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Toward a Theory Of the Autonomous Family

by

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Author's note: Nearly a decade ago, I was invited to write an essay on the nature of the "fully traditional family." The following is a new version of that effort. Rather than a description of the current American social system, it might be seen as a vision of an alternate reality: one that might have existed before, one that may exist in some places today, and one that could exist again.

Traditionalist society rests on submission to the Divine spirit and will. Its members find these manifested in human nature and in the order of Creation. All social constructs strive for harmony with Divine intent.

The First Societal Bond: Marriage

Civil society builds on marriage, the first and most crucial social bond. Marriage holds these distinctions for it is natural and self-renewing, rooted in the mutual attraction of man to woman and woman to man, both of whom feel their incompleteness when existing alone. They come together, of necessity, so that the human species might endure. Most cultures place marriage at or near the center of elaborate religious ritual, but the marital institution can be found even among animist societies, testifying to its universality.

In this sense, marriage is a true anarchist institution.¹ It exists prior to other human bonds, be they clan, village, city, state, or nation, and it has the endless capacity for renewal, even in periods of persecution, social

decline, or moral degradation. In the modern age, each new marriage is an affirmation of life, love (real or potential), and continuity against the darkness which threatens to overwhelm the human spirit. Every new marriage is an act of rebellion against ambitious political and ideological powers that would reduce human activity to their purposes. And each marriage contains within it the power of biological reproduction, a throw of the genetic dice that brings to life new beings, unique and unpredictable in their details.

Marriage bears a special power, as well. Equal in dignity before their Creator, man and woman each hold special gifts, profound and powerful differences in thought, action, and skills. This complementarity transforms their union into something far greater than the sum of its parts.

At the same time, marriage forms the foundation on which humans build other social bonds. Marriage is, at one level, a covenant between two individuals, a man and a woman who agree to give each other mutual care, respect, and protection, and who open their future to the life issuing from their sexual union. Marriage can fulfill this role, and function properly, only when the bond is normatively indissoluble. Without that mutual promise, the efforts toward forming "one flesh" of man and woman remain tentative. The marital partners, out of fear for the future, will withhold some part of their investment of time and energy into the marriage. The promise of indissolubility alone encourages the man and woman to negotiate their way through the great differences between them in mind and body and to bring some resolution to their common life. Incompleteness in the promise operates as would a crack in the foundation of a great edifice, spreading with the passage of time.²

Each marriage is also a covenant between the couple and their kin. In marriage, two families merge in a manner that perpetuates and invigorates both. Even in the denatured societies of the modern West, family members will travel great distances to attend the wedding of a cousin, nephew, or niece, still recognizing through residual instinct the importance of both the promise and the event to their own identity and continuity.

More broadly, marriage is the solution to human society's universal dependency problem. Every community must resolve the same issues: who will care for the very young, the very old, the weak, and the infirm? How shall the rewards given to productive adults be shared with those who are not or cannot be productive? In the natural human order, these tasks fall on kin networks where spouses care for each other "in sickness or in health," where parents nurture, train, and protect their offspring until they are able to create marriages of their own; where the aged enjoy care, purpose, and respect around the hearth of their grown children; and where kin insure that no family member falls through the family's safety net. Acceptance of

these duties passes from generation to generation, as each child views the treatment bestowed by his parents on his grandparents, great aunts and uncles, and so on. These observations teach children, as well, the duty and necessity of begetting their own children, so that the chain of obligation within a family might not be broken.

Marriage is also a covenant between the couple and the broader community. Procreation within marriage offers the best promise of new community members who will be supported and trained by parents without being a charge on others and who will grow into responsible adults able to contribute to the community's well-being. Predictably, children reared within marriage will be healthier, brighter, harder working, and more honest, dutiful, and cooperative than those raised in other ways. They will be more likely to acquire useful skills and knowledge and less likely to slide into violent, abusive, or self-destructive behaviors. As such, each marriage represents the renewal of a community through the promise of responsible new members to come, which is why every healthy human society invests so much ceremony and rhetoric in the event and why an array of informal pressures strive to hold the marriage together. These are symbols to the husband and wife of the solemn importance that this event holds to neighbors beyond their intimate relationship and kin. Humans instinctively understand that the strength of their community is dependent, in the end, on the strength of their marriages. If the marital institution weakens – or worse, if it is politicized and subordinated to ideology – then the social pathologies of suicide, crime, abuse, poor health, and crippling dependency surely follow. If continued over several generations, these pathologies born from the decay of wedlock will consume the community itself.

The Second Natural Bond: The Household

Marriage, in turn, creates a new household. When gathered together, these form the second institutional tier in natural social life and the one on which all political life is built. The household will normally encompass the wedded man and woman, their children, and aged or unmarried kin. Successful households are the natural reservoir of liberty. They aim at autonomy or independence, enabling their members to resist oppression, survive economic, social, and political turbulence, and renew the world after troubles have passed. Complete households have the power to shelter, feed, clothe, and protect their members in the absence of both state and corporate largesse. Such independence from outside agency is the true mark of liberty, making possible in turn the self-government of communities. Households functionally dependent on wages, benefits, and services provided by outside agency or state have surrendered some of their natural liberty and have accepted a kind of dependency indistinguishable at its

roots from servanthood. Independence requires that responsible adults in a household be able to forego these forms of support, if necessary, and still be able to insure the survival of themselves and other household members.

The basic human need for functional independence in food, clothing, and shelter dictates the eternal importance both of a household's bond to the land and of husbandry skills. Autonomy requires, at the least, the capacity to produce a regular supply of food and the ability to preserve a substantial share of this bounty for consumption during the adverse seasons. The keeping of grazing and meat-producing animals adds further to the independence of households and their ability to survive wars, famines, stock market crashes, depression, inflation, and bad government. In arable climates, intensive cultivation of even a few acres of land can provide the necessary bounty that delivers such autonomy; five to 20 acres of soil and timber offer an independence more sure and complete.

Accordingly, traditionalist society views land, particularly arable land, as different in kind from other commodities. The most critical of social, political, and economic tasks becomes the appropriate partition, distribution, and use of the land, where ownership is spread as widely as possible, and where freedom of use is conditioned by a responsible stewardship toward future generations. Both of these principles dictate the need for active measures to forestall the complete industrialization of agriculture. This event would sharply reduce the number of persons in contact with the soil, undermine a political structure of ordered liberty, and bring the deterioration of soil and people.

Attachment to growing things and to the soil also brings the human spirit into synchronization with the rhythm of the seasons and the beauty of the natural world. It means contact with the wind, rain, and the living fertility of the soil. Familiarity with domesticated animals, a defining feature of civilized human life from the beginning, also delivers a natural wisdom unobtainable in any other way.

The Power of Household Production

Together with land, the autonomous household also needs control over the means of production. The industrial revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries, dependent on balky power sources such as flowing water and the steam engine, gave a monopoly on power to centralized factories and stimulated the "great divorce" of work from home. This shattered the traditional order of the family farm and village. The 20th century, however, delivered successive waves of new technologies which have potentially returned "power," in both senses of that word, to the household economy. Innovations included electric generators and motors, the internal combustion engine, and the photovoltaic cell. Each of these allows the household to apply power to productive work in the homestead. The

household computer is another valuable tool once confined to large central work units, but now available for decentralized use. Where the competitive advantage in the 19th century clearly lay with the industrial factory, the homestead has improved prospects at the dawn of the 21st century. Remaining apparent disadvantages often derive from marketing and distributive manipulations that distort real price, or from the corruption of the marketplace by powerful interests.³

Rejecting an extreme division of labor, traditional society also focuses on generalized skill and the well-rounded human life. It celebrates and rewards craftsmanship, the creative application of human intellect to the fashioning of useful devices. It encourages self-sufficiency.

Young people should learn the basic skills of husbandry and housewifery: carpentry, gardening, the preparation and preservation of food, fabric and clothing production. Every household also needs to be equipped with ownership of basic tools: the implements needed to grow food; the utensils to process and store produce; the hand and power tools necessary to build and repair shelter and to make clothing; and the transportation vehicles, communication devices, and information storage and processing units necessary to engage in the world of commerce. Whenever possible, householders should employ devices they can comprehend, assemble, and repair themselves. Again whenever possible, the sources of power should be renewable and independent of outside suppliers, giving further security to the household, particularly in times of emergency and crisis.

Each household also requires an authority structure, where all family members defer to the wisdom of elders and where children defer to the guidance of parents. In the healthy civic order, all other loyalties are subordinated to or mediated through this household structure.

A central function of the household is the education of children, for which parents, supplemented by extended kin, are responsible. The household bears the obligation and natural authority to transmit to children the spiritual doctrines and beliefs of the family, the customs and folkways by which the household lives, the practical skills necessary for the later creation and sustenance of new households, and the knowledge required for successful engagement in the world of commerce. While outside agencies, such as apprenticeships and parent-controlled schools, may be usefully employed for part of these tasks, those households fail which abdicate the bulk of them to others. The education of children, properly engaged, must be home-centered, where parents impart their visions, values, virtues, and skills to the new generation.

Relative to the world, each household exists as a small collective, organized on the principle of altruism. The members of a household share with each other on the basis of love and altruism without any accounting of

individual gain or loss. Under some circumstances, this same principle of justice may extend to other kin, or even to small communities, where the generosity and altruism can be tempered by a practical knowledge of individual character and the discipline which a tight-knit community can bring to bear on its members. This form of small scale organization may exact a price through the loss of efficiency, but it more than recovers this cost through the emotional rewards that household and community life bring.

The Third Societal Bond: The Community

Indeed, the village, town, tribe, or neighborhood forms the next layer of order. A broad society of households allows for the diversification and specialization of skills within a context of general competence and an expectation of fair exchange. Such collectives operate best when bonded by other affections: a common religious faith; a shared ethnicity; a binding sense of history; the intermingling of a relatively small number of kin groups. Within such communities, the individual internalizes restraints on behavior and ambition, recognizing the threat posed by any form of abrupt innovation. In this level of civic order, children receive a kind of communal rearing, where the sharp edges or peculiarities found in each household can be tempered. Such close community also offers the only effective protection of individuals from pathologies within households, allowing social intervention to occur without threatening the normative pattern of family living. The town, tribe, or neighborhood imparts to the young the duties which constitute membership in a community and models of behavior and rectitude beyond those found in one's immediate household. Public actions are guided most commonly by custom and convention with formal law generally aimed at the regulation of the stranger. When deviance from community norms occurs, informal and non-aggressive measures such as shunning are normally effective in restoring order and bringing the wayward back into harmony with the community.

Leadership at this level of society emerges spontaneously, as persons living in close proximity to each other come to recognize the character strengths and weaknesses of their neighbors, and accept the guidance and wisdom of persons who ably practice both self- and household-governance. They give deference, as well, to the experience of age, a kind of public memory that carries a record of past successes and errors. This natural leadership may be formalized through councils of elders or trustees, or it may be left informal. In either case, the leaders accept the great responsibility of protecting their neighbors from internal or external threats that would subvert the bonds of community. Organized community militias, composed of men who study "the arts of war," provide defense

against open aggression or gross challenges to public safety. The more complex dangers lie in alien ideologies and technologies that would strike at the heart of healthy community life. Community leaders properly judge such ideologies and technologies, and seek to prohibit or restrict those which would damage the basis of community life.

Commerce occurs between households through markets. Communities rely on sentiments of common humanity to soften the rough edges of competition, to insure principles of fair exchange, and to preserve the household basis of the economy. Communities strive to forestall a complete industrialization of human economic and social life. The labor of family members, including that of children, normally occurs within the family enterprise. Some family enterprises grow larger without losing their family character. When employment outside the household develops, customary arrangements control the corrosive effects of competitive wages by limiting such labor to only one household member and by expecting a family-oriented wage in return.

Social life at this level also depends on the attachment of individuals to the landscape in which they grow, live, and act, and to the flora and fauna of their native place. Actions such as walking, fishing, hunting, and gardening secure this bond, creating affection for the physical and biological environment which has, in a way, also given life to the individual. This grounding in a small niche of the natural world is vital to the full development of the human personality and necessary to the attachments which define and hold households and communities together. Deep affection for a place is normally the product of growing up there, whether it be the flat grasslands of an Illinois prairie or the soaring mountains and canyons of Utah. Persons without this sense of native place are left incomplete. They often become perpetual nomads, given to grand visions and ideological constructs designed to fill the emptiness in their hearts.

The Fourth Societal Bond: The State

The next tier of society is the state. It exists to protect households, villages, and their members from external threat and to mediate disputes between households and communities that cannot be resolved at a lower level. Having no fixed metaphysic, the structure of the state can vary from place to place and circumstance to circumstance. The sole guiding principle is the limitation of its power. Natural authority resides in households and communities, where it is conditioned by innate human affections. These entities cede to the state only the minimum authority necessary to keep foreign armies and other alien pressures at bay. Constitutional arrangements need insure, as far as possible, that most

authority remains in local and household hands, that powers granted to the state remain strictly circumscribed, and that leaders of the state be persons of character and self-restraint. Full citizenship in the state is granted to those who fulfill certain obligations: participation in the common defense through membership in the militia; maintenance of personal independence through a productive homestead; ownership of home, land, and tools; marriage, procreation, and acknowledgement of responsibility for the next generation; and acceptance by one's neighbors.

Traditionalist families have existed within monarchies, oligarchies, and republics. Monarchical organization has the important symbolic claim of providing leadership of a society of households by a family household. Oligarchies and republics have the ability to draw from a wider pool of talent and virtue. Republics resting on widely distributed small property constitute true democracy. All three forms of traditionalist governance rely on the body of property owners committed to constitutional duty.

The great danger posed by the state is its propensity to become an end in itself, exercising authority not ceded by the foundational social units, but rather claimed as right. Working to destroy the traditionalist order, this rogue state will assert power to "protect" individuals from the rooted authority of households and communities. It will build "state schools" to impart a state morality. It will create artificial "rights" that bludgeon traditional authority. At its most perverse, this wayward state will set wife against husband, husband against wife, children against parents, and household against household. Aggrandizing its own power, this state will weaken the institution of marriage; subsidize illegitimacy and divorce; seize the dependency functions of care for the young, the old, and the infirm; transfer the concept of "autonomy" from the household to the individual; and invert the meaning of liberty, casting it as the gift of the state. Such actions destroy natural society and erect in its place an order where all individuals become wards of Leviathan. An order of free men becomes a "client society," where bureaucrats minister to the needs of "citizen subjects." Such arrangements invariably bring economic and social decline, since they rest on abstract or imaginary "rights" that are divorced from a sense of duty and from the authentic human affections toward kin and neighbors. Moreover, human "needs" cast under the rubric of "rights" have no real endpoint, and the effort to meet them through social agency will ultimately consume the wealth of a people.

The Broadest Societal Bond: The Nation

The last social tier is the nation. It rests on commonalities that transcend households, communities, and states, among them religious belief, a common morality, language, a shared history, a common

ecosystem, inherited folkways, and blood. The consciousness of nationhood may wax or wane, encouraged at times by rallying voices who remind a people of "their common destiny," discouraged at other times by voices urging "universal brotherhood" or the creation of transnational "empire," or even forgotten during periods of social and political chaos.

"Nation" and "state" are never found in perfect unity. The vagaries of history, jealousy, and chance prevent such an ordering. Yet danger lies in even an incomplete merging of these two social tiers, for such a bond inevitably augments the state's claims against households and communities, by appealing to "the needs of the nation" in a quest for taxes, conscripts, and territory. A sense of nationhood, while necessary to a complete or full social life, is properly mediated through the foundational tiers of state, community, and household. Any attempt by large numbers of individuals to swear first loyalty to the nation, or by the nation to sweep aside the social structures lying between it and the individual, must bring in its wake another form of crisis.

The Unbridled Factor

The wild card in human social relations is the corporation, seen here as an artificial, voluntary union of persons toward some common end. This purpose may be religious (as in a Medieval monastic corporation), economic (as in the modern multinational corporation), or intellectual (as in an academy of sciences). The common characteristic of the corporation is the manner in which it transcends the natural social constructs of family household, community, state, and nation by claiming the direct and primal loyalty of individuals. Persons joining the corporation weaken, or even abandon, their bonds to the tiers of a traditionalist order, accepting a new master.

So understood, corporations appear to have existed in most historical ages. Whether its task be missionary conversion to a faith or the production and sale of a commodity, the corporation is part of the human experience. It serves as an agent of change, disrupting inherited ways, and reordering the context in which natural society operates. Where natural society tends toward stability, each corporation represents a push for instability, for what Joseph Schumpeter called "creative destruction."⁴ Conflict between these social visions is inevitable. If the challenge by the corporation is too great, the result can be the distortion or destruction of traditional social life. At the same time, though, the corporation can indirectly help renew natural society, by providing a positive response to challenges. While traditional society can suppress corporate-induced change to the point of stagnation and decline, natural society can also tame or humanize the explosive force of innovation, turning it to constructive ends. The great test facing any age

is to find a workable balance between the satisfactions of continuity through community and the disruptions spawned by corporate-driven change.

The nihilist foes of society understand that ordered liberty rests on this pyramid of relationships: a submission to the sacred; the creation of marriages which flow into households; and the formation of households into communities, states, and nations. While ready to twist or subvert any of these tiers of society, they probably vent their greatest fury against the Divine source of life and the institution of marriage, for it is on these two pillars that all else rests. Accordingly, defense of the sacred canopy and of the marital covenant becomes the moral and political imperative for a traditionalist order. When they thrive, all else tends to follow, and human existence knows a certain joy and peace.

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