



PERSPECTIVE: Gary North

The Perseverance of the Family

PERSPECTIVES is a new *Alternative* feature, in which articulate spokesmen are given the opportunity to argue the pros and the cons, the highs and the lows, the light and the serious of any significant issue. It should be emphasized that the opinions and values herein expressed do not necessarily reflect those of the Editor or The *Alternative* staff.

Conservatives, almost by definition, are institutionally oriented. They suspect the motives and the sanity of all arm-chair social theorists who proclaim radical human autonomy as the foundation of their social analysis. Individual creativity, and a society's ability to appropriate and use such creativity, require the existence of stabilizing institutional supports. Randomness is a threat to man; he seeks to thwart it in the day-to-day affairs of his life. Randomness, if it is widespread, requires too much capital, both human and material, to deal with it. Scarce economic resources, especially time, are diverted from the task of positive creativity in order to subdue, in a negative fashion, the contingency of life. Therefore, as Robert Nisbet has argued so forcefully in his *Social Change and History*, stability rather than change should be the primary presupposition of sociological analysis. It is the error of modern thought (and has been for three centuries) to elevate change to the position of ultimacy, thus relegating stability into the realm of the abnormal. Stability is the setting of social change, not the other way around.

The standard account of the basic components of society which might appear in any of a hundred conservative analyses would include family, church, and state, generally in that order. Furthermore, subordinate institutional

arrangements, probably more fleeting historically, but of considerable importance to society, are such things as school, business (i.e., occupational calling), fraternal organizations, gangs, or any number of other voluntary associations. Without the emotional stability provided by these associations — which Tocqueville said were so fundamental in American life in the 1830s — men are left to find meaning and purpose as social atoms. The "anomie" of modern industrial life, as Durkheim called it at the end of the last century, results from just this kind of social fragmentation and atomization. The alienation of mankind which so appalled the young Marx — an alienation, within the framework of the Christian philosophy of the West, which stems from the ultimate alienation between God and man — flourished far more easily in the milieu of industrial Europe than it had in the more personalistic culture which had preceded it.

It has been a hallmark of totalitarian parties that ultimate sovereignty has been ascribed to the leader, for it is he who is the incarnation of the spirit of universal meaning (*Volkgeist*, the proletarian class, the forces of history, etc.). The leader is the sole source of temporal meaning, the fountain of power, the source of legitimate change, the touchstone of community. Men participate in community, thus bringing purpose into otherwise autonomous, contingent lives, through the leader and the party. Totalitarian systems deny the validity of alternative institutional sovereignties, for these operate as buffers against central political power. At best, such competing institutions are regarded as derivative sovereignties, drawing legitimacy, power, and meaning from the party and the party's state. Thus, the premise of absolute totalitarianism is the simultaneous existence

of radical individualism (i.e., social atomism) and the total integration of each human personality into the overarching sovereignty of the leader and his party. (cf. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*; Robert Nisbet, *The Quest for Community*; J.L. Talmon, *Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*.) From Rousseau to Stalin, a man is defined only as citizen or comrade; no other membership has any legitimacy. As Koestler has put it in *Darkness at Noon*, a man is defined as one million men divided by one million — a pure social atom.

Conservatives rest the case for human freedom on the existence of legitimate multiple sovereignties, each with the authority to express itself by means of establishing institutional restraints on members and on each other. Men can be a part of several of them at any point in time, and each will impart a degree of meaning and stability into his life. Destroy the system of plural sovereignties, each with its own legitimate realm of authority, and society faces the creation of a vast bureaucracy. In fact, the existence of the deadening bureaucratic hand will be the single sovereignty that can compete effectively with the capriciousness of the will of the ruler. The citizen is caught in the cross-fire between the impersonal cage of bureaucracy and the contingent world of the totalitarian leader. Total personalism doing battle with total impersonalism, with the individual citizen crushed in the middle. (Nazi Germany has been described as a "confusion of private armies and private intelligence services," in which the traditional army, the Reichswehr, was confronted with, first, the S.A. forces under Roehm, and second, the S.S. forces under Himmler, and few men ever knew where they stood in relation to the various bureaucracies. The faceless bureaucrats and

Hitler were the foundations of men's lives.)

The one institution which is universally acknowledged by conservative social analysts and philosophers as being inescapable for the maintenance of a free society is the family. The family's relationship with that other crucial institutional arrangement, private ownership of property, is inescapable. Rushdoony has pointed this out in his study, *Bread Upon the Waters*:

"Biblical law places power and authority into the hands of the parents, especially the father, and, as long as the family has liberty, liberty based on the power of property, the parents have authority. The primary purpose of the inheritance tax has been to destroy this parental power; the total financial gain to the state by means of inheritance taxes is small. Similarly, transfer of power over education, income, and property from the family to the state has undercut parental power and authority."

"Because the modern state controls the education, income, property, and labor of all its citizens, it thus controls the totality of powers within the country. The result is totalitarianism. Every country that weakens the independence and liberty of the family and property moves steadily into totalitarianism. It makes no difference in which country this occurs, and what laws the state passes as a restraint on itself. *Property is power, and when the state grows in its controls over property, it grows in the same degree towards totalitarian power.* No political program can stop this growth unless it restores to the family its control over property, income, and education. As long as the state retains the control, it will retain the power and the authority, and it is naive to expect anything but tyranny."

It is therefore not surprising that the Soviet Union officially abolished the family as a legal entity until 1936. The conservative would argue that Stalin was forced to return to at least a somewhat conservative position with respect to the family because the very nature of human society demands acknowledgement of this most crucial of institutions. Without it, and the stability, meaning,

and purpose it brings to the lives of human beings, men cannot be productive, and even the communist state needs basic economic production more than it needs ideological consistency. There is an order that is built into creation that must be respected by men; deny it, and you deny both order and man. Deny the legitimacy of the family, and you deny the operational existence of human society. That is why totalitarianism in its purest theoretical form cannot exist over the long run or over large geographical areas, for it negates the possibility of social control when it negates the possibility of society. This does not mean, however, that attempts to abolish the family by totalitarians and radical anarchists (who work together initially to tear down the fabric of existing society) cannot cause great social havoc. They can, and they have. They may again.

Socialism: Statist vs. Family

The family is the central lawmaking body in human society, not the civil government. It is the structure which teaches children original attitudes toward law, property, and other human beings. It is the primary agency of social welfare, as well as education. Steadily, as the state appropriates the functions of the family, a basic distortion of social life becomes manifest. Those social functions that can best be ordered through the operation of a local, highly personal structure — one which is basically voluntary at its point of origin, i.e., marriage — become totalitarian and inefficient when appropriated by distant, politically controlled bureaucratic hierarchies that use coercion to gain access to their economic resources.

The family is essentially bureaucratic and socialistic in its internal structure. For some reason, this fact seems to bother libertarians. Some of them — at least those conservative enough to defend the family — actually try to deny the obvious. Robert Nisbet, the most influential conservative sociologist in this country (and perhaps the world — there are so few of them), writes in his book, *The Social Bond*, that the family, like the asylum, the prison, or the army, is a strongly authoritarian institution.

The individual is not free to withdraw from it until his term is up, and "within the organization, he is subject to the full sweep of its authority." Or, as it was beautifully put in a cartoon showing a confrontation between a father and his teen-age son: "But Dad, Mom volunteered for this outfit. I was drafted!" Unless the family is in the process of collapse, the parents are in possession of the rights of control: allocation of economic assets, allocation of family tasks, family discipline. Where this "internal socialism" is not present to a considerable degree, the family in question is in very serious danger.

Does this mean that conservatives favor the establishment of basically socialistic institutions? Of course it does. If a society does not establish a multitude of such institutions, it will see the establishment of that single overarching socialist institution, the totalitarian state. Conservatives favor the establishment of such bureaucratic and internally socialistic agencies as police forces (preferably local) and armies (preferably small and professional). They favor the establishment of private, non-tax-supported churches, libraries, schools, and other institutions that need not be operated on the basis of profit and loss statements. We desperately need more externally voluntary but internally bureaucratic institutions to act as buffers against the expanding sovereignty of the totalitarian state. Most of all, we need strong families.

To criticize the family because it possesses features that are repulsive when found in the institution of the state is as misguided an effort as the criticism of the state because it does not function as a family. Radical libertarians tend to practice the first form of criticism, while socialists are in the second category. Both fallacies rest on the same error: the inability to understand that different human institutions have different functions, different structures, different means of financing, different strengths and weaknesses, different laws governing them. Obviously, the family is not the civil government. It is not impersonal. It trains its members to exercise responsible leadership in all areas of their lives, inside and outside the family. It produces children and, through the dual program of discipline and love, can transform rebellious infants into responsible men and women. Children are regarded as children only while they are children. The very process of aging in the parents adds incentive for them to rear up responsible children who can make a mark in the world and later will be able to support their parents when the elders can no longer care for themselves. The family unit, because it operates under the laws of biology (unlike the state), provides for its own internal transformation; children are not treated as children forever. "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh" (Gen. 2:24).

The state, if it attempts to imitate the family's structure and functions, becomes a crude, inefficient, exceedingly dangerous parody. Impersonal (or

Contributors

David Brudnoy is an associate professor of history at Merrimack College, national affairs commentator on WGBH-TV in Boston, and an associate of *The Alternative*.... **George Carey** is a professor of political philosophy at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., and Editor of *The Political Science Review*.... **Chester Finn** is a special assistant to Francis W. Sargent, governor of Massachusetts.... **Haven Bradford Gow** is a college student whose articles have appeared in *Intercollegiate Review*, *Modern Age*, *University Bookman*, and elsewhere.... **James Grant** is on the staff of the *Baltimore Morning Sun*.... **Gary North** is on the staff of the

Foundation for Economic Education....

Roger Rosenblatt is an assistant professor of English and the director of the Expository Writing Program at Harvard University; he is also the Literary Editor of *The Alternative*....

Kenneth P. Shorey works for J.B. Lippincott Company and has written articles for *National Review*, *Modern Age*, *Rally*, *The University Bookman*, *The Intercollegiate Review*, and *The New Guard*.... **C. Bascom Slemp** is the chief Washington correspondent of *The Alternative*.... **E. T. Veal** is a

graduate student at Yale University....

Paul H. Weaver is an assistant professor of government at Harvard University and the Associate Editor of *The Public Interest*.