in off the street. The result: a compromise. The family was charged, via legislation concerning everything from child labor to unsanitary housing, with civic duties (e.g., to raise healthy, obedient citizens), and society was made familial (providing centers for schooling and health care).

Not all family problems are mediated (or complicated) by legislation. Boring work and low pay for breadwinners place heavy strains on today's blue-collar family, reports Berkeley sociologist Lillian Breslow Rubin. Her **Worlds of Pain: Life in the Working-Class Family** (Basic,

1976, cloth; 1977, paper) summarizes interviews with 50 white San Francisco-area working-class families and with 25 middle-class families. Many working-class parents who married as teenagers age quickly; "when I was young" is a refrain repeatedly heard from mothers and fathers in their twenties.

Equally direct is **Trying Out the Dream: A Year in the Life of an American Family** (Lippincott, 1975). Sympathetic but unsentimental, author Paul Wilkes finds that the "Neumeyers," a statistically average suburban family, do not conform to the widely-held "Ozzie and Harriet" image of wholesome tranquility. The parents deplore their offspring's freedom and use of marijuana; the children feel like strangers in their own home; and everybody fights at Christmas.

Journalist Susan Sheehan crisply portrays the life of **A Welfare Mother** (Houghton, 1976, cloth; New American Library, 1977, paper) as "a series of accidents, both happy and unhappy." Despite the crime and squalor surrounding her, this promiscuous Puerto Rican mother seems to Sheehan as content as a suburban housewife. More than 700 letters, reports, and forms fill her New York City Department of Social Services file; she sometimes finds complying with welfare regulations as arduous as a full-time job.

Legal regulations are a manifestation of "the persisting tension between family and public values," maintains one Harvard professor of education. In **Here to Stay: American Families in the Twentieth Century** (Basic, 1976, cloth; 1978, paper), Mary Jo Bane discusses how society's interests (e.g., the prevention of child abuse) come into conflict with family privacy.

Pointing to the debates over day care, abortion, and divorce reform, Bane contends that the chief family-related issue facing Americans is reconciling women's liberation with family stability. It will be best resolved, she suggests, if the government sticks to enforcing women's rights in the marketplace and leaves the resulting shifts in family roles (such as "provider" and "head of family") to be worked out privately.

Europeans see the family somewhat differently. In **Family Policy: Government and Families in Fourteen Countries** (Columbia, 1978, cloth & paper), editors Sheila Kamerman and Alfred Kahn of Columbia University's School of Social Work report that distrust of government invasion of family privacy is not much of a problem in Scandinavia or in Germany and France: Since child subsidy programs are usually applied universally, there is no need for governments to monitor eligibility or ferret out fraud.

The last decade has brought noteworthy changes in Eastern European views on the family. Until the liberalization of the early 1970s, Polish authorities assumed that the family—like all of society's burdens—would eventually disappear in the socialist world. Now communist academics and bureaucrats have come to believe that the family is here to stay, and that its problems must be dealt with: Nurseries are

being expanded; working mothers are now given maternity and child-care leave.

European families who immigrated to the United States underwent a gradual assimilation spanning several generations. Their story is told in **Ethnic Families in America: Patterns and Variations** (Elsevier, 1976, cloth & paper), edited by Charles Mindel and Robert Habenstein. One of the most obvious changes among immigrants has been in family size. In 1910, for example, when all white American women had families averaging 3.4 children, Polish-American mothers averaged 5.9. Two generations later the Polish-American average was 2.8, a figure close to the national mean.

Thus third- and fourth-generation ethnic families come to resemble the American norm: "Small, mobile, and independent," writes Rudy Ray Seward. In **The American Family: A Demographic History**, (Sage, 1978, cloth & paper), the North Texas State University sociologist looks at U.S. census records and finds the American family a remarkably sturdy institution. Despite all the cries of crisis in the family, Seward concludes that, in terms of size and organization, the American family of 1970 was not much different from the American family of 100 years earlier. This year's census will tell us whether the same can be said of America's families in 1980.

---

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Some of the titles in this essay were suggested by Arlene Skolnick and Wilson Center Fellow Laura Nader.*