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# "On The Shining Future Of The American Family [!?]: A Historical Speculation"

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Where I come from, you still sometimes hear jokes about Ole and Lena. They are mythical Swedish-Americans who settled in Northern Illinois, or Minnesota, or the Dakotas, and who are notable for their dysfunctional marriage. I recently heard a new story. Ole is now 97 years old and Lena is 96, and they go before a judge seeking a divorce. The judge is perplexed: "Ole, Lena, you've been married for nearly 80 years. Why get a divorce now?" They answer: "Vell, Judge, we decided to get one long ago, but thought we should stay together until all of the children… were dead."

Alas, today a joke of the sort commonly induces, at best, nervous laughter. This is because such tales work well only within a healthy culture of marriage and family life, where we can laugh because it is mostly fiction.

Certainly, the status of the family in America in the early 21st Century is no laughing matter. The nation's marriage rate is at an all-time low. The average age for a first marriage is near 30 for men, and 27 for women: unprecedented high numbers. It appears likely that a third or more of current young adults will never marry at all. The birthrate in the United States is near the historic low; over 40 percent of the births that do occur are outside of marriage. The divorce rate is high. Most recently, we have witnessed a curious rise in "grey" divorce: couples married 25 years or more who are calling it quits (consider Ole and Lena). Meanwhile, over the last fifty years a series of Federal court decisions and legislative acts have deconstructed, or stripped down, the legal protections and supports that had bolstered the married-couple, child-centered, procreative natural family.

However, if we examine the American past, a more interesting—and possibly more promising-- story emerges. My recent book, *Family Cycles: Strength, Decline & Renewal in American Domestic Life, 1630-2000*, identifies four 100-year episodes in American history. Each of these cycles involves about 50 years of evident family strength, followed by about 50 years of family disruption and decline. Periods of strength occurred, roughly speaking, from 1630 to 1680 (the commonly mocked era of the Puritans in New England), from 1730 to 1780 (the critical decades consummated by the American Revolution), from 1830 to 1880 (America's misunderstood "Victorian" age), and from 1930 to 1970 (the time of the iconic "Baby Boom"). These periods of strength all involved: early marriage (an average age at first marriage of near 20 for women; 23 for men), nearly universal marriage (where about 95 percent of all adults sometime married), high fertility (where the nation seemed to be swarming with children), close attention to parenting, complementary gender roles (which built positively on the real differences between men and women), flourishing small home economies, and stability (meaning few divorces).

During periods of weakness, we find delayed marriages, more never-married adults, lower fertility, smaller families and other signs of a retreat from children, more divorce, a loss of family economic independence, and weakened homes. Such episodes in the American past can be found from about 1680 to 1730 (an era of crisis in Puritan New England, exemplified by the Salem Witch episode), from 1780 to 1830 (the troubled early decades of the American Republic), from 1880 to 1930 (when the stresses of the urban-industrial revolution disrupted American family life), and from 1970 to the present (our current time of family meltdown).

As near as I can tell, these cycles are unique to the American experience; certainly, when compared to the history of Western Europe. The demographer J. Hajnal has described a very different and consistent "Marriage Pattern" among the Europeans, clearly evident since 1700, and probably before. It has involved: a high average age for first marriage; a high proportion of adults who never marry at all (about one-third), and relatively low fertility. Indeed, viewed another way: during cycles of decline, the family lives of Americans have come to resemble the European model. It is in the periods of renewal and strength that Americans have become distinctive… different.

This concept of family cycles challenges existing theories of social history. It rejects the liberal view that change in Ameri-

can family life over the last 400 years involves the growing triumph of the individual and the steady decline of the family. It denies the Marxist view that the "bourgeois family" of the capitalists is unstable, and fated to be replaced by a socialist family form, where the state takes full responsibility for children.

In recent decades, still another theory has emerged, this time among feminist historians: namely, that a "love revolution" has occurred. They say that the family institution is no longer focused on the begetting of children and the preservation of family property; rather, marriage and family living now focus on flexible lifestyle choices designed to fulfill each individual's "emotional and sexual desires." In this view, children are no longer central to family life. Indeed, in a pursuit of sexual pleasure, one is better off without them. My thesis rejects that argument, as well.

Still, one might respond: "Okay, Dr. Carlson, this may be all well and good. But why should I care about a theory of history?" Two responses: First, a theory of history is critical to our identification as a people, a commonwealth, a nation. In this case, are we Americans atomized, pleasure-seeking individuals? Or are we devoted to natural social bonds, to motherhood, to kin, to faith communities?

Second, such ideas do bear consequences. In recent years, for example, the advocates of same-sex marriage – from former President Obama to the great majority of journalists and academics – have routinely claimed that they are on the "right side" of history, while defenders of traditional or natural marriage are on the "wrong side" of history. Such arguments rely on tangled versions of the liberal, Marxist, and feminist theories that I just briefly outlined. More importantly, perhaps, state and Federal judges ruling in recent marriage cases commonly appeal to these same theories of history, rephrased as "social evolution." Typical was Judge William Downing's language in his 2004 decision striking down Washington State's "Defense of Marriage Act"; he wrote:"As time marches inexorably on, human society … evolves." If my argument is correct, though, it is Judge Downing and others like him who may be on the wrong side of history.

My full argument for a "Cycles" theory of America's social past rests in the book. In the concluding chapter of that volume, though, I identify eight "underlying factors" that were common to all four episodes of family strength. In outlining these eight common factors, or causes, I will also offer specific examples of each of them at work. I so hope to illuminate aspects of the American past that may seem new and unusual, because they have been deliberately distorted or hidden.

(1) The first common source of family strength has been the dominance of a family-centered worldview. In the 19th Century, from 1830 to 1880, a remarkable effort emerged to construct a rich and sweeping ideology of the family. At the theological level, a leading figure was Horace Bushnell. In his popular book *Christian Nurture*, he strove to rekindle "a great and momentous truth" – the Organic Unity of the family. Rejecting the "modern" notion of individualism, he stressed the extraordinary power of "the spirit of the house" in guiding children toward good living and salvation. As he summarized: "Understand that it is in the family spirit, the organic life of the house, the silent power of a domestic godliness, working, as it does, unconsciously and with sovereign effect – that it is which forms your children to God."

Giving practical content to this American version of Victorian ideals was what novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne called "a damned mob of scribbling women": female writers who actually dominated American publishing in the Victorian age. They included: Catharine Beecher, eldest daughter in the famed Beecher family and the author of two dozen books and hundreds of articles on the education

of women, theology, and the home economy; Sarah Joseph Hale, the editor for over 40 years of the hugely influential journal *Godey's Lady's Book and Ladies' American Magazine*; and Lydia Huntley Sigourney, the mother of a large family who, in her "leisure" time, wrote 67 books (including a dozen collections of her poems) and over 2000 articles for 300 different periodicals.

Their common themes were: the existence of "separate spheres" of activity for men and women, the role of the home as "the domestic church," and a stress on "true womanhood."

Allow me one specific example of their remarkable work. In her 1838 book, *Letters to Mothers*, Lydia Sigourney actually laid out the arguments for home schooling children: arguments identical to those picked up 150 years later by current home schooling parents. Common objections to the practice and Sigourney's responses include:

- Too little time. Her response: Two or three hours of study a day "would be all that the first eight or ten years of life would [need] and much more than they usually obtain."
- I have too much to do. Her response: "Do not be too ambitious a housekeeper…. Energy, and adherence to system, will accomplish wonders."
- Children require the stimulation found in schools. Her response: "Is this not merely another name for 'envying and strife'?

Sigourney concluded: "Let us keep our children for our own, during their earlier years. The world will have them long enough afterwards."

(2) The second common source of family strength has been the dominance of communitarian ideals, where the claims of the community often take precedence over the wishes of the individual. As historian Larry Gragg summarizes, the 17th Century Puritan project in America sought "to create a society of closely knit Christian villages with a strong sense of communal responsibility,… a Christian utopia." In another historian's judgment, these villages were "small, intimate, and essentially cooperative places," guided by "everlasting love" and operating on the principle of "good neighborliness." A third historian, Kenneth Lockridge, shows how the Puritan founders of these "Christian, Utopian,… Corporate" communities "set out to construct a unified social organism in which the whole would be more than the sum of the parts." Remarkably, he adds, between 1630 and 1680, "they succeeded."

This communitarian ideal gave particular focus to the procreation and nurture of children. The first two generations of Puritans in America averaged about nine children per couple; most of whom survived to adulthood. Sometimes, the results were more striking. In the Massachusetts village of Billerica, there were 26 families with ten children each; 20 families with eleven children; 24 families with 12 children each; 13 families each with thirteen children; 5 families with fourteen children apiece; 1 family with fifteen children; and one with twenty-one. Taken together, Billerica counted 90 families with 1043 children, an average of 11.6! This kingdom of children stands as a classic example of natural fertility, which is the family size associated with early marriage and the rejection of birth control.

(3) The third common source of family strength over the centuries has been widespread property ownership among families, especially in homes and farmland. Between 1730 and 1780, prior restraints on American colonial expansion – notably, the threat of attacks by Indians and the French – disappeared. The quick settlement of Pennsylvania was exemplary. Believing that farming was the

least corrupted of professions, William Penn implemented a land distribution scheme to encourage husbandry and to allow "for the more convenient bringing up of youth." Or, as another early settler put it, abundant land in Pennsylvania created a setting where "tender plants" [their children] might grow "in the Truth"; involving an intensified form of child rearing.

Observers at the time were struck by the ease with which 18th Century American colonists could acquire land and build a home. In 1748, for example, the Swedish Academy of Science sent economist Peter Kalm to visit the colonies of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York. He reported that good, uncultivated land was so abundant "that a new-married man can, without difficulty get a spot of ground, where he may sufficiently subsist" with wife and offspring. In a 1755 essay, no less a figure than Benjamin Franklin agreed that land was so plentiful and cheap in America that "a laboring man that understands Husbandry can, in a short time, save enough to purchase a piece of new land sufficient for a plantation whereon he may subsist a family."

Indeed, the "family" effects of property ownership were large. Marriage came early: an average age for first marriage of about 20 for women (although, in frontier regions the average was closer to 17); and age 23 to 24, for men. One local census in the South Carolina hill country found that among 17,000 white adults, there was not a single woman at age 25 who was neither wife nor widow. All had married, the result of a culture where every signal—religious, economic, and social—pointed young folks to matrimony.

And the fertility of those 18th Century colonial Americans was stunning: again, an average of nine children per family, the great majority surviving to adulthood. A visitor from Germany, schoolmaster Gottlieb Mittelberger, reported in 1754 that "the female sex in this new country is very fruitful." Whenever he met an American woman, "she is either with child, or she carries a child in her arms, or leads one by the hand."

The Anglican itinerant minister Charles Woodmason came to the hill country of the Carolinas in 1760 to preach to those he called "the most lowest, vilest men breathing"—Scotch-Irish Presbyterians. He was astounded, though, by the number of children that he found: "In many Cabbins you will see 10 or 15 children. Children and grandchildren of one size and the mother looking as young as the daughter. Yet these poor people have good health."

In 1775, Harvard University theologian Edward Wigglesworth calculated that through births alone, British Americans had doubled their numbers every 20 to 25 years. Drawing a conclusion confirmed by modern demographic historians, Wigglesworth called this a "rapidity of population [increase] not to be paralleled in the annals of Europe!" Indeed, he continued, such a thing "has never been equaled since the patriarchal ages [of the Old Testament]." Why? Among the reasons that Wigglesworth gave were the "boundless tracts" of new land which allowed "every new-married couple" and their children to gain "by their industry … a comfortable support."

Projections of the time showed that, within a few decades, the burgeoning number of colonial Americans would result in a larger population than found in the mother country, Great Britain. It is clear that a sense of demographic destiny gave courage to Patriots in their challenge in 1776 to the world's greatest empire over issues of taxation, cross-mountain settlement, and trade.

(4) The fourth common source of family strength has been the existence of strong family economies;

a conscious commitment to homes rich in function. According to historian John Demos, the 17th Century family in Puritan New England was first of all a business, the "absolutely central agency of economic production and exchange." Each family strove, by intent, for a high degree of self-sufficiency. The labor by man, woman, and children alike was a "wholly natural extension of family life." The Puritan family was also a school and a vocational institute, where the young learned to read, write, and do sums; and later on acquired the other skills necessary to adult life. Puritan girls were notable for their high degree of literacy, an example of what their leaders called "parental ministry." The New England home was also a church, featuring daily devotions, Bible study, and home worship led by fathers. These homes served, as well, as welfare institutions, hospitals, orphanages, retirement homes, and even houses of correction: that is, the idle and petty lawbreaker could be sentenced to serve a responsible family as a servant.

(5) The fifth common attribute found in cycles of family strength has been a strong middle class. During the period 1930 to 1970, for example, this development took the form that economists call "The Great Compression" in wages. Income inequality in America sharply declined, with the income differential between the top ten percent of earners and the bottom ninety percent narrowing dramatically. Part of the cause were the high marginal taxes placed on the wealthy and the wage and price controls introduced during World War II. For example, these war measures commonly restricted wage increases at the higher levels, while granting raises to employees receiving "sub-standard" wages.

All the same, the major factor – in the words of economists Claudia Goldin and Robert A. Margo – were "market forces [that] increased the demand for less-skilled manufacturing workers." Immigration into the United States was sharply controlled in these years. War production and the postwar economic boom, which lasted until 1970 or so, made this a golden age for American factory workers. These were the unionized, blue collar, bread winners who – by the millions – made the leap into the middle class, complete with a suburban home, a homemaking wife, and children they could now afford.

(6) The sixth common factor behind a strong family system has been a family-centered polity, or government. In each case, law and public policy strove to defend and encourage the married-couple, child-rich home. During the same era just mentioned, 1930 to 1970, federal public policy became decisively and deliberately pro-family. Perhaps most surprisingly, a fair review shows that the whole of the domestic New Deal – Franklin D. Roosevelt's anti-depression program – strongly favored marriage, the payment of "family wages" to fathers, support for full-time mothers at home, the ownership of homes and land, maternal breastfeeding, and the birth of more children. Pushing these values was a group called the Maternalists, mainly women: Frances Perkins as U.S. Secretary of Labor; Grace Abbott of the Council on Economic Security; Katharine Lenroot, Chief of the U.S. Children's Bureau; and Mary Anderson at the U.S. Women's Bureau.

A specific example of their handiwork were the Social Security Amendments of 1939, which created a Homemaker's Pension for women married to qualified men, and fairly generous Survivors Benefits for widows and orphans. To choose another example, the National Housing Act of 1934 introduced the long-term, amortized 30-year-mortgage on the national scene, along with federally subsidized insurance against default. Over 98 percent of federally guaranteed loans went to young married couples, buying their first house. At the end of World War II, such measures stimulated the suburban revolution: by 1960, a mere fifteen years later, the number of owner-occupied family homes in the United

States had doubled. Such policies help explain why evangelicals in the South, like Roman Catholics nationwide, tended to vote Democrat in these years: it was, arguably, the party of the family.

Meanwhile, federal income tax policy also became very family-friendly. A technique of tax calculation called "income splitting" broadly favored marriage and transformed full-time homemakers into valuable tax shelters. The increase and standardization of the personal income tax exemption lifted whole families, at the median income level, completely off the tax rolls.

These laws and public policies contributed to some amazing results. By the 1960's – just as in the 1660's, 1760's, and 1860's – almost all American adults were or had been married. Early marriage returned as well: by 1956, the average age of first marriage was 20.1 for women; 22.5 for men. Fertility soared, with the birth rate almost doubling between 1933 and 1957. The fertility increase was even greater among college-educated women, so defying a law of sociology. And while World War II brought on a spike in divorce, its incidence declined for two decades thereafter.

(7) The seventh common force behind family renewal and strength has been gender-role differentiation: a celebration of the differences in the tasks performed by women and men. The 19th Century "Victorians" in America held in highest honor what they called "The Eden Laws." These were the moral and religious legacies of the Garden, still in force after the Fall: 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: "Man is the worker or provider, the protector and the law-giver; woman is the preserver, the teacher or inspirer, and the exemplar."

Catharine Beecher believed that this restriction of women to the domestic sphere was, by and large, a political expedient, necessary to preserve democracy. In a turbulent society like America, she maintained, some form of hierarchy was needed to avoid a war of all against all. In contrast, Sarah Hale linked this sexual division of labor to women's superiority. Genesis 1 and 2 showed woman to be "the last work of creation," she explained, "the real glory of human nature." In the forming of Eve, "there were care and protection [taken]…which were not bestowed on Adam." Men were the prototype; Women the finished product. The woman "was of finer mold, and destined to the more spiritual uses": most especially, to the guiding of her husband and children, "by the aid of divine Grace, up to the bliss of heaven."

(8) The eight, final, and related factor behind all four eras of domestic strength has been an enthusiastic embrace of each family system by the women involved. Forms of "soft" patriarchy, or male headship, were also present, to be sure. But they only worked alongside a forthright acceptance by their female partners in the building of families. Among the Quakers of eighteenth century Pennsylvania, the quiet leadership of women was evident. For example, a leader of the Quaker migration from Great Britain to America, John Bevan, explained his family's decision to move: "… my wife had a great inclination to go thither and thought it might be a good place to train up children among sober people and to prevent the corruption of them… by the loose behavior of youths and the bad example of too many of riper years."

The average Quaker woman married at age 20; men at age 24: an event that followed a rigorous two-year engagement. A key Quaker innovation here was creation of the separate Women's Meeting. This structure grew in part from a belief in the spiritual equality of Quaker men and women; and, in part, from stress on the importance of mothering to the Quaker system. Women's Meetings closely super-

vised each betrothed couple. In founder George Fox's words, they "must teach the younger women; first, to be sober; secondly, to love their husbands; thirdly, to love their children; fourthly, to be discreet; fifthly, to be chaste, and keepers of the home…." Also, twice during the engagement, the would-be husband had to appear before the assembled Women's Meeting, alone and powerless, to be grilled about his spiritual and moral life and his economic prospects in this world.

Between 1730 and 1780, Quakerism of this sort flourished in Pennsylvania. Large families were the rule again: from seven to nine children per household. Writers such as Benjamin Franklin and Hector St. John de Crevecoeur pointed to Quaker farm families as exemplary Americans, producing both industrious and virtuous children and considerable wealth.

Meanwhile, in the Chesapeake Bay area (meaning Virginia and Maryland), the years 1730 to 1780 produced another extraordinary result. During the prior one hundred years, diseases such as malaria and economic troubles made the Chesapeake into something of a deathtrap, among white planters and African-American slaves alike. Family life was turbulent, marriages infrequent; births few. However, a flourishing tobacco-based economy in the eighteenth century produced a dramatically strengthened family system showing all the signs of the American model. Marriages came early among both groups, and was almost universal among adults. Fertility was high as well. As demographer Robert Wells summarizes, by the 1770's "black and white women in the South were more like each other than like English women" concerning marriage, family roles, and child bearing. Even the vast chasm created by slavery had, in a way and for a time, been bridged by the American model.

So, I have described here specific examples of family flourishing during the four cycles of family strength. What lay behind periods of decline? The brief answer is that most or all of the eight common characteristics turned negative. "Family ideologies" fell into disfavor. Claims by the individual – moral, sexual, economic, and political – displaced organic, communal claims. Land and homes became harder to acquire; tenants replaced owners. Equality in household property ownership and wealth withered. Family-centered economies gave way to impersonal markets. The middle-class faded, replaced by more of the very rich and the very poor. Politics and law turned against the family. Systems of sex-role differentiation broke down. Women turned towards alternatives to the home.

In addition, the record suggests that near the end of every period of family strength, a great complacency set in among leadership elites. Family health would be taken for granted. The deliberate and often difficult efforts of persons two or three generations before to build a family-centered order would be forgotten, or even derided. Commonly linked to these changes were retreats from religious involvement, particularly by the men.

Not too long ago, I described my "family cycles" thesis to a Biblical scholar, and her head nodded: "Oh, it's just like the Old Testament." Certainly, one theme found in those books is the decline of the Hebrews into disbelief and hedonism, only to be summoned back to the faith and moral order by a new band of prophets. In America, I suggest, similar swings have assumed a four-generation sequence: two generations building coherent and strong family systems; and two generations turning away from the family piety of their grandparents and great grandparents.

Will American domestic life continue to follow this pattern in the future? Are the wellsprings of social invention in America still rich enough to launch a new period of family renewal? If they are, we might

anticipate another period of family renewal, beginning about 2020. Might this happen?

The odds are certainly against it. Our current legal climate is remarkably hostile to the natural family model: marriage law us especially distressed. The equity feminist demand for complete gender equality dominates virtually every institution in the land. Measures of inequality in property and income are near historic highs; by all accounts, the American middle class is shrinking.

All the same, a similar situation prevailed during the 1920's and early '30's. And gloom about the family was also a dominant emotion in the 1720's and 1820s. Nonetheless family renewal occurred.

In this light, political scientist Eric Kaufmann's 2012 book, *Shall the Religious Inherit the Earth*, offers an alternate look at the human future. A self-declared secular liberal, Kaufmann nonetheless argues that "[r]eligious fundamentalists are on course to take over the world through demography." (He adapts here the old Protestant term "fundamentalist" to include Jews, Christians, and Muslims who also allow scriptural teachings on marriage and procreation to affect their behavior.) The future, he predicts, actually lies with religious communions that remain faithful to the divine command, "Be Fruitful and Multiply." These include, he says: American Mormons; Anabaptists such as The Old Order Amish and the Hutterites; Ultra-Orthodox Haredi Jews; Salafi Islamists; "Quiverfull" Protestants; and Laestadian Lutherans, who inhabit Finland's northwoods. (He might have added "Latin Mass" Catholics to the mix.) As human fertility otherwise falls around the earth, these religious bodies – with total fertility rates of between four and nine children per woman – are already expanding their relative share of national populations. Compounded over four generations, the transition would prove staggering. He 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: without a new [secular liberal] ideology to inspire social cohesion, fundamentalism cannot be stopped. The religious shall inherit the earth.

Perhaps this phenomenon, while global in Kaufmann's telling, will provide the spark to reignite a new family cycle in American social development. If so, fresh and different expressions of the eight common underlying factors identified here could be anticipated. What specific forms they might take this time, though, is beyond reasonable speculation.