

# Mothers, Fathers, and Other Subversives

**The Subversive Family: An Alternative History of Love and Marriage.** By Ferdinand Mount. (Jonathan Cape, London, 1982) £9.50.

**T**he assault on the family is over. But there remains a vacuum for a new and more realistic understanding of this most fundamental of all social institutions, its history, its role, and its future. The publication of *The Subversive Family: An Alternative History of Love and Marriage* by a British social historian, Ferdinand Mount, is thus particularly opportune and deserves special attention. With this boldly conceived and brilliantly argued volume we have for the first time a powerful version of the family that counters those theories and perceptions that have dominated the public arena for all too long.

The literature on the family, contends Mr. Mount, is "marked by manipulation, dishonesty and sophistry." The history of the family has to be rewritten "from the inside looking outwards," that is, in terms of what ordinary people like to do, not in terms of what they were expected and compelled to do by those who happened to be in a position of control. The formidable bibliography on the subject that has accumulated through the centuries has been informed by assumptions fundamentally hostile to the family, says Mr. Mount. The contemporary media—the newspapers, magazines, and television, all the different organs of this immense apparatus of persuasion—continue that tradition, flaunting and at times even celebrating a pervasively negative image of family life. In spite of the most recent, albeit reluctant, recognition of the family's staying power, much of what the established contemporary texts tell us about ourselves and our history is little more than a rehash of defunct theories and gross misperceptions.

## Mired in Muddle

The author takes issue with this whole body of literature. He does not hesitate to question entire traditions of interpretation—those of the Christian churches, of Marxists, and of their allies—nor does he shrink from taking to task such revered figures as Philippe Ariès and C. S. Lewis. In exploring the reasons why so many of them have misread and muddled the historical evidence, Mount proves himself to be a historian of considerable erudition. In the tradition of the British historian Peter Laslett, he turns to original data, using such sources as parish records, diaries, memoirs, and chronicles. He consults not only well-known writers like Plutarch, Erasmus, Chaucer, and Locke but also less familiar ones, such as the twelfth-century Abbess Hildegard and the Renaissance writer Sebastian Brant. By looking at the family from the inside, in uncovering the meanings family customs and practices held for the individuals themselves, Mr. Mount arrives at a multitude of insights, startling at first, frequently convincing, always intriguing.

In a grand sweep, he attempts to bring to light the varying presuppositions underlying the writings of historians, theologians, philosophers, sociologists, and in short, all those whose theories have become part and parcel of the standard public perception of the family. In exposing them as myths, he develops a powerful alternative history of love and marriage extending from antiquity to the more grotesque events of recent times.

Because of the surprising novelty of his message, it may be useful to illustrate how his particular approach leads to interpretations that challenge the accepted wisdom. A few examples will have to suffice.

## The Troubadour Trap

It has been accepted for some time that marriage for love as an act of free choice between the betrothed is a peculiarly modern phenomenon and that the "sentimental revolution" of the eighteenth century only slowly gained strength and validity. Conservatives and radicals alike are guided by the conventional historian's picture of the terrifying strictures imposed upon individuals, particularly women, by marriages arranged for purposes of procreation and the transmission of property. But Mr. Mount demonstrates that in the Middle Ages love had a central role in marriage, hence the preponderance of common law marriage. Using parish and church court records from sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, medieval correspondence, a fresh look at *The Canterbury Tales*, diaries from the seventeenth century, and instructive tales from the fourteenth, he arrives at the conclusion that love and marriage were intertwined and that "marriage was a central experience in the life of every human being and the end of marriage . . . was likely to prove a desolating event."

Likewise, the notion that romantic love is a modern phenomenon invented by the troubadours—a theory equally celebrated by such diverse writers as Stendahl, Friedrich Engels, and C. S. Lewis—is declared a myth. Citing a wide range of examples from ancient Egypt, the anonymous graffiti on the walls of Pompeii, medieval Byzantium, and Caucasia to Icelandic poetry of the tenth century, Mr. Mount concludes that romantic love certainly predates the troubadours by centuries. At fault in the conceptualization and the persistence of the troubadour myth, he argues, is historians' inability to distinguish between social history and literary history.

As a last example of Mr. Mount's approach, let me mention briefly his treatment of Philippe Ariès's influential *Centuries of Childhood*—a book that has been particularly dear to my heart. Philippe Ariès studied images as conveyed in paintings, sculptures, dress, games, and education to discover how people thought and felt about marriage and children and came to his pathbreaking theory, one that subsequently influenced a whole generation of scholars, that both the concept of the family and the idea of childhood were modern inventions. Unknown in the Middle Ages, Ariès maintained, both originated in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and reached their full expression in the seventeenth. Again, taking a wide range of materials, many used by Ariès himself, Mr. Mount challenges the assumption that childhood and the

nuclear family are recent inventions. He argues that Ariès confused the history of childhood with the history of art. Whether one is convinced by this counterinterpretation or not, the fact remains that any serious scholar will have to come to terms with the challenge to current theories about the modern family.

### A Sermon for Bachelors

The family, Mr. Mount asserts, is a subversive institution. It is an autonomous, natural, and moral entity, an institution in its own rights. It elicits from individuals an emotional intensity, a degree of commitment and loyalty, and an inescapable duty that brings it into direct collision with other institutions, such as the Church, the state, and by extension, any fraternal institution that competes for the individual's allegiance. Throughout history the family has been in a constant tug-of-war with external institutions. These natural enemies of the family never cease trying to bring it under their control.

Contrary to the popular wisdom of radicals, feminists, liberationists, and moderates, the relationship between the Christian church and the family has been marked by a high degree of ambiguity. At the very heart of the Christian vision of life is a tendency to elevate Christian asceticism and the ideal of celibacy over marriage, dedication to spouses, parents, and children. The Sermon on the Mount, says the author, "is a wonderful, intoxicating sermon. But it is a sermon for bachelors." And although there have been repeated attempts—by, for example, Thomas Aquinas—to integrate the family within the church, this fundamental ambivalence toward the family persists into our time. The church itself these days is challenged from within by radicals, feminists, and homosexuals, who rail against the intermeshing of church and family. But Mr. Mount reviews declarations of various denominations—Church of England, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Baptist—and says, "if we compare the tolerance and compassion extended here to homosexuals and adulterers and the *intolerance* towards those who put their families first, it becomes clear that the underlying attitude of the Church is the same as ever."

The relationship between the family and the state is marked by similar ambiguities. History is replete with examples of the state's attempt to bring the family and its practices under its control. Marxists, Bolsheviks, Fascists, moderates, and conservatives alike clamor for stricter state control over the family. Contrary to social theories, such as that expounded by the Swedish Nobel Prize recipient Alva Myrdahl, that the history of the twentieth century is the history of increased state control over the family, Mr. Mount finds that "the history of liberal regimes in the West since the mid-nineteenth century has been a story of gradual but accelerating relaxation of control"—a process that to his mind is all to the good of the family. But the belief that it is the state's business to control marriage and divorce dies hard. Witness demands, voiced recently with considerable persistence in Western societies, that it is the state's obligation to shore up a family "in crisis."

Only gradually is the family *qua* family beginning to impose its own terms, he argues, and is thus finally in a

position to shed its subservient role. As the age of the "ordinary family" (a term Mr. Mount uses interchangeably with "working class") is about to dawn, as people begin to have confidence in their experience and take hold of their own lives, and not to be afraid of deducing moral values from their instincts and common sense, they can escape from the "underground rebellion" they have been forced into throughout history. At this point ordinary people will be able to oppose the immense networks of control erected around them, allegedly on their behalf.

How this dynamic process is to take effect and whether there is tangible evidence that such a process is at work, however, Mr. Mount fails to specify. In speaking of the "family's permanent revolution against the state and of the working-class family as the only true revolutionary class," he has no compunctions about stealing some of Marx's thunder for his own conservative vision. The

---

*. . . the belief that it is the state's business to control marriage and divorce dies hard. Witness demands . . . to shore up a family "in crisis."*

---

kind of fierce loyalty the ordinary man holds toward his family, his down-to-earth private attitudes, his way of deliberately and consciously choosing in order to protect and provide a better life for his family—these are supreme to the author. In a libertarian-conservative vein, he maintains that community spirit is a natural by-product of familial arrangements that "fit in with the wishes and serve the private ends of the individuals concerned." In a brilliant discourse against the manic preoccupation with new communal forms based on sentiments of fraternity (brotherhood, sisterhood, etc.) Mr. Mount presents a provocative and, to my knowledge, original argument. The elevation of fraternity over the family is nothing new: "Fraternity permeates both the Christian and the Marxist hope, lends warmth to liberalism and dogma to the anarchist." In reasoning that "brotherhood has been selected as the image of perfection not because it represents the family at its best but because it is the family at its least familial," he is able to penetrate to the core of the passionate antagonism that has characterized the most recent assault on the family. For what is at stake today is the weakening of the social bond, in Mr. Mount's own terms "the dilution of fraternity."

### Watered Wine

If this image of fraternity becomes and remains a binding normative image, a new social paradigm will be enthroned, one in which innate tendencies toward impermanence, superficiality, indifference, and irresponsibility are contained *in nuce*: ". . . to promise more fraternity in general is to promise a weaker link between each particular pair of brothers. It is a promise to dilute the wine rather than turn the water into wine."

The author's assertion that the family has been and always will be central to individuals is one that contemporary researchers have come to accept, albeit with some reservations. It is therefore important to know what this paramount family looks like and what its distinctive features are. And here again, as Mr. Mount demonstrates, myths abound.

Through the eyes of scholars we have learned to perceive the nuclear family as a historical freak. Although the more extreme formulations of the historical theory of the family, most prominently exemplified by Friedrich Engels, are not shared by most scholars, the fusion of Engels's questionable anthropology with Marx's equally questionable economics has caught the fancy of many modern feminists along with that of more "progressive" social theorists. The nuclear family in this perspective is the product as well as the basis of the capitalist-bourgeois

---

*[He] challenges other fashionable theories like maternal indifference and a distinctive feminine psychology that results from particular social forces.*

---

order of social life, and their rise and fall inextricably intertwined. Family and system mirror each other implicitly as well as explicitly: Both are held to be fundamentally evil and destructive of individuals, cause as well as symptom of each other's failings. To transcend the one, the other must be transcended as well. Even many non-Marxist formulations widely hold the nuclear family to be the product of the political economy of the bourgeois-capitalist order. As the latter slips into chaos, the former will weaken and decay, or so the argument goes. Indeed, it is precisely assumptions along these lines that continue to inform contemporary policymakers in their efforts to supplement and provide alternatives to the nuclear family in crisis.

In *The Subversive Family* Ferdinand Mount manages to render a fatal blow to the central myth of the singularity of the nuclear family. He also casts doubt on some of the subsidiary myths surrounding it. The nuclear family, he says, is not a historical freak but the common practice (when permitted) and the norm in Western history from antiquity to the present. The extended family (several generations of various degrees of kin-relationship living under one roof) has never been a dominant pattern in the West. The author challenges other fashionable theories, like maternal indifference and a distinctive feminine psychology that results from particular social forces. Countering the fashionable ideas about divorce and its effects, he declares that the rising divorce rate serves to strengthen rather than weaken the institution of family.

Undoubtedly, the materials selected by Mr. Mount, the plausibility and the viability of his inferences, and above all, the new public vision of the normative role of

the ordinary family will evoke a good deal of controversy. I, for one, certainly have a good number of problems with this admittedly fascinating treatise. My problems, in the main, relate not so much to his individual expositions—although some are rather selective and fragmentary indeed—as to the basic theoretical position underlying all of his arguments.

### The Bourgeois Family

His basic position, that little has changed in the human condition, seriously underestimates the distinctiveness of our modern age. Not only does he underestimate the effect of the peculiar features of industrial technocracy, the role of the modern economy, the media, and the like, but his conception of the modern state and its immense powers is distinctly misleading. The relationship between the state and the family in contemporary society is by no means as simple as Mr. Mount makes it out to be. He ignores the impact of such diverse forces as the surge of new political pressure groups, the particularly novel role of the expansionary professional empires (legal, medical, therapeutic, educational), which along with other macrostructures impinge on the modern family and vie with the state—and through the state—for greater control over the family. It is misleading to argue that this is the age-old tug-of-war between state and family. Ignored, too, are powerful influences on the family flowing from the emergence of such peculiarly modern phenomena as the new individualism and the search for communal ties, to mention just two.

Above all, Mr. Mount fails to see the peculiar role of the bourgeois family, which is a distinctively modern expression of the nuclear family he rightly argues to have been common throughout Western history. In his impressive marshalling of diverse historical materials, very little is said about the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—precisely that period that witnessed the rise of the bourgeois family and the victory of its ideal. Yet the recent assault on the family has been precisely directed against this type of family. In failing to perceive the normative role of the nuclear family in its bourgeois form and the unique balancing act it performed between individual autonomy and community responsibility, and the peculiar role of religion and capitalism in all of this, Mr. Mount fails to perceive that ordinary families, the heroes of his treatise, are inspired today by fundamentally bourgeois sentiments, values, and hopes.

Perhaps the most serious shortcoming is the author's failure to explore the implications of his basic tenets for public policy. It would be good, indeed, to hear from the author himself. If the vision he formulates is taken seriously, and I hope it will be, it is likely to prompt much-needed dialogue on the family. Previous examinations of the family have yielded little insight, and the resulting dialogues have now grown so tiresome and stale. If Mr. Mount's book breathes new life into the subject of the family, it will benefit not only academics, politicians, and policymakers, but also the majority of ordinary people who desire to gain a hearing for their practices, their values, and their hopes.

Brigitte Berger



# The Static Theory of Progress

**Progress and Privilege: America in the Age of Environmentalism.** By William Tucker. (Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1982) \$17.95.

**Building a Sustainable Society.** By Lester R. Brown. (W. W. Norton, 1981) \$6.95.

**The Ultimate Resource.** By Julian L. Simon. (Princeton University Press, 1981) \$14.50 hardcover, or \$7.95 paperback.

In the old days the environment (*née* nature) used to look after itself. Nature seemed sometimes to be a bountiful friend, at other times a malicious foe, but never a victim needing to be protected by man against man. Today, however, prophets warn us that nature is a dying invalid, sick with overcrowding, exhaustion of energy, overheating of its air, poisoning of its water, extinction of its species, and disturbance of its ecological systems. If this is true, we should be intensely concerned: Without an environment, man would be nowhere.

So rapid a reversal—for environmentalism is only twenty years old—is a cause for wonder. Why did many people suddenly begin to believe that the environment was ailing? What do they recommend as a cure? And how accurate is their diagnosis?

Leading episodes in the evolution of environmentalism are given brisk and thorough journalistic treatment by William Tucker. He shows, for instance, that the forecast of doom—that the world's population would before long overshoot the world's "carrying capacity," whereupon masses of people would die off—published in the Club of Rome's famous report, "The Limits of Growth" (1972), merely projected the pessimistic assumptions that Dennis Meadows and his colleagues had built into the model that guided their computer. He shows further that in a second report by the Club of Rome, published only four years later, a new team of computer experts rejected much of the first report and in fact came out for more rather than less economic growth. Elsewhere Mr. Tucker describes in detail how provincial politicians and "concerned" scientists almost stifled research in genetic engineering on the grounds that it *might* be dangerous (presumably unlike all other human activities). He recounts also the activities of the wilderness lobby, according to whom nature can remain natural only if human beings are kept away from it—as though man, alone among living things, were not part of nature.

Mr. Tucker's own attitude toward all of this is mixed. In environmentalism he detects two strands: preservationism, which he rejects, and conservationism, which he endorses. That is, he disapproves of the view that nature should be kept forever unsullied; he believes, on the contrary, that men should use nature, not exploiting it senselessly and wastefully, but using it in rational ways to

serve man's ends. Recognizing rightly that environmentalists envision a great struggle between nature and man, he regularly comes down on the side of man—as when, for instance, he writes, "We should extend our moral concerns to plants, trees, and animals, *but not at the expense of human beings.*"

Far less satisfactory is Mr. Tucker's sociological interpretation of the environmentalist debate, which he characterizes as a struggle between privilege and progress. Always and everywhere, he believes, those people who are well off want things to be kept unchanged. This basic motive comes to be rationalized as the ethos of what Mr. Tucker calls "aristocratic conservatism": a preference for moral over material values and for gentleness over crass vitality. Accordingly, conservatives become conservationists. They deify nature as the embodiment of permanence and spiritual purity, and they condemn money-makers, speculators, and businessmen, who, as they see it, are fighting an "unrelenting war on nature." Opposed to these privileged conservatives stand all those who, being relatively disadvantaged, want progress, by which the author means economic growth. In America today, according to Mr. Tucker, progress is supported by

---

*If people understood clearly what  
would promote their private interests  
and always acted accordingly, the  
world would be simpler than it is . . .*

---

blacks, labor union members, Neo-Populists, and rising businessmen; the supporters of privilege are the possessors of old wealth and the upper-middle class, consisting of professionals, salaried persons, and bureaucrats. The latter, according to Mr. Tucker, invented environmentalism, the current model of preservationist conservationism, the underlying spirit of which is illustrated in the comment made a hundred years ago by George Perkins Marsh: "wherever [man] plants his foot, the harmonies of nature are turned to discords."

Mr. Tucker's analysis of the sociology of environmentalism, not always easy to follow, is in my view far from persuasive. Plausible as it might seem that people who are well off would resist change (though it is not plausible that they would resist changes expected to fortify or improve their position), nevertheless the historical record shows that in fact many such people have been among the leaders and followers of revolution and reform. It may well be, as the author asserts, that the bulk of the American upper-middle class (assuming, for the sake of the argument, that such a thing really exists) supports environmentalism; yet it also supports any number of non-conservative causes, such as egalitarian redistribution, foreign aid, economic planning, and détente, as well as, I suppose, socialized medicine, disarmament, and feminism. In the same way, the disadvantaged, who by Tucker's reckoning ought rationally to support progress,