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Sexual Revolutions and the Future of the Family

*Randall Collins**

Abstract: »*Sexuelle Revolutionen und die Zukunft der Familie*«. The family is the oldest human institution. Modernity began by replacing family-based organization with bureaucracy. The core of the family has become personal and sexual rather than political and economic. What is personal and sexual has become more a matter of individual choice than in the era of kinship politics; at the same time sexual behavior has become subject to state regulation, either restricting or permitting. From the early 20th century onwards, there have been increasingly militant social movements on one side or another of what is sexually permitted, encouraged, or prohibited. This paper reviews the sexual revolution in non-marital sex; the history of abortion struggles; mobilization of homosexual and transgender movements; and the battle of pronouns. Anti-abortion politics today is a counter-movement in identity politics, in response to the perceived threat to the traditional male/female family. Nevertheless, with a growing number of persons living alone and substituting electronic media for embodied social interaction, the family will likely survive as a privileged enclave of emotional solidarity and shared economic success.

Keywords: Family, sexuality, identity politics, culture war, abortion.

1. Introduction

The family is the oldest human institution. Along with the deliberate control of fire, which Goudsblom (1992) saw as the beginning of socially-imposed self-discipline and the “civilizing process,” early humans also developed a variety of kinship institutions. These were rules about who could or could not marry whom; incest prohibitions and exogamy rules; residency rules about whose group the new wife or husband lived with; descent rules about which lines of descent were considered lineages of membership, obligation, and inheritance.

Family and kinship have always been based on sexual behavior: the right or obligation to have intercourse is the operational definition of marriage (however sentimentalized or euphemistic the terminology might be). Intercourse

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reproduced the social structure from generation to generation; including status differences between children of socially recognized marriages, secondary marriages such as concubines, and illegitimate children who had no legal right to inherit. Regulated and legitimated sex was the building block of kinship structure.

De-regulation of sex became systemic change in human societies when other institutions were created that took the place, in varying degrees, of family-based economic and political alliances, child-rearing, and inheritance. Until the end of the Middle Ages, the kinship-based household was the building block of political and military power, as well as economic production and consumption. Modernity began by replacing family-based organization with bureaucracy. States began to regulate the family household from outside, inscribing everyone on the rolls of the state as individuals. The core of the family has become personal and sexual rather than political and economic. What is personal and sexual has become freer, more a matter of individual choice; at the same time sexual behavior in the non-family world has become subject to explicit political regulation, either restricting or permitting. From the early 20th century onwards, there have been increasingly militant movements on one side or another of what is sexually permitted, encouraged, or prohibited.

In this context, I will consider current disputes over sexuality and gender. Why is there an upsurge in anti-abortion movements just now? I will argue that abortion is primarily about freedom of sexual action. It is part of an overarching array of issues that includes homosexuality, which is to say, more kinds of acceptable erotic practices; also publicizing one's sexual identity in schools, in using toilets, and in festivals and parades; not merely private freedom of sexuality but asserting it as one's central identity. Politics has become more centered on sexuality than at any time in history.

These movements are allied in a united front with a struggle to eradicate gender distinctions. Both sides of the dispute mobilize movements and propose laws, each protesting against the other. In larger perspective, it is a struggle over what remains of the family and what will replace it.

In what follows, I will sketch the many forms of family-based societies that made up most of human history, from the tribal and band pre-state period, through the feudal-patrimonial households which were displaced by the bureaucratic revolution. This transition was the specialty of the two great historical sociologists Max Weber (1968 [1922]) and Norbert Elias (2000 [1939]). Both saw the world-historical importance of the transition, although they called it different things. Weber called it "rationalization" (while recognizing the ambiguities of the concept), but principally he saw modern society as increasingly penetrated by bureaucracy. The lesson of Foucault's cultural histories is similar, although he says nothing about bureaucracy as a driving factor.

Elias set out to historicize Freud: bodily repression of natural impulses is not primordial but dates from the early modern period. Psychology is driven by geopolitics; conquering kings centralized territorial regimes by making the warlords spend time at court – thereby acquiring manners and self-repression. Courtly manners were adopted by the middle class as moral obligations. This is the “civilizing process,” the strengthening of a super-ego of self-control, taken for granted and becoming an unconscious “second nature.” Elias followers (e.g., Wouters 2007) posit further accretions of self-inhibition through the following centuries up through today.

In this historical context, I will sketch the history of abortion struggles; the sexual revolution in non-marital sex; homosexual and transgender movements and the battle of pronouns; and the perceived decline of the family. This will help answer the question: why militant anti-abortion politics now? My hypothesis is that it is an issue in symbolic politics, seized upon opportunistically by conservative politicians in the branches of government they control, in response to policies enacted by militant feminist and homosexual activists. I will end with some sociological tools for forecasting the future of the family.

I hope you will excuse me for relying on American data. Some of these trends originated in Europe; on the whole (with the notable exception of the Moslem world) it has been a world-wide trajectory.

2. Kin Groups versus Bureaucracy

Kinship was the earliest form of human organization, and a distinctive break from animal families (Abrutyn and Turner 2022). The history of complex organizations took off when they separated from kin-based households into distinctive organizations for politics, religion, and economy. But for many centuries these spheres remained connected in some degree with kinship and household. Big shifts in political organization during ancient and medieval times, such as recruiting warriors to join migrating and conquering hordes, were usually created by pseudo-kinship, a pretense of being descended from some mythical ancestor. Settled states were almost entirely alliance networks among armed households. They were “patrimonial households” (a Weberian term that should not be confused with “patriarchy”), with marriage connections at their core. But a household was powerful and rich to the extent it contained many non-kin servants, soldiers, guests, hostages, apprentices, as well as prestige-giving artists and entertainers. The big break in organizational forms was the rise of bureaucracy, which as a practical matter meant that work, politics, religion, etc. were carried out somewhere other than where families live. The change was visible in the built environment; castles and homes that were simultaneously work-places gave way to governmental and

commercial buildings, containing their own furnishings, weapons, and equipment, treated as property of the organization rather than of particular persons.

Too much emphasis by followers of Weber has been placed on the concept of bureaucracy as a set of ideals and a form of legitimacy; it was simultaneously a form of material organization: control through written rules and records, hence a roster of who belongs to the organization, what money they collect and spend, recording who does what and how they did it. It is a network of behavior according to written rules and reports. Everyone is replaceable according to the rules, which means procedures, examinations, due diligence, and whatever the cliché was at the time. Schooling is another such bureaucracy, taking away instruction from the family; and thus simultaneously freeing individuals from family control, while making them targets for indoctrination by whoever controls the state.

This is an idealization; empirical studies of bureaucracies show that the rules were often evaded or manipulated; modern research shows that bureaucrats do not just break the rules backstage, but know how to use the rules against others, when to invoke them and when to ignore them. Being maximally rulebound (“bureaucratic”) is not the most efficient way to do things; but it is an effective form of organization for breaking the power of kin groups, inherited rule. It keeps an organization going as an impersonal entity, even if inefficiently. Every revolution and every successful social movement institutionalizes itself in new rules and government agencies to enforce them. In this ironic sense, as my old professor and Weberian scholar Reinhard Bendix remarked, democracy expands bureaucracy.

3. Abortion and Sexual Behavior

Abortion is argued in philosophical and theological terms: on the one hand, the protection and sacredness of life; on the other, the right to choose, rights over one’s own body. But sociologically, abstract ideas and beliefs are not the ultimate explanation of what people do. It begs the question: why do some people sometimes believe one way or the other? When and why are they vehement about their beliefs? When do they organize social and political movements about them?

My discussion aims to be purely sociological, without taking sides in the heated disputes for or against abortion. Nor do I attempt to summarize all the arguments that have been made; but to focus on the practical consequences for sexual behavior. Sociologically, the ground zero is always pragmatic: a practical matter of how people live. What is the human action at issue behind the abortion argument? Abortion is about sex – erotic behavior. Why do some women want abortion? Because they have sex without marriage, in pre-

marital and extra-marital sex. It is freedom to fuck without worrying about pregnancy, and thus is also a form of birth control for married couples.

Up through the early 20th century, an unwanted pregnancy was a fatal life event for a woman. The exception was for rich women who could keep it secret and farm out an unwanted child to a woman of the lower classes to care for it. To have a child outside of wedlock was scandalous, shameful, to be hidden away if possible. It was a badge of shame, punished by being ostracized; *The Scarlet Letter*, in Hawthorne's novel about 17th Century New England puritans. Worse yet, the mother could be executed for murder if she had an abortion; or disposed of the infant though infanticide (this was the plot line of Goethe's *Faust*).

That was the historical scenario. Today, some abortions happen because married women do not want to have a child at the time; because the child is malformed; because the mother is in danger; or because it interrupts her career. Most abortions are to unmarried women in their 20s.

The taboo on unmarried pregnancy fell away rapidly in some countries (first in Scandinavia, then in the US) in the 1950s and 1960s (Blumstein and Schwartz 1983). In part, this was because of much greater acceptance of sex before marriage; in part because young middle-class couples started living together without getting married – a trend that grew very rapidly at the turn of the 1970s and was accepted surprisingly soon by the older population. Before that time, “living in sin,” as it was called, or “shacking up” was regarded as something poor or non-white people did. But within a few years it became normal to hear someone introduced as “this is my partner” rather than “this is my husband/this is my wife.” The further terminological shift in ordinary language was adopted by homosexual couples, who more recently have shifted to using “husband and husband” or “wife and wife,” after winning political and legal battles over gay marriage.

The political and legal battle for abortion happened at the same time as the revolution in unmarried cohabitation. In Scandinavia, limited abortion rights began in the 1930s and expanded; in 1973, the US Supreme Court ruled in the lawsuit *Roe v. Wade* that abortion was a right covered in the abstract language of the Constitution. The anti-abortion movement dates from that period. Controversy reached a new peak in 2022 when the Supreme Court ruled there is no such constitutional right, and that abortion is a matter for State and Federal legislation.

The arguments pro and con are on the grounds of legal philosophy and highly polarized rhetoric. Translated into social practice, to restore the ban on abortion means that sex should be confined to marriage. This means rolling back the sexual revolution of the mid-20th century. On the other side, my body is my own, means in practical terms: I can have sex with whoever and whenever I want. Men traditionally had this right; why should women be any different?

We are approaching an answer to the question: why is there a resurgence of the anti-abortion movement just now? Which is to say, a movement against casual, non-marital sex. This should be seen in the context of the sexual revolution, starting about 100 years ago.

4. Sexual Revolutions

Throughout human history, marriages were almost always arranged by kin groups rather than the choices of independent individuals. Pre-state kinship structures were built around marriage rules, e.g., which group should send daughters or sons to another specified group (Lévi-Strauss 1969 [1949]). With the rise of large-scale warfare and alliance politics, marriages and other forms of sexual exchange became used as political treaties (Weber 1968 [1922]; Collins 1986a, 1986b). Sending daughters of one leading family as wives or concubines to another leading family made them allies, and also set the stage for future inheritance of territories depending on accidents of which children were born and survived into adulthood. Diplomatic marriages of this sort have continued among royal families (even among figureheads like Queen Victoria) down to the era of modern democracies (including England's Queen Elizabeth II). At less exalted levels of social class, arranged marriages also existed among property-owning families, an arrangement for continuity in family enterprises, and sometimes a means of status climbing where money could be traded for ancestral status.

Sexual/love affairs also existed in virtually all recorded societies since ancient times, but mainly outside of marriage. They were a form of personal excitement, the thrill of a private backstage (Romeo-and-Juliet) which now appeared in the otherwise privacy-denying patrimonial household. Most of what we know about such love affairs is from the literature or entertainment media of the time, which probably exaggerate them compared to the realities of ordinary life in pre-modern households. But as bureaucracy and democracy eroded the importance of household and inheritance for individual's careers, marriage markets spread among the middle class. The growth of individual marriage markets – though still heavily influenced by parents – can be indexed by the topics of popular literature. The new ideology of marriage for love combined with a concern for material fortune is described in the novels of Jane Austen around 1800; it developed more slowly in French literature (long focused on adulterous adventures), and sentimentally as well as moralistically in American literature. The belief became conventional that all marriages happen by falling in love, or at least this became the normative way of speaking about it.

The 1920s were a revolution in courtship. Parents steering their children's marriage choices was replaced by dating and partying. From now on the

younger generation mixed the sexes without supervision, creating a culture where drinking, dancing, and necking was the main excitement of life rather than a transition to marriage. It was a rebellious thrill in the US where alcohol was prohibited, but the same style emerged in England and Germany also.

In the 1930s and 1940s, divorce began to be common, no longer disreputable and scandalous. By the 1960s, almost 50% of US marriages were ending in divorce: a level relatively constant since then. This eroded the ideal of sexual monogamy or “purity”; a large portion of the population of both sexes were having multiple sexual partners (Laumann et al. 1994).

Since the transition from childhood to adulthood involves a shift from a life-stage in which sex is officially prohibited to a stage when it is allowed, the teen years are a center for sexual regulation and associated ideologies. The 1950s produced a new social category, the “teenager.” Working class youths no longer entered the labor force, as governments made them attend secondary school; with free time on their hands, teens created social clubs and gangs, got their own style of music and dancing, with a tone of rebellion against traditional middle-class propriety. The rise in crime rates began at this time and continuing from the 1950s into the 1990s. How to bring up children became a topic of controversy ever since. Apart from psychological advice on home life, the social instrument for shaping and controlling the emerging generation has become schools and the policies by which they operate. Hence a new site for political struggle.

5. The Invention of the Social Movement

Here we step back again to trace another offshoot of the bureaucratic revolution. The social movement is a form of organization and politics outside of the family and household, but also outside of formal bureaucracies: that is to say, it is a mode of creating new networks that did not exist before, recruiting persons wherever they might come from, generating an alliance of individuals held together by their devotion to a common cause. Social movements are a distinctively modern form. They scarcely existed in the era of kinship politics, where households might shift alliances but individuals within them could not go out to join movements on their own. The exception was religious movements, chiefly in the monastic world religions such as Buddhism and Christianity during their early phases of expansion. But as these religions achieved success they tended to ally with the patrimonial households of the aristocracy, and religious conversion generally took place en masse by the conversion of leading aristocrats who ordered their subordinates to follow. Other large-scale religions, such as Confucianism, Hindu sects, and Islam, generally blended with and reinforced existing kinship politics.

Charles Tilly (2004) dates the invention of the social movement to the late 1700s in England and France. Prior to this time, there could be local protests and uprisings in periods of food scarcity and distress, but they remained localized and when serious were almost always put down by superior military power. The bureaucratic state changed the logistics of political activism; it promoted roads, canals, transport, postal services, and the delivery of books and newspapers; social movements were now able to organize large number of people across long distances. And the increasing centralization of the state gave movements a target for their grievances: the capital city and the central government itself. Movements developed a repertoire of techniques for petitioning and protesting, ranging in militancy from demanding reforms and new laws to overthrowing the state by revolution. In democracies, social movements became an alternative to struggling for power through periodic elections; one does not always win the vote, but protest movements can be mobilized at any time to bring pressure on the authorities to make urgent and immediate changes.

With the expansion of communications – telephone, radio, film, television, computers, and the Internet – the material means for mobilizing social movements have vastly expanded. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the main social movements were class based, especially labor movements; sometimes ethnic and nationalist; sometimes humanitarian reform movements. From the mid-20th century through today, the variety of social movements has exploded into a cascade of social movements, all competing for attention.

6. Sexual Movements

What was different in the 1960s was that political and social movements became heavily based among the young (in contrast to labor movements, based mainly on married adults) (Gitlin 1987). The shift was driven by a huge increase in university students. Again, the underlying force was a combination of bureaucracy and democracy. State universities proliferated in response to popular demands for educational credentials once monopolized by the elite. Ironically, this set off a spiral of credential inflation, as once-valuable school degrees (secondary school diplomas; then undergraduate degrees) became so widespread that well-paying jobs increasingly demanded advanced professional degrees (Collins 2019). The political side-effect, however, was that the group of young-adult “university age” students became a favorable base for organizing social movements: students have flexible hours, are freed from family supervision, massed together in their own spaces, and thus available for speedy communications and the emotionally engaging rituals of rallies, marches, protests, and sit-ins. With the adoption of non-violent techniques of “civil disobedience” borrowed from Gandhi’s independence campaign in

India, militant social movements could claim the moral high ground, and also apply pressure by disrupting public routines. Such movements could also spill over into property destruction and violence; as Tilly noted, a violent fringe has historically existed around any large public protest.

In the self-consciously revolutionary generation of the 1960s, we called ourselves the New Left, distinguished from the old Left by being less concerned about ideology than lifestyle. Culture icons were the hippies, drop-outs from school and career, living in communes where they shared psychedelic drugs and free love (Yablonsky 1968; Zablocki 1980). In reality, most were weekend-hippies, and most of the free-love communes disintegrated rather quickly over jealousy and status ranking. The main legacy of the “free love” period was that cohabitation – living together without getting married – became widespread, even becoming a census category in the 1970s (Laumann et al. 1994).

The 1970s were dominated by sexually-based movements. First, the feminist movement sought equal legal rights and employment opportunities for women; plus, its militant lesbian branch, condemning heterosexual intercourse as the root of the problem. In the 1970s and increasing with each decade through the present, a chain of homosexual movements demanded not only freedom from discrimination but the recognition of a new public vocabulary – gender rather than sex, gay rather than homosexual, and so on. This has been a cascade of movements, each building on its predecessors, in tactics, ideology, and lifestyle, each finding a new issue on which to fight.

7. Counter-Cultures and Culture Wars

Recent movements are built on prior movements of cultural rebellion, going back for a century. Like the New Left, the overall ethos has been antinomian, the counter-culture of status reversal. These rebellious social movements were paralleled by shifts in self-presentation, demeanor, and in the media depiction of sexuality (Wouters 2007; Collins 2014). In the 1920s, women’s skirts became shorter; young women adopted a more mannish look. They also began to show a lot more flesh; body-covering swimsuits became briefer; women athletes exercised and competed in shorts. The trend also existed in socialist and Soviet Communist organizations, and in the nudist movement popular in Germany. In 1946 came the bikini, created in France and named for an island where an atom bomb was exploded; eventually there were men in thongs and women going topless at beaches. The 1960s and 1970s were a weird *mélange* of clothing fads: granny dresses and throw-back Sgt. Pepper uniforms; Nehru jackets; surgical smocks; men in pony-tails wearing pukka-shell necklaces and jewelry earrings. Most of these styles did not last long, but the prevailing mood was change for the sake of something different. The

long-term result was the casualness revolution (also called informalization), which triumphed by the 1990s: wearing blue jeans, T-shirts, and athletic clothes on all occasions, discarding neckties and business suits, calling everyone by their first name, no more use of titles and once-polite forms of address. In effect, the symbolic markings of adult social status were eroded by the omni-present styles of youth culture.

Simultaneously with these changes, erotic heterosexuality was coming out of the closet, in literature and the media. The “jazz age” of the 1920s was originally named after a slang word for having sex; novelists like Scott Fitzgerald and song-writers like Cole Porter were full of innuendo. James Joyce’s *Ulysses* in 1922 began literary depiction of the bodily details of sex, followed by D.H. Lawrence, Ernest Hemingway, Henry Miller, and Anais Nin; most of these were published in Paris but censored elsewhere until 1960, when their mass publication fueled the sexual atmosphere of the counter-culture. In 1968, Hollywood film censorship changed to a rating system, marketing soft porn as PG (“parental guidance”) and hard porn as X-rated. The 1970s was the era of the so-called “Pubic Wars”: glossy magazines with nude photos tested the borders of what could be displayed, moving from breasts to pubic hair to aroused genitals and by the 1980s to penetration and oral sex. Pornographic photos had existed before, but they were cheaply produced and had a limited underground circulation; now these were some of the biggest mass-distribution magazines. Sex magazines went into decline in the 1990s, replaced by porn sites on the Internet.

Cultural rebellion spilled over into language. Obscene words began to be used in political demonstrations, then on T-shirts, in fashion advertising, and in ordinary middle-class conversation. The remaining bastion of prohibition on obscene language is what can be said in school classrooms. Everywhere else, flouting overt sex has been a successful form of rebellion. One might even say that the major line of conflict is no longer between economic classes, but a status division: hip and cool versus square and straight.

Homosexual sex came out of the closet at the same time as the porn revolution. Gay porn magazines and film followed heterosexual men’s magazines; their circulation was never as wide (*Playboy* and *Penthouse* reached peaks of five to seven million), but the gay movement was more controversial and more activist. It spun off from the resistance tactics of the civil rights movement, pushing back at police raids of gay bars and meeting places. It became a cascade of movements: gay and lesbian joined by bi-sexual, queer (militant homosexuals rejecting gay marriage), transgender, transsexual, non-binary, and more. The growth of this acronym — now up to LGBTQIA+ — is itself a sociological phenomenon to be explained, as new identities have been added every few years, a trajectory likely to continue into the future. This is the pattern of a social movement cascade; successful movements do not retire, declaring their cause is won, but spin off new branches, seeking new niches and

issues. The phenomenon is sometimes referred to as extending social movement frames to new targets.

A related issue has been sex education in the schools, initially about contraceptives for the prevention of venereal disease (a term subsequently changed as too judgmental). Sex education grew as an official alternative to parental advice or to informal peer-group sexual culture; sex education is the bureaucratization of sex. In the early 21st century, its function expanded to teach children about homosexuality as a protected status, and as a life-style choice. In recent years there are movements among students as young as elementary school demanding to be referred to by non-gendered pronouns; and for government-funded sex-reassignment hormones or surgery. The fields of struggle have expanded: gender-free toilets; the battle of pronouns, banning the words “he” and “she.” In 2022, adolescent children have been charged with sexual harassment for “mispronouncing” – referring to a classmate as “she” instead of “them.” In 2021, the US House of Representatives passed legislation banning the use of gendered words “father, mother, brother, sister” in laws and government documents. Federal health organizations now refer to mothers as “birthing persons” and ban the term “breast-feeding” in favor of “chest-feeding.” There are similar efforts to create gender-neutral pronouns in French and Spanish, although thus far not very popular.

8. Why Anti-Abortion Politics Now?

The arena of such conflicts has become increasingly political, as activists file lawsuits in the courts and demand new legislation; escalation on one side leads to counter-escalation on the other (Robbins, Dechter, and Kornrich 2022). It is in this context that we can explain why the anti-abortion movement has become much more militant in the last few years. In 2019, abortions in the US were about 20% of live births; but in fact the ratio has fallen from 25% ten years earlier; this is largely due to teenagers having fewer children and fewer abortions; and to some extent to the growth of homosexuality in the age-group below 30. The anti-abortion movement has not intensified because abortion was growing worse; it is just the most prominent way conservative legislators can strike back at the latest waves of sexual revolution.

Conservatives view these developments as the decline of morality and good taste and the intrusion of government into the lives of their children. Educational policies are regarded as indoctrination. Abortion is seen as part of the sexual revolution run rampant, separating sex from the family, extolling forms of sex that turn traditional parenting into an outdated status. Militants of homosexual movements have declared that hetero-normativity is on its way out. Homosexuality has become more widespread: it was less than 2% of the Baby Boom generation; grew to almost 4% of the generation born before

1980; to 9% of those who became adults around the year 2000. In so-called Generation Z, now about 18 to 23 years old, identifying as LGBT has jumped to 16% (Zumbrun 2022). This is still far from a majority; but an expanding movement is full of aggressive confidence, and some militants explicitly look forward to a time when the heterosexual family is a quaint minority.

Conservatives see the same trends but from a different point of view: the falling marriage rate; below-replacement fertility, now down to 1.6 children per woman in the US, the lowest in its history (and even lower in parts of Europe), with 40% of all children born to unmarried parents. More people are living alone; proportionately more among the aged 65 and older, but in sheer numbers of households, the largest number living alone are working-age adults.

Strict laws in American states banning abortion have been created in a situation where the political split between conservatives and liberals leaves neither of them with a firm majority at the Federal level, while conservatives fall back on regional state legislatures which they control. Here also control over what goes on in the schools is increasingly contested.

Abortion is just one issue in a divisive cluster of issues. Making abortion laws more restrictive will not save the family; illegal abortions would reappear, recapitulating the conflicts of the 1960s. Conflict over abortion is a symbol of the bigger question – what conservatives perceive as a multi-pronged assault on the family.

9. Why the Family is Not Likely to Disappear

But there are reasons of a different sort why the family is not likely to disappear any time soon. When the feminist revolution took off in the 1970s, men soon discovered they had an economic interest in their wives' careers. A family with two middle-class incomes could outspend a traditional, male-headed upper-middle class household. Two working-class incomes put a family in the middle-class expenditure bracket. In the new economic hierarchy, the poorest families are those where one woman's income has to care for her children alone. Marriage and its shared property rights continues to be the bulwark of economic stratification. From a radical left point-of-view, this would be a reason to abolish the family; or at least take child-rearing away from the family.

The situation is complicated by gay marriage, beginning when gay couples demanded the tax and inheritance rights of marriage. It also creates wealthy households, since gay men are usually middle class or higher, and two such incomes makes them big spenders – one reason why consumer industries and advertising are so favorable to the gay movement. On the other hand, although gay couples sometimes adopt children (or use sperm donors), the number of children in gay marriages is small (only 15% of same-sex couples,

married or not, have children) and unlikely to compensate for the overall decline in child-bearing. There are about 1 million same-sex households in the US; out of 128 million households, this is less than 1%. Since about 13 million Americans identify as LGBT, this implies that only 1/6th of them is living with a sexual partner; most of them are living alone. The big increase in living alone may even be driven by the rise of homosexuality, or perhaps vice versa. This seems to be particularly true in big US cities, such as Washington D.C., where one-quarter of the adult population live alone in apartments, making up half of all households. Washington, D.C. is also the city where the largest percentage identify themselves as LGBT, at 10%.

Can sociology predict the future of the family? What will happen hinges a great deal on government regulations, and these depend on the mobilization of political movements against each other. The Internet era has made it easier for all sorts of movements to mobilize. But government regulation may become a weapon by which one side can censor the other and try to keep it from mobilizing. The causes of conflict are easier to predict than the outcomes, especially when the sides are relatively evenly balanced.

Computerization and its offshoot, the Internet, foreshadow a future in which almost everyone works at home; manual work is done by robots; everyone spends most of their time communicating online, or absorbed in online entertainment. The generation brought up on the Internet is the shyest generation yet; they have many on-line “friends” but few friends in the flesh; they are less sexually active; more anxious and fearful (Twenge 2018). The issue of abortion may eventually decline because there is less sexual activity in the future generation. The immersive virtual world of the Internet, strongly promoted by today’s media capitalism, may be destroying the family by making it easy to live physically solitary lives. Thus, the recent jump in identification as homosexual (16% in the youngest generation) may be largely a matter of announced identity rather than bodily erotics; a kind of fantasy ideology more than actual sexual practice.

Yet this may be why the family will survive – not as the universal social institution, but as a privileged enclave. It is privileged because it is a place of physical contact, of interaction rituals, solidarity, and emotional energy. It is also a place of reliable sex (surveys show that married and cohabiting couples have much more frequent sex than unpartnered individuals (Laumann et al. 1994) – they do not have to spend time looking for partners). Add to that the two-earner effect on household income, an incentive for the family to survive.

The trajectory of the last 100 years has been to undermine the family, but the rise of the disembodied computer world may change that. I suspect we are heading towards a future where intact families – father, mother, and their children of all ages – are the dominant class economically; and media-

networked or media-addicted isolates, living alone with their electronics, are wards of the welfare state.

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Studying Long-Term Processes in Human History.

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