

PART I

**Society and Culture**



## CHAPTER ONE

# Family and Demography in Postwar America: A Hazard of New Fortunes?

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Since the mid-1960s the proportion of children living in two-parent households has declined for all groups in the United States, a trend that has elicited responses – popular and scholarly – ranging from consternation to mild satisfaction. While the ill-fated “Moynihan Report” (US Department of Labor, 1965) promoted single-parent headship as the chief cause of “family breakdown” among African Americans, the subsequent decline of two-parent households among whites has provoked more generalized concern about the health of family life in the United States. As long as single-parent headship was linked exclusively to the “disorganization” of a group as patently oppressed as African Americans and the cause of their immiseration could be hung on slavery and Jim Crow, single-parenthood could be regarded as a remote, if malformed, adaptation to the harsh conditions imposed by the evils and ignorance of generations past. At the close of the twentieth century, however, it became increasingly difficult to dismiss as a cultural perversion a social change of such magnitude: by the late 1990s, more than a quarter of all white children were being raised in the home of one parent, and divorce was the leading cause of this trend.

Other, “worrisome,” developments had contributed to the rise in single-parent households, namely, the spreading acceptance of premarital sex, the consequent increase of teen pregnancy and illegitimate births among white females, and from an unanticipated source – growing numbers of women who were choosing to conceive and raise children outside of wedlock. Still more trends added to the list of concerns over the status of marriage and family life: a birth rate barely at replacement level; a historically high ratio of adults who have never married; and increasing numbers of couples who choose to cohabit rather than marry. These developments were all the more striking since family life during the two decades after the war had witnessed a seeming return to more tradition-bound patterns of marriage and childrearing. Politicians, policymakers, and some social scientists pointed to these trends with alarm. They declared the end of the family, the decay of the social fabric.

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Historians, more circumspect in their assessments, disagree about the meaning of these changes and even how much change has occurred. Some decry the family's "decline" and argue that the function, form, and feeling of family life have altered irrevocably since World War II. Others have drawn attention to the fact that divorce has replaced death as the primary cause of single-parent headship, the resurgence of "blended families," and step-parenting (Smith, 1995; Ruggles, 1994). Households, moreover, include fewer extended kin and unrelated individuals than at any time in the past (Ruggles and Goeken, 1992). As a site for reproduction, child nurture, and the pooling of economic resources, some historians argue, the family has demonstrated tremendous elasticity in its ability to accommodate changing economic and social relations. Compared with the social and behavioral sciences, however, the historical literature on family life in the postwar period is relatively thin and uneven. Whereas interpersonal and social relations have been key concerns of the behavioral and social sciences for more than a century, historians have been latecomers to the widening discourse on family life in the United States and did not fully turn to the study of family and kinship until the late 1960s. Contemporary historical study of family life was initiated by Philippe Ariès in 1960, but the earliest full-length studies of family and kinship in the United States did not appear until a decade later (Demos, 1970; Greven, 1970). Elemental questions about household structure, life span and cycle, inheritance practices, the functioning of family groups bound together by common (if not mutual) economic and emotional interests, and a host of other concerns that filled people's daily lives from cradle to grave absorbed the attentions of this first wave of scholars in family history. These historians must have felt themselves at the very heart of the movement to compose a comprehensive "history of everyday life" that was ascendant in the early 1970s.

Lost or sidestepped in the effort, however, was a similar accounting for changes in African American family life since World War II. There is no shortage of theory, speculation, and empirical analysis by social scientists of African American family life since 1945, but there remains little scholarship written by historians; and even what little historiography there is displays preoccupations quite remote from those of social scientists concerned with African American families in the same period. The social sciences are "problem"-driven disciplines, which may explain why their attentions have remained riveted to African American group life during the second half of the twentieth century. As social problems are identified in political discourse they become the object of sociological curiosity – and no less the object of scrutiny by economists, political scientists, and even anthropologists. The federal government and philanthropic foundations have an interest in funding such studies because they hold out the promise of a cure for perceived social "ills." As a consequence, most of what histories we have of black families since World War II have been composed by social scientists trying to explain what had transpired before the Moynihan Report or the alleged emergence of a black "underclass" twenty years later, and how each crisis framed current understandings of African American family life.

Two factors, I think, amplify the noticeable silence of historians in this area. First, to those who continued to pursue lines of inquiry established at the renaissance of social history in the 1960s, the experience of African American families seemed to follow a different historical trajectory from that of the dominant culture in postwar America and thus to require a different narrative framework and different questions.

Second, the Moynihan Report cast a long shadow across the young field of family history. The Moynihan Report had provoked a storm of protest so devastating that less than a year after its circulation, the issues raised by the report were pronounced “dead” (Rainwater and Yancey, 1967, p. 481). Criticism ranged from ideological objections to quarrels with the methodology and presentation of the data.

Moynihan characterized the black family as a “tangle of pathology” (US Department of Labor, 1965, p. 30). While acknowledging the contribution of white Americans’ racism to inequalities between whites and blacks, Moynihan concluded nonetheless that it was the “weakness of family structure” among African Americans that accounted for the many problems that prevented blacks from gaining an equal footing in American social and economic life. Drawing upon E. Franklin Frazier’s research on the African American family in the 1920s and 1930s and Stanley Elkins’s historical analysis of slavery, Moynihan explained the legacy of the black family’s “weakness” as a product of African enslavement, which had broken the family’s back, established women at its head, and trapped generations of children in a cycle of poverty, disorganization, and dysfunction, uninterrupted since emancipation (US Department of Labor, 1965, p. 17; Frazier, 1940; Elkins, 1959).

To a much greater degree than perhaps has been appreciated, historians have actively avoided study of black families in the postwar period precisely because they were at a loss to explain what appeared to be a deepening of the very trends identified and condemned by Moynihan. Given the degree of criticism provoked by the report, it was clear that it was politically hazardous to undertake such a study (Rainwater and Yancey, 1967). But what is more, family historians faced an intellectual *cul-de-sac* in studying African American family life. The questions they asked presumed too much about how intimate relations are (or ought to be) configured – between husbands and wives and parents and children in particular – to be able to think about other ways that people might conduct caring, committed relationships that counted as “family” and were infused with meaning and purpose over time.

The absence of a historiography of contemporary African American family and kinship represents a grave shortcoming in any effort to comprehend the variety of family life since World War II. Nonetheless, it is a period full of drama – drama heightened by the confluence of attitudes and behaviors that yielded its most remarkable feature, the “baby boom.” The baby boom between 1945 and 1964 was an extraordinary demographic event, not because the birth rate climbed to unprecedented levels – it did not. The birth rate at the beginning of the century surpassed the highest level achieved during the baby boom at its peak. Rather, it was the coalescence of a sustained, elevated birth rate with other demographic features and a reinforcing ideology of pronatalism that made the era distinctive.

During the peak years of the baby boom, social theorist Talcott Parsons argued that the isolated nuclear family represented an ideal social “adaptation” to the conditions of modern life. Parents and their dependent children, living in a dwelling apart from their own families of orientation, economically independent, and subsisting “from the occupational earnings of the husband-father,” he observed, was the “‘normal’ arrangement” in American society (Parsons and Bales, 1955, p. 10). Moreover, since the roles of the conjugal pair were specialized by temperament, biology, and aptitude, parents, it was proposed, operated most effectively when they worked together as the family’s “leadership element” while clearly dividing the tasks to which

their different natures inclined them. Complementary to the father-husband's instrumentalist function as family task leader was the mother's "expressive," nurturing role – a role cemented by the "bearing and early nurturing of children" (Parsons and Bales, 1955, p. 23). Unencumbered by responsibilities for the education and care of the sick, disabled, and aged, the modern, nuclear family, according to Parsons, had one primary purpose: the socialization of its children.

Although the nuclear family took root as a widespread social ideal after World War II, its components were in evidence well before mid-century. "Companionate marriage," the notion that men and women formed an egalitarian partnership in marriage based on friendship, mutual respect, and a breadwinner/homemaker division of labor in the family, was popularized in American cinema and other media by the mid-1920s (E. May, 1980; L. May, 1980). The passage of federal prohibitions against child labor, as well as the enforcement of compulsory school attendance laws throughout the nation, sent the family wage economy into permanent decline by the onset of the Great Depression. This meant that children, rather than contributing labor or income to their households, were to be the beneficiaries of mother's attention – the objects of both affection and vigilant, conscientious correction (Zelizer, 1985; Lasonde, 1998). Simultaneously, Social Security enhanced the possibility of independence for elderly Americans after 1940 (Ruggles, 1994). It was not until after World War II, however, that a majority of Americans began to realize the ideals projected by popular culture and underwritten by the Wagner and Social Security Acts during the New Deal administration. After World War II this legislation, aided by the GI Bill, the expansion of home loans through the Federal Housing Administration, and a wave of unprecedented prosperity, expedited the rise of the isolated nuclear family and subsidized the prodigious birth rate.

Other, associated trends were not firmly established until the middle of the 1950s. Historically high marriage rates and lower ages at marriage, a lower age of entry into motherhood, an increased rate of conception within the first year of marriage, a preference for larger families, a significant rise in homeownership, as well as increased consumer spending and debt all combined to create a distinctive commitment to what John Modell has called the era's "family-building ethos": the belief that the height of personal satisfaction was to be found not just in marriage itself but equally in childrearing (Modell, 1989; May, 1988; Cherlin, 1981; Jackson, 1985). Almost as soon as these trends merged, however, they began to unravel. By the late 1950s, key ingredients of the "family-building" ethos – the stay-at-home mother and marital longevity – were challenged by the increased workforce participation of mothers with young children and the renewed climb of the divorce rate (Davis, 1984; Cherlin, 1981; Easterlin, 1980). While the gender roles prescribed by "family building" continued powerfully to shape women's and men's ambitions, sense of duty to others, and relations to one another for a generation, "family building" began to lose its luster as the decade wore on and the relentlessness of raising so many children, so close together in age, and in so solitary a fashion, took its toll on this resanctified arrangement of coupling, reproduction, and childrearing.

Women who strained under the gendered division of labor approvingly depicted in the mass media and modeled on Parsons's isolated nuclear family – working, divorced, and unwed mothers – appeared to threaten the healthy operation of the family. By infringing on the adult male's role as "family task leader," they were con-

sidered deviant and condemned for modeling deviance for their children. In 1963 Betty Friedan voiced the deep, if quiet, discontent that later blossomed into the women's movement. Feminists ultimately rejected the political economy of marriage, reproduction, and the stereotyped family roles cast by the Parsonian model and popular culture. In response to its suffocating narrowness, they called for a broader conception of the forms and functions of family and household.

In 1974 support for this perspective came from Carol B. Stack's ethnography of black working-class Chicago, *All Our Kin*, the first sustained scholarly response to the Moynihan Report. No one until Stack had taken on Moynihan's chief assumption, that the fluidity of familial relations among African Americans and especially the pragmatic substitution of adults to perform "parental" obligations were fundamentally "dysfunctional." For this reason, *All Our Kin* was a pivotal study. Rather than catalogue the relative extent of two-parent households in the black community, Stack showed how African Americans had developed "fictive kin" to satisfy the range of functions that parents fulfill in European American families. She not only interrogated the presumption of the nuclear family model but challenged the normative necessity of male headship and authority. In effect, Stack equipped students of African American family life with a new lens through which to view the function and meaning of family and kinship and simultaneously licensed feminist critics to deconstruct contemporary family history from their own vantage point, by toppling the myth of male authority (Rapp, Ross, and Bridenthal, 1979; Collier, Rosaldo, and Yanigisako, 1992). This is not to say that historians had failed to address the issue of male authority in the family sphere before; this had been a central focus of women's historians and theorists since the founding of women's history as a subfield of social history during the 1960s. Rather, it was not until after Stack that feminist historians of family life examined changes in family structure, operation, and ideology in the postwar years. Stack paved the way for a critical evaluation of patriarchy and the maintenance of the nuclear family ideal during this period.

Christopher Lasch, one of the first scholars to assess the state of postwar family life from a historical perspective, published two widely read books on the family in the space of two years: *Haven in a Heartless World* (1977) and *The Culture of Narcissism* (1978). The first was an extended critique of family sociology and the rise of therapeutic solutions to the perceived decline of male authority in the twentieth century. The second disparaged the "attack on the nuclear family" and the arrogation of the family's right to educate and socialize its children. The theme that united these two works was the assertion that American culture is the worse for the decline of male authority – a decline set into motion decades earlier, to be sure, but precipitated by the feminist critique of the nuclear family.

Social trends extending back to the dawn of industrialism had ripened by the 1920s and 1930s, Lasch wrote, but had begun to rot by the middle of the twentieth century. By the 1950s most of the family's functions had been stripped away. Care for the infirm and aged, education, moral instruction, its economic function, all of these had been overtaken by other institutions. More disturbing in Lasch's estimation, however, were the many incursions into the sole remaining purpose of the family as the seat of human intimacy. Increasingly, from the 1920s forward, psychologists and psychiatrists – experts in infant care, childrearing, marital relations, sibling rivalry, and sexuality – began to impose their own notions of correctness upon every aspect of

family relations. The result, by the mid-1950s according to Lasch, was the widespread adoption of “permissive” parenting and the complete absence of the patriarch-father, whose role as family leader was so critical to the Parsonian conception of the evolved nuclear family. It had been difficult enough when father had been physically absented from the home by his work; now his lack of authority in the home meant a lapse in moral standards as well (Lasch, 1978, pp. 172–9).

A second consequence was that the mother attempted to compensate for the husband’s absence by indulging her children in every feeling and desire. “In this way,” Lasch argued, permissive parents “undermine the child’s initiative and make it impossible for him to develop self-restraint or self-discipline” (Lasch, 1978, p. 178). Just as ties between parents and children were weakened by the abdication of parental authority, he suggested, ties between men and women had been frayed by what he called the “cult of intimacy.” Predicated upon the increased importance of sexual gratification in conjugal relations as well as the “emotional overloading of personal relations” between husbands and wives, marriages dissolved under the weight of unrealistic expectations (Lasch, 1978, p. 188). Divorce was the result and its unparalleled rise, he concluded, could be laid at the doorstep of feminists who had advanced such improbable demands in the first place and worse, who had called off the tacit truce between men and women and their mutual, “easy-going contempt for the weakness of the other sex” (Lasch, 1978, p. 195). Lasch shared Moynihan’s presumptive uneasiness about matriarchy as well as his conviction that the nuclear family offered society’s best hope against the pathologies that hinder social progress for the majority of Americans and perpetuate poverty and deprivation among blacks (Lasch, 1977, pp. 157–62, 165; US Department of Labor, 1965, p. 76).

A more even-handed assessment of many of the trends troubling Christopher Lasch was offered by Andrew Cherlin in *Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage* (1981). Cherlin’s was a stock-taking enterprise that proposed to puzzle out what he described as the “roller-coaster” patterns of marriage and divorce since World War II. If familial living arrangements were transformed in the decade after the war, they looked radically different again by the last quarter of the twentieth century. Not only was divorce near an all-time high and the birth rate at an all-time low, family configurations, single parenthood, and average age at first marriage all reversed patterns that had emerged immediately after World War II. If Lasch wrung his hands over the state of American family life by the 1970s, Cherlin and others pointed to the 1950s as the anomaly to be explained, for the 1960s and 1970s merely reasserted trends of long standing in marriage, fertility, women’s labor force participation, and divorce. For Cherlin the appropriate question to ask was: what happened during the 1950s to create such an exceptional cluster of family-forming behaviors?

Cherlin presented the debate over how to explain the 1950s as dividing into two camps. One, which he characterized as the “period” explanation, posited that the rush to marriage, prolific childbearing, slowed divorce rate, and initial withdrawal of married women from the workforce after the war could best be understood as the product of a specific historical era: a collective, emotional response to the deferral of family formation made necessary by the straitened circumstances of the 1930s and then by the absence of marriageable males during World War II. A competing theory, which Cherlin called the “cohort” explanation, had been championed by Richard Easterlin. The cohort explanation understood the 1950s as a reaction to the gener-



ational experience of the men and women who had come of age during the late 1940s and 1950s. Born just before and during the 1930s, they had experienced the deprivations of the Great Depression and thus had low material expectations as they moved into the labor market. Yet because their birth cohort was small and the United States rode a long wave of prosperity in the wake of the war, jobs were abundant and wages were relatively high. Able to meet their standards for material comfort early in their working lives without having to trade comfort for children (which most young couples *must* do), they had children. Cherlin sensibly considered some combination of the two explanations as most plausible. Neither cohort size nor the catastrophes of depression and war could alone explain the extraordinary convergence of low age at first marriage, high birth rate, the tendency for newly married women to give birth in their first year of marriage, a stabilizing divorce rate, and an all-time-high ratio of men and women marrying (95 percent).

Cherlin's was one of the first attempts to unravel the complex and baffling puzzle of the baby boom and its aftermath. Yet his characterization of the debate as it stood in 1980 could not anticipate the shape of future historical interpretations of the demographic and political "events" of postwar America. Since the publication of *Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage*, historians have struggled not just with behavioral patterns but with the attitudes that informed these behaviors and with the discourse about family life, attempting to understand parents and children as agents of change as well as continuity. I will examine some of these studies below, but Richard A. Easterlin's *Birth and Fortune* (1980), which, as Cherlin pointed out, had the "virtue of theoretical simplicity" in its modeling of postwar social trends, exemplified an approach to historical change that aspires to a kind of scientific rigor absent in most of the studies undertaken since.

The industrial revolution, Easterlin pointed out, made possible continued increases in living levels for the masses in every society experiencing its upheavals beginning during the eighteenth century. However, industrialization also introduced tremendous volatility into individuals' financial fortunes and social status. In the United States, the Employment Act of 1946 addressed the worst consequences of industrial capitalism's cyclical growth and contraction. Because the federal government gained the ability to dampen the effects of economic downturn, the economic recessions of the postwar period were, he argued, "hardly enough to ruin a start on a working life for large numbers of young people" (Easterlin, 1980, p. 146). The lone determinant of one's relative prosperity or want, he illustrated repeatedly, was the size of the generation one was born into. The ways women and men organized their personal lives, from cohabitation to reproduction, are accordingly arrayed by the generational hand one is dealt. A bad hand is one in which the birth cohort is large. A lucky one is small. For the large cohort, employment will be relatively scarce and wages correspondingly low, whereas for the diminutive cohort, jobs will be abundant and remuneration generous. And while it has ever been so, according to Easterlin, this phenomenon stood as the single factor with sway over an economy whose cycles have been comparatively flattened out since World War II.

All of us, it seems, make a kind of internal estimate of what we need materially to be happy and then work, as couples, to support that calculus. We reproduce, or not, to the extent that children interfere with our combined capacity to reach our cultural target-family size. The argument is at once compelling (in his rendering, if not

mine) and depressing: while none of us chooses our parents and hence the socioeconomic status or race we are born into, neither do we choose the size of our birth cohort. Whether or not we believe that women should have the power to decide to carry a pregnancy to term, that women and men should equitably divide the burdens of income earning, housework, and childcare, or whether the nation's social policy should assist or punish parents based on their marital status matters little in the face of factors beyond the individual's control. It is the marrying kind who decide what the fate of the next generation will be and those decisions are made twenty years before anyone looking for work can do anything about them (Easterlin, 1980, p. 56). Despite his unabashed demographic determinism, Easterlin's approach keenly illustrates the difference between the aims of historical demography, which is a tool to predict future reproductive behavior, and social/cultural history, which is a tool for understanding the way people acted and understood themselves, their choices, and their world.

Sociologist David Popenoe, like Lasch, has bemoaned the inevitable decline that he predicts will accompany the swells of change unleashed by the 1960s and that had been already partly realized by the end of the 1980s. *Disturbing the Nest*, which appeared in 1988, views divorce and a number of other indicators as leading the world's "advanced" societies into decline. Popenoe's comparative study of family life in Sweden, the United States, Switzerland, and New Zealand concluded that the collection of trends witnessed in Sweden since World War II is coming to America. These trends portend a shift from what he called the "bourgeois nuclear family" to the "postnuclear family." Early sexual experience, late age at first marriage, low marriage rates, rock-bottom fertility, high divorce rates, high rates of nonmarital cohabitation, serial monogamy (but an increase of sexual polygamy among the married), blended families, and increased reliance on nonfamilial childcare have all resulted in the post-nuclear family. Sweden, he wrote, has become a society dominated by single-person and "nonfamily" households, households with "pair-bonded" adults with no children, and households with children but only one adult. The extended family household with two generations of adults has been driven virtually out of existence and the "traditional" two-parent family "became a small fraction of the total" (Popenoe, 1988, p. 298). If the bourgeois nuclear family had been guilty of greatly restricting women's freedom of association, access to education and wealth, exposing women and children to physical abuse, and contributing to social inequality (by placing a premium on the family's ability to control and inherit wealth), it had the virtue at least, according to Popenoe, of placing the welfare of children at the center of its purpose. The hallmark of the bourgeois nuclear family was child-centeredness – the willingness of parents to forego personal gratification to satisfy children's needs for security, emotional nurturance, and the development of competence and autonomy – even at the cost of happiness in one's marriage, job, and social relations. The post-nuclear family, by contrast, was "adult-centered" and individualistic, and the form of individualism it championed, he asserted, was a "relative newcomer on the world scene" (Popenoe, 1988, p. 329).

Published the year after Popenoe's study, John Modell's *Into One's Own* examined an important consequence of this newly discovered individualism by tracing the structural bases for the experience of adolescence and youth during the middle decades of the twentieth century. While postwar "youth culture" had been flamboy-

antly individualistic in the very manner that so worried Popenoe, it was also anti-authoritarian in its postures, which openly parodied the adult world projected by Popenoe's postnuclear family. *Into One's Own* bridged work by historians who have explored the rise of youth culture in the postwar era and family history, which exist intuitively as interrelated topics but which have developed nonetheless as separate subfields in social and cultural history. Other studies on postwar youth culture, such as James Gilbert's *Cycle of Outrage* (1986) or William Graebner's *Coming of Age in Buffalo* (1990), neatly complemented Modell's study by describing adolescents' efforts to define themselves in response to and *against* official, "adult" culture. However, these works are more concerned with understanding the effect of mass media on postwar teen life, the fascination with juvenile delinquency during the 1950s, or the variety of subcultures that evolved from, or in defiance of, emerging national symbols of youth culture than in demonstrating the rising influence of peers over family and parents.

Modell analyzed the forces – demographic, economic, and sociocultural – that created this cultural space for adolescents and youths in the first place. He examined long-term change in the way young people organized – or properly, were enabled to organize – their assumption of both the pleasures and responsibilities of adulthood. Modell was concerned with the series of "events" that occur in each young person's development from his or her dependence upon parents, family, and kin to eventual autonomy and the establishment of a family. These events consist of school-leaving, workforce entry, moving out of the parental household, marriage, and parenthood. During the late nineteenth century in the middle class and by 1920 across the US social structure, the combination of these events was imposed upon the "life course" of every young person. *Into One's Own* told the story of how the management of the life course evolved from an adult-controlled, tightly sequenced series of stages with little overlap, to the postwar regime, which was made possible by the spreading affluence enjoyed by the majority of Americans, giving young people more freedom to arrange the order in which they passed through life-course events.

Unfettered by demands to support the family economy, young people could elect to extend their schooling, work at the same time, even establish their own households, marry, and start their own families. The barriers – economic and social – for doing so were much lower than at any time in the past, and the result was both more choice in their sequencing and higher anxiety as a consequence. Much of what young people experience as adolescent angst today, in Modell's view, may stem from having the liberty to choose how to organize and pass through these stages. Of all the historical studies of family relationships during the latter half of the twentieth century in the United States, Modell alone provided a comprehensive analysis of the changing structure of youth – the way growing up is now organized by the interplay of institutions and the people who pass through them.

While Modell made sense out of young people's daring embrace of adult responsibility just after World War II, in *Homeward Bound* (1988) Elaine Tyler May looked beneath the sheen and apparent calm of 1950s family experience to explore the emotional lives of the women who had helped erect the ethos of family building. The most compelling part of the story May told centers on a longitudinal survey of couples' satisfaction with their marriages, which revealed the deep ambivalences women experienced as housewives. Most of the women in the study cited by May

had had some college education and had left school to marry early and begin families. While the majority did so willingly, they only realized over time the price exacted by the sublimation of their aspirations and autonomy to their husbands' careers. The full-time responsibility of raising children turned out for many to be more wearying and tedious than satisfying. Some worked the "double shift" that would become so common during the 1980s and afterward. In order to support a higher standard of living (and spending) for their families, they took low-paying, unfulfilling jobs to "help out" with bills and debt while continuing the full-time maintenance of household and children. About the majority of women in the study May concluded that "[t]hey all resented their husbands' unquestioned authority in the home, wished for more attention to their own needs, and chafed against the subordination that was expected of them. Yet they also protested that they loved their husbands, were satisfied with their marriages, and blamed themselves frequently for their discontent" (May, 1988, pp. 199–200).

The most pointed defense of the kinds of changes in family life that nagged Lasch and Popenoe has been mounted by Stephanie Coontz. Coontz reminds scholars, policymakers, and average citizens that change in the organization of familial relations has been eternal and that functional variety, not uniformity, has ever been the rule. *The Way We Never Were* (1992) was written to counter a pervasive cultural myth that the 1950s were years when the lived experience of the majority of Americans approximated the televised rendering of the family circle. Coontz not only exposed the falseness of this image but documented the social costs of nurturing its memory. As a result of this "nostalgia trap," as she called it, girls and boys came of age during the 1960s and afterward believing that the average family has two parents, that the father is the family's sole provider, and that the mother devotes herself exclusively to housework and childrearing, which consist of cooking hearty meals, attending PTA meetings, dispensing timely advice to her children and consolation when they meet with disappointment. Soulmate to her husband, she is his personal sanctuary from the daily rat race that affords a new home, a suburban school system, a new car every few years, and all the pleasures of the highest standard of living in the world. For her, marriage offers both sexual intimacy and the companionship of equals, even if she contributes nothing to the family's income and her husband pays all the bills. In sum, the family is a harmonious ensemble, ever caring, gentle in its expressions of rebuke or affection, and the source of consideration and respect for others (Coontz, 1992).

The least malignant outcome of this myth, Coontz suggested, is that Americans have grown up believing that their own families were, and are, dysfunctional because they so little resemble the image of family life cultivated by the media. They consider themselves failures as parents, just as they have come to believe that their own parents have failed them. More insidious, she added, is the effect of this image on policymakers, who have allowed such distortions to blind them to the sources of continuing social inequality – capitalism, racism, and sexism.

In contrast to Easterlin and even Cherlin, Coontz was ardent in her conviction that the social changes Popenoe, Lasch, and others lamented were brought about not by impersonal demographic and economic forces but by the determination of dissidents in American culture to challenge the unequal treatment of women, consumer conformity, and the "sentimentalization of family life as the final culmination of the search for personal fulfillment" (Coontz, 1992, p. 173). And while critics of

contemporary family life were apt to blame the flight from personal and social obligations on nontraditional families and particularly the women's movement for fostering women's independence and spawning divorce, in fact, Coontz argued, it was consumerism that was "eating away at family time, neighborhood cohesion, and public solidarities" (Coontz, 1992, p. 179).

This last observation has had many echoes. Indeed, if there is a unifying idea in historians' judgments about family life over the last half-century, it is that affluence and the expanding consumption it has supported have accelerated the kind of self-seeking that has shaped family life for the majority of Americans since World War II. Moynihan's *The Negro Family* was a product of the same bonanza that expanded the middle class, suburbanized the American landscape, and financed the very consumerism that historians from Lasch to Coontz have worried about. However misguided and racist its analysis, the impulse to "fix" the black family could only have arisen at a time when both the political will and economic clout to fund family support services on a massive scale existed side by side. While the clamorous failure of *The Negro Family* as a policy report seems to have stimulated social science research, it has had the opposite effect on historical studies of postwar African American families – an impact all the more lamentable for the fact that the Moynihan Report had been at the same time the first "history" of postwar African American family life. Bringing up to the present data on African American family structure, male unemployment, educational attainment, illegitimacy, teen pregnancy, AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) enrollment, fertility, female headship, "broken homes," juvenile delinquency, and drug abuse, Moynihan catalogued every conceivable index of urban "pathology" imaginable, back-lit against the tableaux of slavery, the Great Migration, and the urban ghetto.

At first it seemed that reaction to the document might generate significant historical scholarship. Herbert G. Gutman and his students began researching Moynihan's (and Frazier's) claims about familial headship, marital longevity, and employment among blacks during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – an initial outpouring that produced several article-length collaborations and Gutman's tome, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (1976). But Gutman's study ended chronologically where Frazier's sociology of the African American family had begun in the 1920s. The first historian to push some of the issues raised by Gutman into the postwar period was Jacqueline Jones, whose *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow* (1985) surveyed the history of African American women from slavery to the 1980s.

Jones showed that the reign of postwar prosperity in the United States, which stimulated such remarkable and pervasive social change in white America, reestablished a family economy for most African Americans that was all too familiar. Unlike the majority of American women (who retreated from the workforce immediately after World War II), African American women were unremitting as family breadgivers even as veterans reclaimed their jobs in the peacetime economy. One reason they returned so readily to their prewar occupations was that their own husbands, brothers, fathers, and sons confronted the same discriminatory hiring practices after the war that they had suffered before the conflict (Jones, 1985, p. 261). Another was that the kinds of jobs that black women resorted to as the wartime economy cooled were beneath the notice of returning (white) heroes. While white women were as apt to lose their jobs to returning soldiers as to economic recession, the aftermath of war

forced black women back into low-paid, demeaning domestic work by “mass firings and layoffs, separate seniority lists based on race and sex, [and] union harassment of women who fought desperately to retain their blue-collar wages” (Jones, 1985, pp. 256–7). This “redomestication” of African American women, as Jones has called it, also meant an accompanying decline in wages relative to white women, whose average earnings doubled those of black women just one year after the war had ended. Yet in stark contrast to white women, says Jones, married black women were much more likely to work than their white “sisters,” as “work seemed to form an integral part of the [black] female role” (Jones, 1985, pp. 261, 269).

Andrew Billingsley’s *Climbing Jacob’s Ladder*, published in 1992, considered the impact of these and other changes on the entire class structure of African Americans since World War II. Where Jones emphasized the profound influence of racism on gender roles in family life, Billingsley analyzed the long-term effects on family structure of deindustrialization and the simultaneous expansion of the black middle class. Deindustrialization had had two major consequences for African Americans, he found. Just as black males gained a foothold in industrial occupations during and after World War II, the proportion of all workers employed in white-collar jobs in the United States surpassed those engaged in manufacturing. Because African Americans did not participate in this shift to white-collar employment to the same degree and with the same frequency as other Americans, however, their entry into the middle class was forestalled. While the black middle class expanded during the 1960s (from 13 percent to 25 percent of the black population between 1960 and 1970), the resultant “lag” in their entry into the white-collar workforce meant that as the US economy was increasingly dominated by its service sector, manufacturing jobs were lost. African Americans were hit hardest by the permanent disappearance of industrial occupations (Billingsley, 1992, p. 139). Already by 1954, African Americans were out of work at twice the rate of whites – a trend interrupted just once over the next three decades.

The consequent decline of the black working class had a devastating impact on the organization of family life. Its diminution, Billingsley observed, was “the single most important force responsible for the decline in the nuclear-family structure over the second half of the twentieth century, from a high of 78 percent in 1960 to 44 percent by 1990” (Billingsley, 1992, p. 138). On one hand, Billingsley lauded the diversity of African American family structure, which is a tribute, he maintained, to the adaptability and ingenuity of African Americans in the face of adverse circumstances. On the other hand, he intimated that the interests of black children would be better served by the two-parent family model. “For the hundred year period between the end of slavery and the aftermath of World War Two,” he noted, “the structure of African-American family life was characterized by a remarkable degree of stability . . . the core of the traditional African-American Family system has been the nuclear family composed of husband and wife and their own children” (Billingsley, 1992, p. 36). By 1990, just 39 percent of black families were headed by married couples, a downward trend, he predicted, that was “likely to continue into the future” (Billingsley, 1992, pp. 36–7). Billingsley approvingly cited the research of other scholars to show that the single-parent, female-headed black family is an adaptive strategy to which African American families have resorted in response to joblessness, racism, and the collapse of the welfare state. The single-parent family did not evolve “because



of forces internal to . . . [African American] culture,” he argued, “but from forces in the wider society” (Billingsley, 1992, p. 35). The key feature of the nuclear family model, he suggested, is the consistency of concern, support, and involvement that it makes possible. While this support has been replicated by other means (by the active engagement of adults in the lives of other people’s children, for example), such alternatives are a less dependable form of fostering the development of children (Billingsley, 1992, pp. 381–5).

In *Black Picket Fences* (1999), Mary Pattillo-McCoy offers an ethnography of black middle-class families in a neighborhood on Chicago’s South Side. She explores the meaning of what it is to be African American and middle class in postwar America, and the reasons why the children of the “new” black middle class have had such difficulty repeating gains made by their parents. Like most work on African Americans during the latter half of the twentieth century, *Black Picket Fences* was not conceived as an historical study, but it employs history as a way of understanding the current state of black family life in the United States.

Pattillo-McCoy considers the role of geography on the interaction of African Americans across the social structure. Spatial mobility – or its absence – she argues, has dangerously compromised the aspirations and competencies of black children who grow up in middle-class homes. As their numbers swelled after the 1960s, middle-class blacks began leaving the inner city much as white ethnics had done before and just after World War II. However, they could not get very far, as housing covenants and red-lining hemmed them into first-ring suburbs. While black suburbanites had been able to leave the areas of *most* violent crime and drug abuse – of broken-down schools, ineffective law enforcement, and other impotent institutions – they remained to their detriment interwoven into the fabric of the urban black community. Their proximity to “blighted, poor neighborhoods,” Pattillo-McCoy shows, exposed middle-class black children to the same influences as children whose parents’ means were slender. Thus, compared with white middle-class children, their ability to avoid drug abuse, gang involvement, prison, and violence was hampered. Pattillo-McCoy is less apprehensive than Billingsley about the decline of the black two-parent, nuclear family, however, noting that middle-class African American families have adopted the extended family model of impoverished blacks to good advantage in order to cope with an “increasingly precarious economic context.” A good portion of the families she interviewed, she says, “flourished only because of the combined time and money resources and emotional help of many families, sometimes all in one house and sometimes spread out across the neighborhood and city” (Pattillo-McCoy, 1999, p. 213).

Like Pattillo-McCoy, but in contrast to much of the work on African American family life today, Andrew T. Miller has trumpeted the virtues of the extended family in all its forms. The problem with discourse on family life and social policy since the Great Society, Miller argues, has been its assumption that the African American family model is badly flawed. The black family of the late twentieth century was not merely an outcome of adaptation to cruelties wrought by slavery, institutionalized racism, or industrial capitalism but an extension of the folkways of societies ravaged for the New World slave trade. What has been overlooked, he says, is that the African American family is itself a worthy design for living based on traditions that extend far into regions of sub-Saharan Africa, where “fosterage” continues to thrive. Fosterage is the practice of placing children in others’ homes – usually but not necessarily those

of relatives – where they can be nurtured more easily or advantageously than by their own parents (Miller, 1993, pp. 277–80).

Miller's essay, "Social Science, Social Policy, and the Heritage of African-American Families," turns the Parsonian paradigm on its head, arguing that the upwardly mobile European American family, far from offering a template for family life on which to base social policy, is itself a "tangle of pathology." "Euro-Americans," he says, "show high levels of living alone, have much higher levels of family violence and abuse, . . . abandon children and the elderly to a greater degree, . . . much more often support the practice of abortion, . . . label certain children illegitimate, will not get involved in the family problems of others, and condemn alternative living arrangements" (Miller, 1993, p. 284). While child-centeredness is usually defined by the degree to which parents invest time, money, and other resources in their children, Miller argues that, considering the constraints under which the African American family has long labored, it has proven far more "child-centered" than the isolated nuclear family of Parsons's description. If the modernity of the family form is derived from its concentration of attention and resources upon the child, he suggests, then the African American family may be considered better adapted and more "modern" than those of the majority of European Americans. While for European Americans, family life is defined by the legal union of two heterosexual adults, for African Americans, he points out, it is the creation of the child itself that brings a family into being. This crucial distinction, he argues, is symbolic of very real differences in the ways that children are regarded and cared for.

Miller's table-turning is at points simplistic and polemical, but it highlights the most admirable aspects of African American family life and importantly rejects the kind of defensiveness that has characterized so much of the "underclass" debate since the 1980s. Richard A. Davis's *The Black Family in a Changing Black Community* (1984) shares this quality and yet muddies the waters by emphasizing the emerging ethnic variety of the US black population, which has added to the complexity of the search for the "origins" of attitudes toward childrearing. Identifying the streams of cultural influence on contemporary African American family life will no longer be so simple, he suggests. Or more acutely, he predicts that the necessary vagueness of gestures to the influences of the "African Genesis" will fail to stand up in the face of future contributions to the history of black family life in the United States. As migration from the Caribbean continues – as well as immigration from parts of Africa itself – and infuses black culture with a wealth of influences new and ancient, it will be difficult to be satisfied with the search for remnants of "Black Africa" in the folkways of African American family life.

In 1982, in the tenth-anniversary volume of *Reviews in American History*, Mary P. Ryan surveyed the historiography of family life in the United States in an article entitled "The Explosion of Family History." There, she discussed the major works of a decade that had witnessed the rise and maturation of the study of family history. Only three of the works she cited were histories of the postwar era. As I have already indicated, most of this postwar work appeared after Ryan's review – during the late 1980s. Ryan was convinced that family history was only at the beginning of a boom – that its growth as a subfield in historical studies was mostly ahead of it. However, family history faltered over the next decade and seems to have declined as a unifying field



of inquiry for historians. While aspects of human experience within the domain of family history, such as sexuality, gender, or childhood, have flourished in the last several years (spawning their own journals and scholarly organizations), interest in the history of family life per se has failed to attract new scholars at the same pace. Indeed, when *Reviews in American History* published its twenty-fifth-anniversary volume in 1998, it did not even devote a chapter to the history of family life (Masur, 1998). Components of family history as conceived during its formative years – gender in particular, but also motherhood, housework, and sexuality – are mentioned, but the history of family life is nowhere in evidence.

While it is beyond the scope of this essay to explore the reasons for this fragmentation, the results have been twofold. First, there is a dearth of historical studies not only of African American family life in postwar America, but of Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, and peoples who have migrated during the last thirty-five years from Central and South America, the Caribbean, the Indian subcontinent, East Asia, and the Pacific Rim. Second, historians have yet to come to terms with the impact of postwar affluence on values in American culture. Part of what has been purchased with Americans' changing consumer behavior and attitudes is the luxury to expect more from their personal lives. Throughout the twentieth century divorce was increasingly a remedy for marital unhappiness. Once the province of the wealthy or the desperate, divorce became a refuge for those unprotected from the abusive exercise of male authority and physical and economic domination. Desperate women often traded one kind of subordination for another: male control and abuse for destitution. The stimulus to divorce in the United States, nonetheless, has been the consequence not of disillusionment with marriage, but its opposite – the heightened promise of fulfillment through intimacy (E. May, 1980). For white middle-class America, then, the last generation's luxury has become its own necessity. Divorce, single parenthood, and remarriage have become accepted alternatives to time-worn forms of oppression at the hands of convention and fear of social stigma. And yet, there is a certain irony – or hypocrisy, depending on one's politics – about the transforming impact of divorce and single parenthood on family life since World War II. As growing numbers of Americans choose to raise children as single parents, it becomes increasingly difficult to scapegoat minority single-parent families for "weakening" the foundations of family life when the prerogatives of race and class enable the white middle class to do so in the pursuit of happiness.

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