

## ONE MOTHERHOOD, ONE FAMILISM: THE NATURAL FAMILY AS AN INTEGRATIVE SOCIAL FORCE IN AMERICAN HISTORY

Lecture For Matica Srpska  
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Popular mythology holds that the United States of America is a land of individualists: the lone frontiersman of colonial times; the acquisitive capitalist or solitary cowboy of the 19th Century; and the internet tycoon of recent times. The American identity, this myth holds, is free of the communitarianism found among other peoples. Rather, the American way is one of atomistic individualism, unbound by spiritual or kinship restraints.

This is most untrue. The historical record actually shows Americans to have been a strongly communitarian people, bound by familial and religious obligations. Most strikingly, Americans have been shaped by what I call the Natural Family model. The recurring features of this family form have been: early and nearly universal marriage; high fertility; close attention to parenting and children; complementary (rather than equal) gender roles; flexible but real intergenerational bonds; stability; and an aspiration toward family economic autonomy.<sup>1</sup> This authentic American way differs sharply from the historic European family pattern identified by demographer J. Hajnal, evident since about 1700, involving: a high or late average age for first marriage; a high proportion of people who never marry at all; and relatively low fertility.<sup>2</sup>

The American attachment to the Natural Family model began with the founding of the first successful English settlement in North America: the Massachusetts Bay Colony of 1630.<sup>3</sup> These Protestant Separatists – or Puritans – sought to escape the moral disorders of Europe. In historian Perry Miller’s words, they were “an organized task force of Christians, executing a flank attack on the corruptions” of the Old World, “an essential maneuver in the drama of Christendom,” where a true re-formation of Christian faith might be achieved.

At the core of the Puritan social vision was the Christian home, or – as they preferred – the “family church.” They came to America to increase the body of Christ through the procreation and rearing of Godly children. Puritan homes featured daily family prayer, home Bible study, the singing of hymns, and father-led discussions of sermons. The family so served – in historian Amanda Porterfield’s words – as “the nucleus of moral armament and social stability” in the Puritan project. Marriage – as one pastor’s explained – “is... the seminary of the Commonwealth, seed-plot of the Church, pillar (under God) of the world.”

Popular mythology casts the Puritans as a joy-less, almost sex-less lot. In fact, they were exuberant procreators. Women married at age 19 or 20; men at age 24. Virtually all adults married; and most husbands and wives lived out their lives together, for the New England climate was actually relatively healthy. Most notably, they had huge families. The early generations of Puritans in New England averaged nine children per couple, 90 percent of whom reached adulthood. Sometimes, the results were more startling. In the Puritan village of Billerica – today, a suburb of the city of Boston – there were in 1680 twenty-six families with 10 children each; twenty families with 11 children; twenty-four with 12 children each; thirteen with 13 children each; five with 14 children each; one family with 15 children; and one with 21. In total, Billerica counted 90 families with 1,043 children, an average of 11.6 per family. This was a true Kingdom of Children! Indeed, demographer Jim Potter reports that “the natural growth rate [through fertility alone] of Massachusetts Bay colony... in the second half of the seventeenth century was extremely unusual, if not unique, in human history.”<sup>4</sup>

The same Natural Family pattern appeared among subsequent migrant groups coming to America. In the middle decades

<sup>1</sup> For the full argument, see: Allan Carlson, *Family Cycles: Strength, Decline, and Renewal in American Domestic Life, 1630-2000* (New Brunswick, NJ, and London: Transaction Publishers, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> J. Hajnal, “European Marriage Patterns in Perspective,” in D.V. Glass and D.E.C. Eversley, eds., *Population in History: Essays in Historical Demography* (London: Edward Arnold, 1965), 101-06.

<sup>3</sup> Earlier settlements – Virginia in 1607 and Plymouth Colony in 1620 – did survive, but struggled in their early years.

<sup>4</sup> Jim Potter, “Demographic Development and Family Structure,” in Jack P. Greene and J.R. Pole, *Colonial British America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 148.

of the 18th Century, for example, German Moravians (a Protestant sect) migrated from the Old Country to Lancaster County, in Southeastern Pennsylvania, the proprietary colony founded by William Penn. The same striking family patterns emerged once again. Most women and men married at a young age; indeed, 40 percent of the women entered wedlock before age 20, with an average of 20.9. Such marriages proved to be surprisingly stable; divorce was almost unknown. More impressively, these marriages were also fruitful. For those couples married between 1741 and 1770, the average number of children was 8.3: another example of “natural fertility,” unhindered by deliberate birth control.

In a 1754 report to the Duke of Württemberg on German settlers in Pennsylvania, the educator Gottlieb Mittelberger could scarcely contain his astonishment. “It must be confessed,” he wrote, “that the female sex in this new country is very fruitful.” In both city and countryside, he continued, “when one comes into a house, one finds it usually full of children, and the city of Philadelphia is fairly swarming with them.” Whenever a visitor meets an American woman, he added, “she is either with child [i.e., pregnant], or she carries a child in her arms, or leads one by the hand.”<sup>5</sup>

Seen here is the manner in which a cultural celebration of “one motherhood” and “one familism” worked to unify the emerging American people. Differences of language and cultural traditions were overcome and integrated by a shared family system that helped to define Americans, as compared to Englishmen or Germans.

Writing in 1775 – the year before the American declaration of independence – Harvard University theologian Edward Wigglesworth saw such developments as almost Divine in meaning. Through births alone, he reported, the inhabitants of British North America doubled their number every twenty-five years. This was “a rapidity of population growth not to be paralleled in the annals of Europe.” Indeed, such a thing “has never been equaled since the patriarchal ages [of the Old Testament].” Early marriage, “temperance in diet,” and “boundless tracts” of new land enabled “every new-married couple” to welcome children in unprecedented numbers and gain through honest work “a comfortable support.”<sup>6</sup>

During the 19th Century American numbers climbed dramatically again, fueled this time much more directly by immigration ... particularly after 1845. The mythology of American individualism emerged at this time, a product of attention to the Westward expansion of the American frontier.

In fact, though, this development too was actually driven by communitarian forces, and a common natural family system. The great American historian Frederick Jackson Turner emphasizes how the frontier experience – the meeting point between savagery and civilization – shaped both Americans and American democracy. As he colorfully wrote:

The [American] wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin.

From the earliest settlements in the 17th Century until the “closing” of the American frontier in 1890 (when the last empty land was settled), each advance of the frontier “meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence on American lines.”<sup>7</sup>

Except for the earliest trappers and hunters, though, this settling of the frontier occurred through morally grounded families. As Turner summarizes: “... the hunter and the fur trader who pushed into the Indian country were followed by ... the pioneer farmer whose family constituted a self-sufficient economic unit ... raising their own food, weaving their own clothing.” Viewed from another angle, “the tide of [new] immigration [from Europe] flowed to the frontier,” ever less English in its composition. Between 1830 and 1880, the number of American farms increased by 400 percent, reaching 4,565,000 in number. While the population of New England was now relatively stagnant, early marriage and “natural fertility” producing 8 or 9 children per family could now be found on the new farms in the territories and states of Iowa, Nebraska, Minnesota, the Dakotas, and Montana. These were, by and large, immigrant families – mostly from Germany and Scandinavia – which once again adapted to the unique American environment and renewed America’s distinctive “family way.”

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<sup>5</sup> Gottlieb Mittelberger, *Journey to Pennsylvania in the Year 1750 and Return to Germany in the Year 1754*, trans. by Carl Theo. Eben (Philadelphia, PA: John Jos. McVey, 1898), 107.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Wigglesworth, *Calculations on American Population...* (Boston: John Boyle, 1775), 5-6, 23.

<sup>7</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1920), 4.

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Also sustaining strong family life in 19th Century America were religious currents affirming again the Christian home in a new era. At the theological level, Horace Bushnell – in his popular 1847 book *Christian Nurture* – rekindled “a great and momentous truth” – what he called the “organic unity of the family.” Rejecting “modern individualism,” Bushnell showed how “the spirit of the house” could guide children toward moral virtue. As he wrote: “Understand that it is in the family spirit, the organic life of the house, the silent power of a domestic godliness... – that it is which forms our children to God.”<sup>8</sup>

Popular female writers of the era concurred. Sarah Hale, long-time editor of the hugely influential Godey’s *Lady’s Book and Ladies American Magazine*, paid special respect to what she called “The Eden Laws.” These were the moral and religious legacies of the Garden of Eden, still in force after The Fall: specifically, God’s creation of human marriage, the Divine command to “be fruitful and multiply,” and sexual complementarity in the home. In Sarah Hale’s words, this meant that “man is the worker or provider, the protector and the law-giver; woman is the preserver, the teacher or inspirer, and the exemplar.” She was particularly proud that Americans – more than any other people – now [circa 1868] “preserved the habits and feelings of those days [in Eden].”<sup>9</sup>

Immigration into the United States of America surged again between 1890 and 1914. Fewer Germans were now involved; many more from Southern and Eastern Europe, including the Balkans. When nationalist tensions exploded into the Great War of 1914, and more especially after the U.S. entered the war on the Allied side in 1917, all recent immigrants into the United States became subjects of scrutiny. Strong ethnic enclaves in the major American cities – German, Polish, Swedish, Slavic, Italian, Greek, Jewish – drew particular suspicion. Foreign language newspapers faced censorship and suppression. Across the land, cries rose for the urgent “Americanization” of the immigrants.

Much of what followed was cruel, useless, and occasionally humorous (such as the Federal campaign against the eating of spaghetti). However, one serious and influential response did emerge. In 1918, a woman – Frances Kellor – became the Director of Americanization Work for the Federal government’s Bureau of Education. She openly asked: “Surely there must be some key to assimilation which will open the doors of racial and American institutions alike, through which both the native and foreign born may pass freely.” Kellor soon found her answer in a familiar place: the American home. Immigrant men, she realized, would be assimilated through military service and the economic system. Children would be Americanized through the public schools. This left the “foreign born woman and her home” as “the most vulnerable spots” in defense of American values. Yet the response was also clear:

If we start with the family and work upward we get a sound city that will stand the strain of any crisis because its weakest links are strong.... Approached from the neighborhood and family and met squarely, the problem of Americanization can be solved adequately.<sup>10</sup>

Framed another way, Kellor believed that American unity could be achieved again through an emphasis on a common motherhood grounded in strong families: “One Motherhood; One Familism.”

This insight fed into what historians call The Maternalist Campaign, which dominated Federal domestic policy making for the next fifty years. Advocates held to assumptions quite compatible with the Natural Family model found in prior American centuries: early and nearly universal marriage; the birth of at least three or four children per couple; sexual complementarity, meaning [in the words of the Chief of the U.S. Children’s Bureau] “a living wage and wholesome working life for the men, a good and skillful mother at home to keep the house and comfort all within it”; a training of girls and boys in their respective skills of home production; the creation of incentives toward family ownership of homes and the land needed for vegetable gardening; and family centered social insurance. This was the family model of the Puritans of the 17th century, the German immigrants of the 18th Century, and the “sodbusters” on the American prairies of the 19th century, now summoned again in a new, but familiar way to secure national unity.

And this worked. American welfare, taxation, housing, and social insurance policies adopted in the 1930’s and 1940’s, combined with compatible cultural shifts, produced remarkable results: a sharp decline in the average age of first marriage, to age 20 for women, age 22 for men; nearly universal marriage, embracing over 95 of American adults; a near doubling of the U.S. fertility rate; the growing popularity of home economics as a field of study for young women; a decline in

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<sup>8</sup> Horace Bushnell, *Christian Nurture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967 [1847]), 80-90, 98.

<sup>9</sup> Sarah J. Hale, *Manners; or, Happy Homes and Good Society; All the Year Round* (New York: Arno Press, 1972 reprint [1868]), 22-23, 261-62.

<sup>10</sup> Frances A. Kellor, *Neighborhood Americanization: A Discussion of the Alien in a New Country and of the Native American in His Home Country*. An address to the Colony Club of New York City, 8 February 1918; 9-10, 19.

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the divorce rate; a vast expansion of the American middle class, as pre-1914 immigrants and their children experienced a true climb in real wages; and a near doubling in the number of owner-occupied homes, reaching 40 million by 1965. These were the signs of the Marriage Boom and the Baby Boom, which characterized American life from 1940 to 1970. Once again, the Natural Family Model of one motherhood and one familism had succeeded in shaping American life. Why did this fresh expression not last? Two developments converged. First, the U.S. Congress approved The Immigration Reform Act of 1965. After a 45 year hiatus, it reopened American borders to mass immigration. Notably, for the first time, large numbers of immigrants from places outside the Christian framework would now be able to enter.

Second, just when the integrative force of the Natural Family model was most needed to sustain national cohesion, it actually came under vicious attack. Radical legal theorists effectively took over the Federal courts, creating out of thin air a series of so-called constitutional protections that undermined American family life: a “right” to birth control (1965); a “right” to fornication (1970); a “right” to abortion (1973); and a “right” to sodomy (2004). At the same time, state legislatures adopted “no fault” divorce statutes that left marriage as an empty legal shell, while another series of Federal court decisions stripped away both the rights and the duties that had defined fatherhood and the role of husband.

The ideas behind these attacks came from: Marxist theorists in the universities and law schools; feminists committed to full equality between male and female, despite the biological barriers; neo-Malthusians who fretted about overpopulation; and sexual revolutionaries who despised monogamous natural marriage generally, and the generation of children, in particular. The damage was vast. As early as 1973, one analysis – coming, quite remarkably, from a prominent voice of the sexual revolution, itself, the Playboy Press – summarized the situation well:

What happened to America after the Revolution?... Everything got devalued. Not just the dollar, but everything in American life. Virginity. Love. God. Motherhood. Mom’s Apple Pie. General Motors has less value now, and so does the Bill of Rights... The quality of men available to lead was devalued. Our technology was devalued; our institutions and our customs were devalued; the worth of an individual was devalued. All the Pleasures were devalued ... [sexual intercourse] too. Especially too!<sup>11</sup>

America’s “Culture Wars” since 1973 – over the intertwined issues of abortion, contraception, the nature of marriage, the protection of children, and immigration – have been efforts to limit the social and cultural damage being done. Some minor victories have been won. Overall, though, the revolutionaries still seem to be in control.

But this will not last. With some confidence, I predict that Americans will recover their centuries-old attachment to healthy family life; to the Natural Family. How might this happen?

One possible answer comes from the British political scientist Eric Kauffman, in his recent book *Shall the Religious Inherit the Earth*. A self-described secular liberal, Kauffman nonetheless argues that “religious fundamentalists are on course to take over the world through demography.” By fundamentalist, he means any religious group within which Biblical teachings on marriage and procreation do influence the behavior of adherents. In his survey of religious communities around the globe with above-replacement fertility, he gives particular attention to current American examples:

- Anabaptist communities such as the Hutterites in the Dakotas and Montana and the Old Order Amish now found in twenty states;
- Ultra-orthodox Haredi Jews, in cities such as Brooklyn, NY, and Cleveland, Ohio;
- “Quiverfull” Protestants, found throughout the U.S.A., who reject all forms of birth control; and
- Latter-day Saints, or Mormons, found especially in the Inter-mountain American West.

Already, such groups are expanding their relative share of regional populations. For example, in 1900 the Old Order Amish – who still speak German as their language of family life and worship – numbered only 5000. Today, through natural increase alone, they number 350,000, and are resettling the American countryside. If compounded over several more generations, the result becomes stunning.

Kauffman concludes: “It will be a century or more before the world completes its demographic transition. There is still too much smoke in the air for us to pick out the peaks and valleys of the emerging social order. This much seems certain:

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<sup>11</sup> Allan Sherman, *The Rape of the A\*P\*E\*: The Official History of the Sex Revolution* (Chicago, IL: The Playboy Press, 1973), 389.

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without a new [secular liberal] ideology to inspire social cohesion, fundamentalism cannot be stopped. The religious shall inherit the earth.”<sup>12</sup>

And Americans would once again appear before the world as a strongly communitarian people, bound by familial and religious obligations ... a people again in conformity with the Natural Family model.

And yet, it is important that I note, in closing, that this model is by no means uniquely American. Rather, the Natural Family is a fixed aspect of the created order, ingrained in human nature, everywhere. As an ideal, it is a universal aspiration in all healthy cultures. It rests on the lifelong union of a man and a woman for the purposes of sharing love and joy, procreating a “full quiver” of children, providing for their moral and practical education, building a vital home economy that provides security in times of trouble, and binding the generations. Such families, working together, serve as the first locus of any strong and healthy political community. As the great American President Theodore Roosevelt once explained, each nation “is nothing but the aggregate of the families within its borders.”<sup>13</sup>

The World Congress of Families project, which I helped launch 23 years ago, works to support and encourage this renewal of the Natural Family model in every nation. It is my solemn hope that Serbia, too, after a century of turmoil, can find its own unique path back to this rich and bountiful family model.

As the American Founders commonly closed their letters and speeches, I wish you all Godspeed!

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<sup>12</sup> Eric Kauffman, *Shall the Religious Inherit the Earth. Demography and Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Profile Books, 2012), 269.

<sup>13</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, *Presidential Addresses and State Papers of Theodore Roosevelt. Part Two* (New York: P.F. Collier and Sons, [1904]), 493.

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