

The Family

Institutions of Repression, Part 1

A. R.

She meant well, most all do. And she did a fine job, under the circumstances. And that's exactly what it was, a job, like any other. Underpaid, understaffed, boring. She put off all compensation for her later years. "A child saved is a child earned." Like insurance, but with no guaranteed premium. And she wonders now, that most of her children have departed, what she has to show for it all.

He too meant well. And he did a fine job under the circumstances, climbing from the bottom to the middle, hoping his children would continue on to the top. But there was always something wrong. Something that he just, couldn't quite put his finger on. Like most good folk, they quietly accepted the given reality. Life for them was the semblance of happiness, the appearance of being satisfied, and the dull security of knowing that tomorrow would be more of the same. As the years passed, what vitality they'd had in their early years gradually ebbed, leaving a mask on their faces etched in drudgery and remorse, a mask only occasionally removed following a few drinks with old friends.

It all looked so normal. Neighbors thought them nice, and they thought nicely of their neighbors. But then, the neighbors looked remarkably the same. They too had the same lines etched on their faces.

Except that, often a sudden transformation would occur. Friends would pop in on weekend or/trips would be arranged with a whole tribe of people gathering out in the country. The transformation was remarkable. Everybody became different. Exuberance would fill the air and a bantering manner would displace the empty home dialog'

Kids would run off in a pack screaming and yelling, while the parents popped the flip-tops.

It all appeared so unusual as compared to the drabness of daily existence. But the contradiction in itself became a norm, a mode of life. Weekdays were obviously not to be enjoyed; they were meant to be dull, routine, dreary, lonely and in general to be ignored.

But weekends, well, that was different. That was the time to go, to let go and do it. To run, scream, shout, play, and let loose all that energy stored-up under the family roof. But even then, Sunday mornings would come along and with the impact of a sledge-hammer remind everybody that the weekend, short as it was, was about over. And that God, lonely soul that he was, also needed some love and attention and financial assistance.

She wonders now what went wrong, with all of the time she has to sit and contemplate the past. And he wonders why the attraction of money and upward mobility has become so distasteful an idea to me-and others like me. They both wonder why we downgrade the state and the church and the family—as if it were a personal smear on them.

They've grown accustomed to the harness of social relations based on control from above, a harness woven on economic conditions that has reduced their tribe to isolated units for weekday production. They have accepted limited social isolation in exchange for a form of economic independence, yet only express themselves through social functions on weekends based on cooperative interdependence.

All this they strive to pass on. "One day you'll see." They still say that and they think that marriage and child-rearing under the prevalent social relations will inevitably force us to accept and make the best of reality as they see it. They want to see us bound the same way they were bound. That, in a way, would be their compensation.

Propagation or Conditioning?

Were this situation unique, it would hardly demand attention here. The point is that the family, as we know it, exists not only as a social unit for the propagation of the species, but also as a fundamental economic unit upon which all religious and political hierarchies have depended. Furthermore, it is the family which reproduces through the children the specific religious and political conditioning of the parents.

Wilhelm Reich, in his essays on sexuality and politics, shows how this conditioning occurs through a process of sexual negation and sexual repression expressed as the morality of society. And he shows how it serves only the economic interests of the holders of power:

“The morality of society is reproduced in all individuals subject to the same sexually repressive economic situation; these transformed individuals then influence their offspring according to their moral attitudes rather than their repressed needs; the economic situation continues in existence and continually reproduces the moral demands of the power-exercising class, so that the external social pressure continues.”

– Reich, *Sex-Pol*, page 244

In a society where the individual has so little control over the means of subsistence, it becomes necessary to instill at a very early age submissiveness to external authority in order to insure that the individual adheres to accepted norms and plays out a passive role supporting the status quo. Under these conditions, the individual is reduced to a mechanical functionary in direct contradiction to his/her emotional make-up, which results in a sublimation of anxiety and tension. Without the means to express frustration in any acceptable form, a displacement of frustration often results. And in the family it is all too often the spouse and children who serve as the objects of aggression.

Recent statistics on child-beating, run-away children, and suits for divorces coupled with rising alcoholism and drug abuse bear this out and indicate that the nuclear family, as a social unit, is not able to bear the isolation, repression, and oppression imposed by social relations fixed on competitive economic exploitation.

This in no way means that what society needs is more psychological therapeutic centers or the introduction of acceptable vents for frustration expression. What it does mean is that the social-economic-political basis of modern society is itself responsible for the havoc we encounter in our everyday lives, and that it is this basis which must be changed.

Historical Development

The historical development of socio-economic relations has been marked by two distinct but related phenomena. On the social side, human relations have gone through a reductive process whereby early tribal associations gave way to the extended family, which in turn gave way to the nuclear family. On the economic side, communal ownership of the means of production gradually gave way to private ownership, which has in turn given way to a highly centralized corporate ownership under the control of a small fraction of the population.

The continuation of this historical process points to the breakdown of even the nuclear family on the social side, and complete ownership of the means of production by a very small group of financial barons on the economic side. The contemporary isolation of age-specific groups to particular geographic areas (e.g. the elderly in Arizona and Florida and the young in university towns) has gone hand-in-hand with real estate development and business concentration on age-specific markets.

Even sections of large cities have become divided along similar lines with the development of singles apartment complexes, professional housing areas, retirement complexes, and even the formation of gay communities. All this, atop the already existing racial and economic class distinctions, continues to show that the total economic isolation of the individual is the pernicious objective of capitalist social relations.

It is no wonder then, that the most pervasive psychological problems in today's society are related to acute forms of alienation and anomie, and that a mystical religious fervor is on the rise whereby individuals are instructed to put their faith in God or Jesus, or simply black-out in some form of spiritual meditation, thereby ignoring the realities of the material world.

Although sexual repression has served to uphold the family, and consequently the institutions of society, it has also led to a growing sexual rebellion. The whole trend toward late marriage, coupled with a free indulgent attitude toward sexual gratification before marriage (and often after), the growing preference for simple cohabitation without the legal strictures of marriage, and the proliferation of open gay relationships all contribute to the fact that individuals are taking a decisive stand against sexual repression.

The whole impact of the Women's Liberation Movement, if not a prime stimulus to this rebellion, is at least a major contributing factor allowing more and more women the necessary economic independence for developing relationships unfettered by the need for economic dependence.

Capitalistic Accommodation

However, it is becoming increasingly apparent that capitalism is not only accommodating itself to these changes, but in fact, is taking advantage of the whole process. With the breakdown of the family as a consuming economic unit, the market for commodities has been in effect doubled.

Advertising, in response to this, is adopting a new social norm, a new morality, custom-fitting individual gratification to the needs of the market. The Geritol commercial is a prime example. Though using the family as a background prop, the message is obviously directed at the individual as a consumer: "Make every day count, do what you really want to do."

But such messages, superimposed on a society already conditioned to consumerism, provide only the impression of individual freedom while subtly maintaining the existing repressive economic relations. Commodities are still glorified as the agents for overcoming boredom (Mustang II beats boredom), and as the means for doing what you want to do.

The new morality twist, while cashing in on the individual, quietly lays to rest the nuclear family. Thus, the mystique of both sex and money is unveiled. A mystique that once bound the family now breaks it down and we are left with an increasing number of individuals struggling and hoping to establish some sort of meaning and identity beneath forces cognizant of only complaisance and mechanical functionality.

This critique of the breakdown of the family is by no means conclusive. It is only meant to point out some of the relations that are operating today in society, relations that are for the most part obscured, and if not totally ignored. What is conclusive is that we are the guinea pigs in the hands of social-economic experimenters who care little of the hazards of the maze that's been laid out, and remain content with totally superficial formulations as to causes of the pervading social and economic ills. But the walls of the maze are paper thin, and it is high time we set them ablaze.

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