Families against 'The Family'

The transatlantic passage of the politics of family values

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Progressive Brits beware. Political campaigns conducted in the name of The Family are now in their third decade in the United States, and there are signs that transatlantic missionaries are finding prominent converts in the UK. Indeed, addressing the Labour Party Conference in 1995, Tony Blair himself proclaimed: 'Strengthening the family has to be a number one social priority.' Perhaps a crash course in the forms, contents, and effects of the politics of family values in the USA can help you avoid some of their social costs.

'Profamily' movements erupted in the USA during the mid-1970s, initially as an explicit backlash against the sexual revolution, the counterculture, feminism and gay liberation, all of which were viewed (and not without cause) as threatening prevailing definitions of family and motherhood. 'Profamily' campaigns by the New Right helped to establish the grassroots base for the Reagan–Bush era and employed an ideology that Thatcher's Conservative regime echoed in a minor key. In the USA, the New Right successfully turned the Republican Party into an anti-feminist, anti-gay, anti-abortion fortress where now few candidates who fail any of these litmus tests can receive the party's endorsement.

The election to the presidency of Democrat Bill Clinton in 1992 seemed to promise a shift in national political rhetoric and policy. Running on a platform of 'it's the economy, stupid', Clinton's first presidential campaign countered reactionary Republican profamily rhetoric with affirmations of support for diverse kinds of families. But startlingly soon after his election, Clinton too jumped on the family-values trolley. Republicans and Democrats alike now compete to promote their increasingly similar brand of neoconservative politics in the name of The Family, meaning one particular kind of family – mom, dad and the kids.

Clinton may have grasped at the family-values lifeboat while adrift in a sea of political weakness, retreat and opportunism, but the lifeboat was far less rudderless than he. In fact, a sophisticated, well-organized and remarkably successful new family-values crusade commandeered Clinton's conversion. The distinctive sources, rhetoric and tactics of this campaign merit careful scrutiny because they are likely to enjoy much greater popularity in the UK than have those of the New Right. Whereas old-style US family-values warriors, like Jerry Falwell, Dan Quayle and Pat Buchanan, are right-wing Republicans and fundamentalist Christians – overtly anti-feminist,

anti-homosexual, politically reactionary – the predominant 1990s' 'family-values' campaign represents itself as centrist, secular and 'nonpartisan'. A product of academics and politicians rather than clerics, it grounds its claims not in religious authority but in social science, and promotes a gender ideology better characterized as post-feminist than anti-feminist.

During the late 1980s, an interlocking network of research and policy institutes, think-tanks, and commissions began mobilizing to forge a national consensus on family values and to shape the family politics of the 'new' Democratic Party. Central were the Institute for American Values (IAV), directed by David Blankenhorn, and its offshoot the Council on Families in America, originally co-chaired by social scientists David Popenoe and Jean Bethke Elshtain. The personnel, funding and programmes of IAV overlap with those of sociologist Amitai Etzioni's Communitarian Agenda and with the New Democratic Leadership Conference of the Democratic Party.

Virtual social science

Neo-family-values campaigners engage in a sophisticated practice of virtual social science – public dissemination of selective representations of social science data in order to transmute the hegemonic Western belief in the superiority of heterosexual, married-couple families into social scientific 'truth'. For example, 'in three decades of work as a social scientist', Popenoe asserted in the *New York Times*, 'I know of few other bodies of data in which the weight of evidence is so decisively on one side of the issue: on the whole for children, two-parent families are preferable to single-parent and stepfamilies.' Claiming that research proves that parental divorce and unwed mother-hood inflict devastating, unjustifiable harm on children, virtual social scientists are waging a self-described 'cultural crusade' to restore social stigma to these practices.

During the 1990s, as family-values discourse became ever more ubiquitous on the national political landscape, its central rhetorical focus began to shift from laments over the social hazards of miscreant moms to those of missing dads. Books bemoaning missing dads became the rage – from Blankenhorn's *Fatherless America*, to Popenoe's *Life Without Father*, and even one by former vice-president Dan Quayle, *The American Family*. Quayle's opening chapter, 'The New Consensus', begins: 'America has reached a new consensus on the importance of the traditional family – a consensus unthinkable just a few years ago.… Fathers *do* matter. Families *are* the basis of our society. We *must* support the unified model of father, mother, and child.'

The crusade to combat fatherlessness fans fears that it generates lawlessness. Characteristic is an alarmist selection of correlational data published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (9 February 1996): 'In the United States among boys aged 12 to 17, the percentage who are arrested for violent crime has doubled in the past 15 years. Not coincidentally, the percentage of children under 18 who are being reared without fathers, also has doubled during this period. Nationally, about 70% of school dropouts, 70% of teenage girls who are pregnant and unmarried, and 70% of incarcerated juvenile delinquents were raised without fathers.' As key source for some of these data and analysis, the author cited Blankenhorn, who is not a social scientist: 'Fatherlessness is the most harmful demographic trend of this generation. It is the leading cause of declining child well-being in our society. It is also the engine driving our most urgent social problems from crime to adolescent pregnancy to child sexual abuse to domestic violence against women.'

The claim that fatherlessness leads to lawlessness is approaching the status of national dogma in the USA. Even Hillary Clinton's putatively liberal defence of child welfare, *It Takes a Village*, succumbs to the doctrine, approvingly citing Daniel Patrick Moynihan's mid-1960s' warning that 'the absence of fathers in the lives of children

– especially boys – leads to increased rates of violence and aggressiveness, as well as a general loss of the civilizing influence marriage and responsible parenthood historically provide any society.' The US public seems to be absorbing the message. In a 1996 Gallup Poll, 79 per cent of those surveyed agreed with the statement 'The most significant family or social problem facing America is the physical absence of the father from the home.'

The politics of fatherlessness is colouring a broad canvas of reactionary politics in the USA. In some cases, the links are explicit or obvious. For example, family-values crusaders cite the risks of fatherlessness in campaigns to reinstitute restrictions on divorce. Some directly call for restricting access to sperm and fertility services to heterosexual, married couples. Blankenhorn, for example, condemns donor insemination for lesbians or unmarried heterosexual women: 'State legislatures across the nation should support fatherhood by regulating sperm banks. New laws should prohibit sperm banks and others from selling sperm to unmarried women and limit the use of artificial insemination to cases of married couples experiencing fertility problems. In a good society, people do not traffic commercially in the production of radically fatherless children.'

Mainstream journalists quickly embraced these views. An article in *US News and World Report* (15 May 1995) cited Blankenhorn as authority for the claim that 'The consensus of studies is that no-father children, as a group, are at risk in all races and at all income levels. If so, doesn't society have a stake in discouraging the intentional creation of fatherless children?' Similar concerns have appeared in even ostensibly more liberal publications.

Displaced families, displaced politics

Some of the reactionary political effects of fatherless frenzy are more indirect, but profound. The welfare overhaul bill of 1996 justified the draconian measures it was about to enact in virtual social science rhetoric. 'The Congress makes the following *findings* (my emphasis)', the bill announces, before listing family-values claims in defence of its actions, such as, '(1) Marriage is the foundation of a successful society; … (3) Promotion of responsible fatherhood and motherhood is integral to successful child rearing and the well-being of children; … (7) The negative consequences of an out-of-wedlock birth on the mother, the child, the family and society are *well documented* as follows', and what follows is a series of misleading claims that out-of-wedlock children are more likely to suffer child abuse, low cognitive attainment and lower educational aspirations.
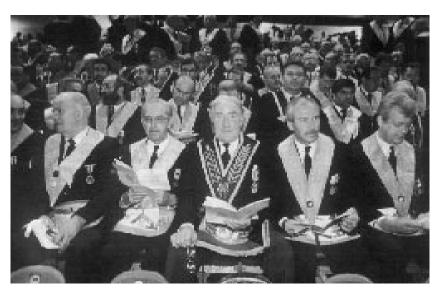
Of course, the actual body of research on the effects of father absence is far more complex and contested, but belief in the destructive effects of fatherlessness itself has destructive effects. It fuels reactionary initiatives injurious to vast numbers of children and families and to the social fabric more generally. Jobs programmes and health-insurance reforms that might have provided tangible relief to the growing ranks of endangered actual families suffered catastrophic defeat after Clinton took office in 1993. Soon both parties employed family-values rhetoric to rationalize dismantling the welfare state and shifting budget priorities from schools, social services and crime prevention programmes to prisons and police. Legislators claimed that caps on eligibility for welfare benefits would reduce rates of 'illegitimacy' and of the single-mother families that they blame for the rising numbers of criminals in the USA.

In the name of The Family, legislators justify terminating public support for the arts, humanities research and public broadcasting. They claim that artists like the late gay photographer Robert Mapplethorpe subject the young to corrosive sexual images and ideas, as do publicly funded scholars, critics and journalists who canonize and disseminate such work. Family-values rhetoric defeated Clinton's attempt to integrate

gays openly into the military. It is being deployed to prevent sex education, the distribution of contraceptives to teenagers, and access to abortion. It was central to the rapid, bipartisan passage of the anti-gay Defense of Marriage Act.

Moreover, the politics of fatherlessness fosters support for knee-jerk quick fixes, which are futile at best, and more likely to backfire. For, what if one believed (as many social scientists like myself do not) that one family form is superior and that every child should have a 'right' to a father? (Interestingly, few seem to concern themselves with whether a child also has a right to a mother. The growing ranks of single-father families seem to inspire few laments.) Even if one wished to combat 'fatherlessness', what could be done that would do children and their parents more good than harm? While one cannot mandate or legislate the quality of intimate relationships, misguided policies can readily make them worse.

For example, the family-values case against 'divorce culture' has encouraged many states to consider legislation to repeal no-fault divorce laws. Yet this poses even greater dangers to women and children. Ironically, Barbara Whitehead, author of *The Divorce Culture*, herself belatedly warned in the *New York Times* (13 January 1997) that 'rather than alleviating the damage divorce does to mothers and children', repealing no-fault 'will only make their situation worse'. Indeed, as Whitehead points out, it will 'intensify the pain of divorce for children. Nothing is more emotionally devastating to children than a prolonged conflict among their parents. Such friction will only worsen if parents fight over who is at fault in the breakup. The children will be caught in the crossfire.' Battered women would have to mount dangerous, expensive court

battles against their abusers, while emotionally desperate spouses would find incentives to fabricate abuse, to forfeit economic support, or simply to desert. Moreover, the repeal of no-fault might easily induce many men, as well as women, to avoid legal marriage in the first place. Just these sorts of unintended consequences recently led Roman Catholic voters in the Irish Republic to pass a constitutional amendment to legalize divorce.

Likewise, hostility to 'fatherless' lesbian families helped to justify the anti-gay and Orwellian titled Defense of Marriage Act, a rash of state-level campaigns to prevent the legalization of same-sex marriage, and proposals to restrict child custody and adoption rights to married, heterosexual couples. Yet the most tangible effect of these assaults on the legitimacy of lesbian-parent families is to deny stability, legitimacy, resources and respect to the millions of children who now live in what are often *invisible* two-parent homes.

By far the most widespread tangible harm that contemporary idealization of The Family will inflict on real families derives from its contribution to dismantling welfare, which currently threatens millions of already impoverished children and their caretakers with homelessness, malnutrition and devastation. It is difficult to imagine how such measures will introduce fathers or any other benefits into the perilous lives of children in such families.

In the end, however, it is difficult to believe that many family-values enthusiasts care much about improving the lives of the members of most real 'fatherless' families.

Instead, the politics of fatherlessness and family values are a politics of displacement. They function as proxies for anti-feminist, anti-gay, xenophobic and anti-welfare sentiments, which themselves displace direct engagement with the most fraught social divisions and anxieties in the USA – gender, sexuality, race and class. They deflect attention from the social sources of what they reify as personal or familial problems. Thus, in a book that promotes school vouchers, tax cuts, divorce restrictions, prayer in schools, and a full-scale conservative agenda, Dan Quayle dares to proclaim, 'On this, we're all allies. *Strengthening families should not be a political issue.*' Yet there is no such thing as an apolitical platform for strengthening families, or even for agreeing on a definition of the kind of family that 'we' might wish to strengthen.

In the current conservative, anti-government, anti-tax and anti-spending climate, family-values rhetoric advances profoundly political issues. By blaming massive, global crises on individual moral failings and lapses of 'personal responsibility', it rationalizes a sweeping privatization of resources and responsibility. Unsurprisingly, therefore, as the 'global village' erodes the gender division of labour and the male breadwinner wage that underwrote The Family in industrial societies, family-values campaigns have begun to spread to other postindustrial nations, and particularly to the UK. *Observer* columnist Melanie Phillips, for example, condemns the removal of fault criteria by the Family Law Act while employing precisely the sort of postfeminist family-values rhetoric that pervades US discourse. This transatlantic passage of the politics of family values is not merely coincident. Not only do the same sort of demographic and economic dislocations now threaten the UK welfare state; the UK is also particularly susceptible to a direct US family-values export industry. Indeed, some of the very social scientists who spearhead the US campaign, including sociologist Amitai Etzioni, have directly influenced Blair and some of the British media.

A new pro-families agenda

How, then, might progressive intellectuals on either side of the Atlantic respond to family-values frenzy? In the USA, we face quite a rearguard struggle in which I consider it urgent to try to forge a centre-left coalition in support of pluralistic family values and more progressive social policy. To do so requires entering the arena of virtual social science ourselves to engage in cultural politics. To that end, a group of family researchers, clinicians and theorists in the USA launched the Council on Contemporary Families, which held its inaugural conference, 'Reframing the Politics of Family Values', in Washington DC in November 1997. The Council has begun a public-education effort to challenge the simplistic claims about the sources and effects of family diversity made by family-values campaigners (see our web site: http://www. slip.net/~ccf/).

UK progressives, on the other hand, have a chance to derail the family-values tram before it flattens all dissenting views. First, Blair's Labour government has to satisfy a constituency more progressive and better organized than are most rank-and-file Democrats in the USA. In fact, Melanie Phillips even charges that 'new Labour is marching to a hard feminist tune: that the problems of lone parenthood and working motherdom can be solved by childcare and we should support every family form equally.' She points to the creation of a minister for women but not one for family as symptomatic of this bias. Moreover, while Blair may have lent Etzioni his ear, the prime minister is receiving more extensive, frequent sociological counsel from Anthony Giddens – theorist of the 'pure relationship' and no family-values fan. Thus, gazing from the Atlantic's western shores, New Labour appears to offer far greater opportunities than the New Democrats to build a centre–left coalition in support of more inclusive family and social values.

What is more, mounting a virtual social science campaign to support pluralist family values and a progressive agenda can be done with integrity. Anyone with even cursory knowledge of the social science literature who genuinely wished to reduce fatherlessness and to strengthen most families would make it a political priority to provide secure employment and a living family wage to all workers, and most urgently to workers without a college education. After all, marriage rates generally rise and divorce rates fall as one goes up the income and employment ladder. Those particularly concerned about the declining ranks of ghetto fathers would try to redirect state priorities from prisons to schools and to reduce the spread of firearms. After all, as the grim findings in a 1997 study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention demonstrate, the USA far exceeds the twenty-six richest countries in the world in losing children to homicide, suicide and death by firearms. Almost three out of four violent deaths of children in the industrialized world occur in the USA, and many more of the murder victims are boys than girls. Since dead boys do not grow up to become fathers, and incarcerated, unemployed and underemployed men make up much of the expanding universe of missing dads, progressives can challenge family-values fans to address these sources of the growing demographic imbalance between young women and men in our most impoverished communities.

To exploit such opportunities, however, feminists and leftists on both sides of the Atlantic need to shed lingering remnants of our historic antipathy to families as such. While most family-values rhetoric is indeed anti-social, as *The Anti-Social Family* by Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh argued long ago, families themselves are inescapably social. More to the point, however, progressive social values are unlikely to survive if they are presented or perceived as hostile to the survival of families. Hence, those of us struggling against The Family as ideology should simultaneously struggle for a comprehensive pro-*families* agenda.