

DEMOCRACY AGAINST THE FAMILY

William D. Gairdner for CIVITAS NATIONAL CONFERENCE, TORONTO, APRIL 19, 1997

The first time I got deeply alarmed about the status of the family in modern society was when I heard an important politician tell a talk-show host that the definition of “the family,” should be “any four people seen together on Donahue!” What disturbed me was that so many of the callers thought this was just great. “We should all be free to live as we please,” they said, “that’s what democracy is all about.”

So I decided to fight back, and my book *The War Against The Family* was the result. By the end of it, what seemed manifestly clear is that throughout history the State and the private family wax and wane inversely to each other.

And yet I had always thought that what we fondly term “democracy,” should be an exception to this rule. But I now think it is not. The rise of enthusiastic “right-wing populism” - pure democracy for conservatives - that I have pushed hard myself, and which I think is an important tool for beating back big government, seems to me now as somewhat of a Trojan horse when it comes to society and the family.

In order to understand this larger conflict, however, we need first to understand the smaller ones underlying it. First, we have an ongoing struggle between the organic and the radical view of the status, or position of society.

In the classical Athenian forms of democracy (even in the early democracies of the New World), society, and especially the family, was always held to be at the centre of life, and a producer, or rather an absolute origin both of the individual, who was always considered less important than society, and of government - at best considered a kind of delegated defender of the mostly unwritten social constitution. This was an organic concept that said the individual is naturally obedient, by law to government, and by convention and morality to society.^[1]

But with few exceptions, organic democracies seem to transform over time into their radical form, and rarely the other way. We need to ask why this is so? For when they have huge tax harvests to spend, they may do this with amazing speed. Canada and Sweden are examples. Both travelled from deeply conservative to extremely radical in less than half a century. For both, civil society, which is based on the family, has been dislodged. We end up with a tripartite structure with the provider State at the top as master (rarely even pretending to obey the will of the people), civil society (and the family) now in the middle, as a re-positioned servant to this

provider, and millions of isolated individuals as recipients of equal “rights” and benefits, dished out by the State at the top.

It bears noting that even though this re-positioning was restrained by classical liberal beliefs and by the strength of religion for quite some time - arguably until this century - the “autonomism” and subsequent “atomization” of society that has resulted was fully intended and has been carried out in the West under the flag of democracy.^[2] So this first unresolved conflict takes the form of the question: which shall be first, the individual, or society? I suggest that many conservatives still are not sure.

Flowing from this is a second conflict between the hierarchical and the egalitarian view of moral authority. The first says that the moral orderings of society flow from some high standard of the good, and of right behaviour, downward by degrees to lower forms. Standards of any kind, however, automatically create moral authority backed by stigma, and above all emphasize not the equality of persons and their behaviour, but their differences. We are told this is not in the democratic spirit. That we should not speak of standards, but of “values.”

So the logic of democracy now says that because all values are chosen by people with equal worth and rights, therefore all values are equal. To insist otherwise is to “impose” your values on mine. However, neither the family, nor society as a whole can survive as moral communities without the positive discrimination and stigma required to defend the good. The liberal meaning of “tolerance” for example, is not in itself a good; it is a declaration that everything is good; therefore nothing is bad. So as democracy travels at increasing speed from organic to radical, virtue must fall. Then the State leaps eagerly into the moral vacuum. Human rights tribunals are just one example of this. So the question, ‘Shall we have family at the center of a good society?’, hangs on our prior decision whether to argue for standards, or merely values, and policy follows accordingly.

Flowing from this is a third conflict between opposing visions of the self that underlie modern times. I call these the metaphors of the glass-house, and the onion. The first imagines each of us enclosed in a structure made of hundreds of panes of opaque glass. In this vision, the truth of the universe is external, and each time we achieve an insight into the truth, one of those panes of glass breaks, allowing a fuller glimpse of the world beyond. The goal of earthly life is to improve one’s character by breaking as many panes as possible before the end.

The contrary, onion metaphor however, says that because everything is a matter of relative values, ultimate truth must be internal. Thus, if we just peel back enough layers of false authority laid down by society, religion, family, and so on, we will find our true selves there, shining, and beautiful.^[3] This image of the self as trapped by the falseness of the material and moral world is profoundly rooted in the West. It is also deeply anti-authoritarian, and crucial to the success of

the democratic enterprise. The prototypical modern voice broke through long ago in Walt Whitman's essay *Democratic Vistas*, and in his 1855 poem *Leaves of Grass*,^[4] which begins with, "One's-self I sing, a simple separate person," and another called (wouldn't you know!), *Song Of Myself*, which begins: "I celebrate myself, and sing myself/ And what I assume, you shall assume/ for every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you."

For democratic Walt, the self is sovereign in the moral realm - there is no higher law; just as in democratic theory, the collection of selves is sovereign, based on the centuries old slogan, *Vox populi, Vox Dei*, "the voice of the people is the voice of God." In modern times we encounter everywhere the same shrill claim of a right to seek out and fulfill one's personal appetites as prior to other social obligations or conventions. This amounts to a kind of "descent of sovereignty" over time. First democrats attacked the sovereignty of God, then of Kings, then Aristocrats, and now finally, and ironically, we see the people themselves being attacked in the name of individuals and their rights. In other words, democratic ideology seems to end by attacking the very society it nurtured in its organic stage. Conservatives will not be able to restore society until they restore a more realistic concept of the self and its obligations.

The last and perhaps most important conflict has to do with the notion of privilege and exclusivity. Now the very word "privilege" implies ranking, hierarchy, and an "insider/outsider," or what some call the "friend/enemy" distinction, repugnant to all democratic thinking. And yet I believe the underlying mechanism for the formation of any human community, from the intimacy of the biological family to the nation itself considered as a "political family," is this very distinction.

This means - and this is my most subversive point - that the democratic impulse is in the long run inherently contrary to the impulse for community. The reason for this is that all social groups seem to rely on a four-step process to recruit and bind their members as insiders. They require a willingness to sacrifice self-interest to the group (an example is the Rotary International motto: "Service Above Self"), they require subordination to the authority and rules of the group; they then demand some process or ceremony of commitment, whether by a solemn vow, a contract, or a ritual; and finally, when all this is done, they reserve privileges and a special status for accepted members, that must be denied to all outsiders.

This means that when democracies move from their organic to their final radical form, there will always be a civil war over moral standards due to democracy's imperative to eliminate all privilege, of which the natural family is historically the most glaring and persistent example. Of interest is that, faced with two such conflicting ideals deeply held by the people, the ploy of the State has been to remove the offending privileged status of the family, but not its benefits. These it simply showers on all claimants alike, thus converting formerly exclusive policies that secured

a commitment from citizens to the family and society, into general welfare rights that release them from, and dissolve those commitments.

Such democratic fundamentalism operates chiefly through five radical movements, each of which is aimed at the destruction of one kind of order or another crucial to the survival of the natural family. These are so well known I need only mention them briefly.

Radical feminism seeks to overthrow the biological order by negating all gender differences, and the natural social and familial consequences that arise from these. The radical abortion movement, connected to this, seeks to overthrow the order of love and replace it with an order of death (whose natural extension is euthanasia), knowing full well that without the right to kill their unborn children, women may be “trapped” by their bodies or gender in motherhood - which means trapped in the natural family (or, in the case for euthanasia, trapped by their aging parents). Section 7 of Canada’s Charter has supplied this right under the aegis of “security of the person,” with no mention of the security of society.

The radical pansexual/homosexual/incest/ and pornography movements seeks to overthrow the sexual order. They say if the self is naturally good, then all sexuality is naturally good. However, our sexual order is grounded in four traditional prohibitions based on Number, Gender, Age, and Incest: You can only marry one person at a time, only someone of the opposite gender, never someone beneath a certain age, and not a close blood relation. All four measures protect a procreative society.

Again leaning almost exclusively on the democratic language of “rights” found in our Charter, the privileges and protections normally reserved exclusively for those who commit themselves to this sexual order are now being given to all claimants regardless of qualification. The most amusing and yet effective use of democratic political language is the push to legalize pedophilia on the grounds that it will “liberate” children from a “sex-negative society.”

Not least, we have the legal radicals who populate every law school in North America, sit on many benches, and have been very successful in eliminating the legal and tax order constitutive of a family-based society, in the name of purely democratic rights. Until very recently, co-habitation has had amazing legal and tax advantages over true marriage; the tax code continues to penalize the traditional family that wishes to rear its own children; welfare rights financially reward single motherhood; and no-fault divorce now means no responsibility marriage. At present in Canada and the USA it is impossible legally to bind yourself with someone for a lifelong marriage. By all of these measures, rights enthusiasts they have succeeded in undermining the whole contractual and sacramental basis for marital union.

In addition, anyone unfamiliar with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child will be

shocked to see how many sections of that document enforce the rights of the individual child against the family and society. Since children are too young to exercise rights, this means government officials will do so for them. During its recent “Year of the Family,” the United Nations actually defined the family as “The smallest democracy at the heart of society.” Now this is pure bureaucratic hype and drivel, because the family has never been a democracy, nor should it be. Just try to imagine a family with three children voting against their parents on whether they should attend school, or be allowed to burp at the table.

Finally, we have all met the education radicals. Public school teachers must of course act as trustees of children for someone, either for the parents and their community, or for the State. Ultimately, in curricula, teaching philosophy, text-books chosen, and especially in every aspect of modern sex education, they clearly tend to side with the State and its officially promulgated views, against those of the private family which they deride as “Victorian,” “bigoted,” “homophobic,” or, most damning of all - “from the fifties.”

So to conclude, the course for conservatives is clear. We must first understand that a certain amount of classical democracy may be a good thing, but in its radical modern form it seems to work against the formation of community and takes special aim at the natural family, which will always come out the loser in this war.

As conservatives, the first step is to recognize this uncomfortable fact, and then develop political, economic, and policy means to fight back.

[¹] A good essay collection on how society fared under Greek democracy is Josiah Ober and Charles Hedrick, eds., Demokratia: A Conversation on Democracies, Ancient and Modern (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996). Also, very useful are Mogens Herman Hansen, The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), and of course, Numa denis Fustel de Coulanges, The Ancient City (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1980).

[²] The best analysis of this process of social decomposition at the hands of the State is Robert Nisbet, The Quest For Community: A Study in the Ethics of Order and Freedom (San Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1990).

[³] The notion that the truth of existence is internal and is symbolized as a form of resident knowledge that needs only to be awakened through a form of self-revelation has important roots in ancient gnosticism, an ancient religion popular in much of the ancient world and highly competitive with Christianity, that has surfaced periodically since as the great “alternative” conception of the cosmos. It survived throughout the known world in the form of Manicheism until the 12th century, and was the object of purges by the Catholic Inquisition of the Medieval Cathars of France and Italy. Whereas Christianity explains the logical problem of the co-existence of a good God with evil, by positing original sin and the fallenness of humanity, gnosticism argues that this is an illusion. The true God is good, but unknowable directly. Therefore this evil world must have been created by an imposter God. Men are accordingly pure

souls trapped within this world and their only way to spiritual salvation while here is to gain knowledge of their self-divinity, to connect their spark of light, or “gnosis” (Greek for “knowledge”) with the true God beyond. When they die this spark of knowledge will join the true God for eternity. This is the background for the study of radical “selfism” in the democratic West, and for its syncretic form in New Age philosophy boasting of the divine within persons. The importance of this for political life in the West was first roundly and incisively analysed by Eric Voegelin, The New Science of Politics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), and again in Science, Politics and Gnosticism (Washington: Regnery Gateway, 1968), published in German in 1959. Unfortunately, Voegelin did not have the benefit of the first masterful examination of Gnosis by Hans Jonas, The Gnostic Religion (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), which itself was prior to the translation of 52 gnostic “secret gospels” discovered at Nag Hamadi in 1945, but kept from the world until the mid 1970s. The best treatment of the gnostic religion that includes the Nag Hammadi gospels is Kurt Rudolph, Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1987), first published in German in 1977.

^[4] See James E. Miller, Jr., ed., Walt Whitman: Complete Poetry and Selected Prose (Boston: houghton mifflin, 1959)