

June 2003

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Welcome to the June 2003 Discussion Board

Author: [Shannon Mason](#) (---.uchicago.edu)

Date: 06-02-03 16:39

Welcome to the discussion board. We invite you to use this space to post reflections, comments, or questions in response to Don Browning's commentary "Critical Familism, Civil Society and the Law" and in response to the comments of Amy Laura Hall.

If you wish to review these articles, please visit the web forum pages on the Martin Marty Center web site at <http://marty-center.uchicago.edu/webforum>.

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Re: Welcome to the June 2003 Discussion Board

Author: [mari stitt](#) (---.tc.ph.cox.net)

Date: 06-18-03 15:48

The last sociology class I taught was sociology of the family. I told the Dean it could not be taught because no one knew what was happening -- we managed to find plenty to learn and one of the major insights was the need within the family to learn the discipline of dialogue.

I just printed up Browning's comments and the two in response, looking forward to studying them. The internet surely improves the life of this 80 year old! thank you
mari

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Media Reporting on Same-sex marriage

Author: Mark Schneider (---.northwestern.edu)

Date: 06-19-03 09:55

As a simple journalist (and for the time being, an instructor of journalism) I have tried to grasp the fundamental points of what Prof. Browning means by Critical Familism. I take it that he argues for a post-modern family that is deeply informed and gently guided by religious traditions and wisdom. I think he must believe that his is a more nuanced, and 'modern' view than that espoused by Focus on the Family, for example.

But what would Prof. Browning say if a pack of reporters descended on his office demanding answers about his position on same-sex marriage? I am not sure his wish not to "become buried in the legal details" would do

him much good. Just as religion and society are entwined by "complex interweavings", so too are civil society, government, and the law.

In Canada, where I come from, appeal courts have now ruled that existing marriage law denies same-sex couples the basic human right of equality before the law. In both Ontario and British Columbia, these courts have now permitted same-sex civil marriages to go ahead, using the "slippery slope" argument that if we abridge civil rights of gays and lesbians, it might sanction and give comfort to bigots, and promote hate crime.

Here we have two competing efforts to "dignify" human society, in collision.

I can easily imagine someone arguing thusly: "As a person who wishes to have my relationship with my same-sex partner recognized by civil society (and sanctified in a church), Critical Familism can be of great benefit in helping to shape my same-sex family. Please, Prof. Browning, allow us the dignity of being included in your magnificent effort to reclaim the family from the ravages of modernity."

Sincerely,

Mark Schneider
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Re: Media Reporting on Same-sex marriage

Author: [James Anderson](#) (---.proxy.aol.com)

Date: 06-19-03 13:00

I have been following the recent developments in Canada and also those in the U.S. relative to same sex marriages. I believe the "slippery slope" is not one toward further bigotry, etc., as it is of further undermining the institution of marriage, an institution that transcends cultures and is a product of complex historical development and traditions. Marriage should not be minimized or marginalized for the sake of political expediency to accommodate the aims of a relative few. The so-called "majority view" on the subject in certain quarters may, in fact, be only a temporary phenomenon as more people begin to learn and understand more fully the implications on family life, community, etc. Respecting individual rights is something we all ought to be concerned about, but we should do so with both reason and compassion, not knee-jerk reactions to prevailing political winds or narrow agendas. While I may not entirely agree with how the State of Vermont has dealt with this subject, I think it is a much more temperate, wiser and less risky course where individual rights can be protected for same sex partners without damaging or trivializing the institution of marriage. I would hope that Canada fully considers all of the ramifications and implications of legalizing marriage for same sex partners before it acts. I believe that if it does not, it could well undermine the character of its society rather than enriching it. This is a very serious matter that demands extreme caution and circumspection.

Respectfully,

James N. Anderson
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520/399-3336

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Re: Welcome to the June 2003 Discussion Board

Author: [mari stitt](#) (---.tc.ph.cox.net)
Date: 06-24-03 13:13

Why is it not possible to preserve the sanctity of marriage between a man and woman who intend to have children and a rooted family and also sanctify a loving relationship that parallels but is not the same between any two other persons? As I understand Browning his emphasis is on the need to have stable homes for children.

As we follow the social tides which respond to contemporary issues and needs we can stay open without diminishing the utmost respect for the traditional family, altering roles as Browning suggests. It was C Wright Mills who said the roles have been too limited. -- mari

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Critical Familism and Children

Author: [John Wall](#) (---.rutgers.edu)
Date: 06-26-03 13:53

It struck me while reading Don Browning's excellent defense of "critical familism" that the context in which it was given needs more careful consideration. Amy Laura Hall's commentary begins to do this. But I wondered in the end whether Browning and his dialogue partner at the American Law Institute, Martha Fineman, are asking exactly the same question.

As Browning himself admits, there is a difference between questions of culture and questions of law, although of course these also intersect. But there may also be a difference between asking what is best for marriage and what is best for children, even if again they overlap. Marriage, as Browning and others have shown, is clearly on average good for children, not least because of the financial, social, and emotional resources it brings to child rearing. But Fineman's concern, as I take it (not, admittedly, having heard her remarks), has to do with protecting children in and of themselves, an appropriate concern for the law to take up.

The market economy that Browning rightly identifies as one of the largest problems for marriage today is also a problem directly for children, who unlike in most of history now no longer contribute to it or make a wage, but are pure consumers. Children have gone from full membership in the work economy through feudalism and agriculture to gradually lengthened delays through the increased education needed for work in industrial and post-industrial societies (as well as changing cultural attitudes toward "childhood"). Clearly one way to assist

children economically today is for the law to help strengthen, or at least protect, marriage. But another way is also to help children in their own right, and this should involve not only decent funding for schooling, universal child health care, and so forth, but also legal protections for and economic support of parenting.

The challenge from the point of view of children today, then, is how at once to revitalize marriage AND deal with the economic repercussions of children's alienation from today's market economy. Otherwise children are doubly impoverished (and they are already the poorest segment of America today). The Judeo-Christian languages of covenant and subsidiarity seem like good places to start -- perhaps better than the relatively thinner languages of rights -- in putting these somewhat different questions together.

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Re: Critical Familism and Children

Author: [Amy Laura Hall](#) (---.nc.rr.com)

Date: 06-30-03 20:29

John Wall's contribution to this discussion is quite helpful. If we add to his careful analysis of the broad changes in childhood and the market the present problem of a generation ill-prepared to care for their own children, it seems the time is ripe for change. Encouraged as mere consumers (from McDonald's toddlerhood to MTV teenagers) my own generation of the middle and upper-middle classes arguably has a diminished capacity for parenting. The job market continues to encourage the separation of family and work, with ever-lengthening workdays and shorter vacations, spinning the cycle of child-avoidance among the decision-making classes. I have heard John speak to the theological resources for setting childhood and parenting within the context of a church and civil community, and his is a promising account.

For whatever it is worth, I predict that the generation behind my own will have even more need for holy prompting on these matters. Teaching undergraduates at Duke is quite disheartening, as they value most dearly the virtues of "independence" and "strength." It is hard to approximate either of these while carrying a baby or tending to a small child. While I have not seen the episodes, a family member tells me that the all-beloved Friends have offered a stunningly shallow presentation of new parenting. It seems that the build-up to birth was exciting, young adult worthy material, with cute pregnancy clothes and babygap purchases. Now, when the buff beauties and their gel-haired beaus would in reality be faced with spitting up, crying, and the like, the new mother and father are shown consistently, sans infant, sipping chai tea in the coffee shop. It is a tempting vision of perpetual, unencumbered consumption, and one that fits so well with the expectations of the mall-me generation.

In sum, I look forward to John Wall's reconfiguration of the parental imagination, and I pray it will take root even in this unpromising soil. All things are possible with grace.

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Re: Welcome to the June 2003 Discussion Board

Author: [Gary Hogue](#) (---.236.241.94.gha.mi.chartermi.net)

Date: 07-06-03 21:58

I just participated in memorial service for my wife's 96 year old Aunt. Her stable home provided key support over many years to her four daughters and their children by offering her basement for the numerous crises they faced, especially the grandchildren as they moved through the rocky 16-22 age span in the midst of their mothers' multiple divorces. Being with these eight grandchildren and numerous great grandchildren in the last few days and seeing the huge array of problems facing the daughters, their children and grandchildren is enough to make one weep. With the grandmother gone, there is no home for any member of this extended family to go to when physical health or relationships fracture. The grandchildren are made up of single parents, a gay couple, multiple divorces, two never married with kids, and two marriages. When the Aunt's husband died, she remained focused on helping her daughters and their families, and she provided stability. The daughters and their children are the new paradigm, which leaves the next generation floundering. There is no one to turn to when sickness and turmoil hit. Don Browning's book hit the bullseye in terms of the need to slow down the destruction of family life. Yes, both cultural and economic forces are eroding the bonds of family, and sadly, the worst is yet to come. Meanwhile, Bellah's expressive individualism rules the hearts and minds of popular American culture.

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Re: Critical Familism and Children

Author: [deanna pikkov](#) (---.cpe.net.cable.rogers.com)

Date: 12-14-04 12:27

I just want to say how much I enjoyed this dialogue. I had googled 'familism' because I am writing a paper on Tocqueville and his modern champion Putnam, and alarms went off when Putnam set up an opposition between the 'amoral familism' of the Italian South and the civic engagement of the North. Tocqueville himself was more careful, understanding that in the (slightly fantasized) 'America' about which he wrote, the family provided a strong, complementary base for the associations, both civil and political, that provided such advantage to the country. Putnam's claim that "force and family provide a primitive substitute for the civic community" shows a typical underestimation and neglect of the family in modern mainstream scholarship. Surely family is itself an association - and like other associations can differ along a democratic/authoritarian axis, as well as in the extent to which it is functional and intact, and these differences have consequences. It is downright stupid to simply oppose family and society (sorry Robert - I really liked the book otherwise). The point is: why are these issues intelligently discussed in only the quietest of corners and nooks?

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