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Fractured Generations

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Allan Carlson, *Fractured Generations: Crafting a Family Policy for Twenty-First-Century America* (Transaction Publishers, 2005).

What becomes of the family when there is nothing concrete left to bind together husband and wife, father and son, brother and sister, save for emotion or companionship? What happens to a family when each member departs for the greater part of the day for his or her own job, schooling or childcare, coming back together only in the evening, with the result that any common life that exists between the members revolves primarily around shared leisure activities or, more rarely, a shared meal? How can such a family be united without a common mission, a *transmission* of tradition and culture through the incarnate realities of work, learning and caring, activities which must take place in that specific and *shared* time and place which we call a home? What, in other words, is the fate of the modern "functionless family"?

This, I would argue, is the overriding question that emerges from Allan Carlson's *Fractured Generations*. Begun as a series of lectures on "Family Policy," the book deals with the history of marriage and family, primarily in twentieth-century America, especially through the lens of changing public policy. Specifically, the various chapters treat the issues of population policy, childcare, schooling, suburbia, tax policy, the home economy, and elderly care. While the book suffers somewhat from the lack of an overarching, comprehensive argument regarding changes in family policy, an underlying unity shines through as one continues to make one's way through the work. In particular, it becomes clear that Carlson sees the chief problem as a continual loss of the specific functions of the family to either the welfare state or to big business (which often work together in conjunction with one another), a loss which is particularly grievous when it comes to tasks dealing specifically with persons: care for the young and the elderly and the schooling of children most especially.

Carlson contrasts today's functionless family with the family as it existed throughout most of the history of the world, including nineteenth-century America, when ninety percent of the populace worked small family farms and most of the other ten percent worked as artisans or craftsmen. In such an economic situation, most tasks occurred within the household and local community: the growth and preparation of food; the making of clothing; the construction and maintenance of shelter; education, such as it was; basic health care, etc. Husband and wife both worked in and around the home, as did the children, specializing in various ways and yet working together toward a common goal. This situation changed, of course, with the advent of the industrial revolution: not only were various family tasks siphoned off to the factory, but the labor of the family as a whole was divided, with men, women, and children pulled apart and put to work in different factories based upon their different aptitudes. Carlson cites an early feminist author in this connection, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who wrote that, even in 1899, the tasks of the once productive family had been reduced to only three: cooking, cleaning,

and early childcare. Tellingly, Gilman saw no reason why even these three functions could not also be industrialized: and, arguably, that is exactly what has occurred.

The development of industrial capitalism also makes it no longer economically beneficial to have children: according to Gary Becker and the Chicago School, current fertility rates have declined as the "price" of children, including the "market value" of the time spent on each child, has risen, while the economic benefits children provide in terms of labor has dropped. Carlson notes, however, that this account is not quite accurate, since fertility rates did not begin to decline immediately coincident with the rise of industrial capitalism. Rather, Carlson argues, together with John Caldwell, that fertility declined with a change in *schooling*: according to statistics, "Each additional month that rural children spent in school decreased family size in that district by 23 children." What could explain this connection between increased education and decreased fertility? The answer, Carlson surmises, is that through mass public education new inimical *ideas* about the family were introduced.

Indeed, throughout the book as a whole Carlson makes the larger point that it is not material conditions but ideological ones that account for the damage the American family has sustained in terms of declining births in children, fewer marriages, rising divorce, etc. It is right and important, I think, that Carlson recognizes the underlying cause as a change in how we understand reality. The book, in fact, makes clear in quite concrete ways the manner in which our self-proclaimed neutral government is in fact always "legislating morality," consciously or not, subtly shaping the ways in which we think about marriage, children, the home, and indeed freedom and morality itself. To take an extreme example, this is evident in the population policies put in place at the end of the Nixon era, codified especially in health care policy *Title X*, which in response to neo-Malthusian fears, explicitly sought to create an "anti-natalist" mentality. It is evident in housing laws which either favor young married couples or elect not to do so, and which determined, through architecture and zoning, whether houses should operate on a "functional" model or a "companionship" model. It is evident in tax laws which at times have penalized married couples who file jointly, and which either directly reward or indirectly punish having children, through raising or lowering the personal exemption that can be claimed and the tax credits which are made available.

Unfortunately, Carlson to some extent follows a familiar and by now worn line in laying most of the responsibility for America's anti-family policies at the feet of an immoral elite, such as equity feminists, neo-Malthusians, sexual revolutionaries, and militant secularists. Carlson sets these thinkers against America's "natural religiosity" and the general normative strength of the family, which was simply taken for granted throughout most of our history. He argues, for example, that in the face of the industrial revolution and the consumerist individualism it induced, Americans still held onto the importance of the family despite strained economic circumstances. According to Carlson, there was a deliberate shift in the first part of the twentieth century to a breadwinner/homemaker model, in which women by custom and consent took part-time and lower paying jobs in order to be able to remain at home with their children, thus enabling the men to earn a higher "family wage" that could support the family as a whole. As Carlson paints it, then, gender inequality in the workplace during the middle part of the century was not simply a byproduct of a bigoted age, but was deliberately engaged in as a means of keeping some semblance of communal family life in the face of industrial capitalism.

Today, of course, it is commonplace for both parents to work outside the home and to try to care for their children simultaneously, and the author sees this as a grave problem for the waning strength of the American family. The modern-day solution is a childcare system which, according to the data, results in children with far more health issues and psychological problems. Carlson instead advocates the return, as much as possible, of *both* parents to the home, as an attempt to re-functionalize the

family, through telecommuting, for example, or home offices or clinics. In particular, he sees homeschooling as an important first step in this direction, and notes that families who homeschool are vastly more likely to have only one parent working, enabling them to try their hand at vegetable gardening or even small animal husbandry. In keeping with the focus of the book, Carlson also advocates policy-level solutions, particularly in the area of tax policy: for example, reintroducing full "income splitting" in the federal income tax, raising the level of the personal income-tax exemption for children (which historically has been shown to correlate with increased fertility), and giving tax credits for homeschooling education expenses and to families that choose to raise their young children at home (currently tax credits are given only for those who use day-care).

Fractured Generations provides much information on the history of the family and public policy that is stimulating and at times surprising. If there is a shortcoming to the book, it is that Carlson perhaps does not think deeply enough about the nature of American individualism and our peculiar "anti-natalism," attributing it too quickly to the ideas of the immoral elites mentioned above. In contrast, we should think, e.g. with David L. Schindler, about the way in which the very notions of liberty and the autonomy of the self, which are the grounds for the American political system, themselves betray a certain anti-childness.

Likewise, we need to recognize that change cannot simply occur, or occur first, at the policy level, but needs to begin with a change in heart and most especially in *understanding* of each person. (Carlson himself explicitly recognizes this fact when dealing with the issue of reforming public school policy.) While recognizing the focus of the book on public policy issues and the kind of limits such a focus implies, I would argue that the symptoms (e.g., falling fertility rates) and solutions (e.g., tax breaks) to the problems facing the family which Carlson puts forward need to be engaged at a much deeper cultural level. At the same time, as indicated above, the author does make clear through the statistics, history, and facts he provides the manner in which our overall cultural stance toward reality - the underlying metaphysics and theology implicit in our culture - is concretely manifest in a myriad of various ways.

Finally, I would want to push Carlson a bit further in his claim that industrialization, while representing a "misplaced quest for efficiency and profit" in services dealing with *persons* (e.g., child or elderly care), nonetheless "works miraculously well when the products are light bulbs and automobiles." Rather, I would argue that our current economic system instantiates a kind of instrumentalism in our economic dealings with *things* - which of course, incidentally, are always also dealings with persons - that both reflects and redounds upon the nature of *persons*, and particularly upon the nature of the family as a haven for the "useless" intrinsic goodness of persons as represented in children and the elderly. In this way, the reformation of something like an authentic family economy which Carlson calls for, in whatever specific form that might take, will have an impact far beyond the family, helping to reshape how it is that we understand both our relationship to the natural material world and our relationship to others, both inside the family and beyond its bounds.

