
READERS

WRITE

On “The Family Crisis”

To the editors:

It is easy enough for Richard Busacca and Mary Ryan to get “Beyond the Family Crisis.” They begin by assuming there is no such thing, though one has been “much ballyhooed,” with “fevered regard” for the family’s plight being evinced by left-wing, right-wing, and in-between-wing critics. But the authors’ promised “rethinking” of what is really at issue when the term “family crisis” gets bandied about boils down to a redefinition of the family that eliminates any crisis by fiat. Indeed, the misguided notion that we face a family crisis serves as “a smokescreen for a fundamental crisis in the organization of social reproduction.” Our “fixation on the family” is passé, an atavism in the new age dawning all around us. For the family that provokes critical frothings has been, or is being, superseded by a modern model, a new “social reproduction system.” The critics just haven’t caught up to social evolution.

There is something very odd about this argument. Upon inspection, the force of Busacca and Ryan’s case comes down to a counsel of rational acquiescence in a new engine of “people production,” the latest one thrown up by our industrial, technological, liberal, capitalist order. We should stop making an “ideological totem” out of the family and come to appreciate “the inevitable emergence of a politics of social reproduction.”

The authors’ language is the best clue to their values and their vision. Their language is one of unrestrained functionalism, a set of descriptive terms and an explanatory framework that by no means represents some neutral mode of scholarly reflection. For example, their history of the loss of traditional family “functions” follows the standard functionalist schema of Talcott Parsons. This functionalist history is eerily disembodied. One finds structures determining functions and functions evolving structures but one rarely encounters deep political

conflict (or it is “doomed” if it is out of synch with the inexorable march of structural-functional imperatives) and one never meets up with a self-defining human subject.

Notice—a distinguishing feature of functionalist argument—the way in which abstract, impersonal nouns are granted agency; observe the generous deployment of the passive voice. “History records”; “the family was invested”; “homosocial bonds took on”; “seventeenth-century New England presents”; “the parents, children, and servants . . . were enjoined”; “thus it is no accident that” (there are never accidents in the functionalist universe).

Functionalist history is matter-of-fact, and Busacca and Ryan are no exception to this general rule of thumb. One finds affection being “redistributed” along with income and goods. People, as well as products, are “produced.” History marches along. Nothing functions better than functionalism. In the functionalist teleology writ large, the family performs requisite functions for the macro-order. As these requisites change, the family transmutes. This leads to the evolution of “ideal-typical” types. A functionalist doesn’t ask *why* people may be devoted to a particular social institution. Theirs is not to question “why.” The *raison d’être* of any institution is given and its “meaning” is exhausted once one has described its functions within a structure in which those decreed functions function. “Good,” to the extent it exists, resides in states of affairs. Human social life and historic change are marked by a calculus of inexorability. One might call this the ideal-typical cage of functionalist argumentation.

Confronted with a new structure of “social reproduction,” then, one can either inveigh, fulminate, ballyhoo, throw up smokescreens, and show fevered regard or one can, sensibly, acquiesce in this transformation, one can endorse, in Busacca and Ryan’s words, an era whose “hallmark is acceptance of the central role of the state in organizing, regulating, and subsidizing social reproduction and a corollary acceptance of the politicization of the once private universe of personal and family life.” Is *that* all! Cast in the words of functionalist common-sense one should, I suppose, feel relief. There isn’t a real crisis after all—just the shaking-down and fine-tuning attendant upon major social change—in this case change that locks us into an order with enhanced power to police, regulate, and constrain in more and more areas of social life, up to and including “people production.”

There is only one problem with all of this: it is a tidying-up of social reality that easily becomes fatuous. *Pace* Busacca and Ryan, the family is not really or simply, or only the way a society gets recruits and structures its reproductive “functioning.” The family remains the locus of the deepest and most resonant human ties, the most enduring hopes, the most intractable conflicts, the most poignant tragedies, and the sweetest triumphs human life affords to the vast majority of us. Passion, intimacy, the surprising depth of love and hate, and the as-

tonishing strength of human endurance and concern—families tap and evoke all of these. Small wonder all sorts of folks are fevered and ballyhoo a lot. Many of us do not see the new world of “social reproduction” as having some *prima facie*, irresistible force. Many of us do not find that the social and personal meanings, fears, and hopes inseparable from images of “family” can be accounted for in functionalist formulation. Busacca and Ryan to the contrary, there is a family crisis—it is a crisis of meaning and it goes to the heart of our self-understandings and our social existence.

Jean Bethke Elstain

Amherst, Massachusetts