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In Search of Lost Time. Family, Nature and Culture

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Abstract

There is a spectre haunting current political, cultural and ideological debate in Italy (and perhaps throughout Europe): the traditional family.

This spectre is raised by those who are afraid of change; as they are unable to respond to the general ongoing societal changes (not only in the family), they suggest a return to the good old days where, for a start, men and women knew their place in society and complied with standard cultural norms and models. The proposed response to the problems affecting families in the 'liquid' society is a step back into the past to rediscover the values and solidity of the traditional family. Under the guise of the adjectives 'traditional' or 'natural', this 'retrotopia' invokes a return to the patriarchal family where the individual rights of women and children are denied.

Keywords: family, nature, culture.

1. Introduction

There is a spectre haunting current political, cultural and ideological debate in Italy (and perhaps around Europe): the traditional family.

It is as frightening as any other spectre, posing a threat to all those who think that the family of today – despite its many difficulties and changes – still offers a way for men and women to develop paths of development and individual self-fulfilment in their lives through essentially symmetrical relationships based on mutual respect. While it is true that asymmetrical relationships and pockets of authoritarianism and violence (especially against

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women) persist within families, they are now socially stigmatised and in many cases punishable by law.

To this end there are two books – *The war over the family: capturing the middle ground* by Peter and Brigitte Berger (1983) and *Haven in a heartless world: the family besieged* by Christopher Lasch (1977), perhaps both now a little dated – which highlight that, despite everything, life in modern-day families is slightly better than in the past, especially in terms of power relations, quality of affective ties between men, women, parents and children, and general standard of living. While the families of today are undoubtedly more unstable and provide less security, they also offer far more freedom as Bauman would put it. Higher levels of freedom are thus combined with lower levels of certainty – liberty comes at a price.

Analysis of changing family relations in contemporary society consistently underlines two social processes. Firstly, there has been an increase in the importance of individual rights within the family, with a relative rise in opportunities for constructing detraditionalised life stories and ‘do-it-yourself’ biographies. Secondly, affiliation ties have loosened and there are fewer certainties, meaning that ‘self-made biographies’ are easily transformed into ‘biographies of failure’ (Bauman 2004, Beck, Beck-Gernsheim 1996; Giddens 1995; Luhmann 1985). Whereas the family was once the ultimate source of certainty and security, it has become a source of risk. Similarly, instead of providing a safe haven in a ‘heartless world’ as it used to, it is now often a battleground for individuals who no longer accept relationships ‘conditioned’ not only by marriage and social conventions but also by individual willingness to enter into relationships of exchange that are not and can never be a zero-sum game (Di Nicola 2017)¹. The optimism displayed by the Bergers and Christopher Lasch clearly needs to be toned down; the emergence of new family forms, the growth in de facto unions and same-sex families, the increase in babies born outside marriage and same-sex parents claiming the right to exercise parental responsibility can all be read as indicators of ‘crisis’. However, they can also be seen as attempts to obtain social and legal legitimation of the need for (affective and family) ties, which cannot be ignored or underestimated.

As sociologists, we have to ask ourselves why homosexuals want to get married and have children in a society where many others no longer wish to do

¹ If a marital or non-marital partnership were a zero-sum game, a debilitating illness in one of the partners would naturally lead to separation, as the exchange would no longer be equal. A similar discourse applies if a child is born with a disability: if the parent-child relationship were a zero-sum game, the child would be abandoned as the parents would lose out by raising a child with difficulties who might not know how to or be able to reciprocate in the future.

so. In order to provide an answer, we also need to gain a better understanding of the underlying causes of the crisis of the family. It may not only be a question of dissolution, but also a request for new forms of institutionalisation (Di Nicola 2017).

2. Who is raising the spectre?

This spectre is raised by those who are afraid of change; as they are unable to respond to the general ongoing societal changes (not only in the family), they advocate a return to the good old days where, for a start, men and women knew their place in society and complied with standard cultural norms and models. Such a society was based on order and compliance with and acceptance of rules imposed from above, a society in which men and women had strong and well-rounded identities; it is said that there were no differences between individual identity and social identity. Social actors made life choices with little reflection and followed in the footsteps of their predecessors. This society of order is cited in response to a social and existential condition (for social actors) in which the future and the dream of individual self-fulfilment have been transformed into the fear of being inadequate, of having insufficient personal skills and aptitudes for the performances required by a society of risk and isolated individuals, a society dominated by instrumental rationality.

As the old fears drifted gradually into oblivion and the new ones gained in volume and intensity, promotion and degradation, progress and retrogression changed places – at least for a growing number of unwilling pawns in the game, they were – or felt themselves to be – doomed to defeat. This prompted the pendulums of the public mindset and mentality to perform a U-turn: from investing public hopes of improvement in the uncertain and ever-too-obviously untrustworthy future, to re-investing them in the vaguely remembered past, valued for its assumed stability and so trustworthiness (Bauman 2017: 6).

As Bauman claims (2017), echoing Solana (2016), Europe is suffering from nostalgia with the rebirth of nationalist and sovereignist movements, while European leaders persist in applying yesterday's solutions to today's problems.

Rather than proposing a utopia, those raising the spectre advocate a retrotopia, to adopt Bauman's term².

² According to Bauman, 'the prospects of human happiness – tied since More to a *topos* (a fixed place, a *polis*, a city, a sovereign state – each under a wise and benevolent ruler) – have been unfixed, untied from any particular *topos* and individualized, privatized and

What I call 'retrotopia' is a derivative of the aforementioned second degree of negation – negation of utopia's negation, one that shares with Thomas More's legacy its fixity on a territorially sovereign *topos*: a firm ground thought to provide, and hopefully guarantee, an acceptable modicum of stability and therefore a satisfactory degree of self-assurance. It differs, however, from that legacy in approving, absorbing and incorporating the contributions/corrections supplied by its immediate predecessor: namely, the replacement of the 'ultimate perfection' idea with the assumption of the non-finality and endemic dynamism of the order it promotes, allowing therefore for the possibility (as well as desirability) of an indefinite succession of further changes that such an idea *a priori* de-legitimizes and precludes. True to the utopian spirit, retrotopia derives its stimulus from the hope of reconciling, at long last, *security* with *freedom*: the feat that both the original vision and its first negation didn't try – or, having attempted, failed – to attain (Bauman 2017: 8-9).

There are three factors that trigger fear and lead to the desire to step back in time: the increasingly strong voice of same-sex partners claiming the right to form couples and families, the fertility crisis and the growing presence of immigrant families, who seem to overshadow the dwindling number of – often ageing and childless – indigenous families.

The emergence of the concept of homosexual partnerships and parenthood as a cultural phenomenon is accompanied by the fear of being supplanted as a population by subjects with different cultural and religious values from the indigenous ones. These two elements are viewed as attacks on a tradition whose details are more generally evoked than comprehensively described. The resulting perceived siege situation – the family under assault – is effectively caused by minority groups: there are actually few same-sex partnerships and families, just as foreigners are nowhere near replacing the population.

Why do they generate fear then, leading to a desired return to the traditional family? Why is the family of today not defended and supported with adequate policies? After all, the family of today, or rather the statistically relevant families of today (with all their variability) are no longer a reliable guarantee of consensus or integration; they are more fragile and tend to change shape over the course of their life cycle, interrupting the regularity of development typical of the past

personalized ("subsidiarized" to human individuals after the pattern of snails' homes), it is their turn now to be negated by what they valiantly and all but successfully attempted to negate. From that double negation of More-style utopia – its rejection succeeded by resurrection – "retrotopias" are currently emerging: visions located in the lost/stolen/abandoned but undead past, instead of being tied to the not-yet-unborn and so inexistent future, as was their twice-removed forebear' (Bauman 2017: 4-5).

– marriage, children, child-raising, children leaving home (empty nest phase) – and therefore the phase of singleness. In contemporary Italy there are growing numbers of cohabiting couples, children born outside marriage, second marriages (not following widowhood) and reconstituted families, while women give birth to fewer children who leave home at an increasingly late age. There is also an increase in non-widowed single people and a drop in the marriage rate (Barbagli, 1977; Barbagli, Castiglioni, Dalla Zuanna, 2003; Barbagli, Saraceno, 1997; Di Nicola, 2017). In addition, same-sex couples can now establish civil unions and have their parental responsibilities recognised. In short, the confines of this family afford too much freedom. However, it is felt that a step backwards is required in order to control the phenomenon rather than stopping for detailed analysis of the existing situation. The contemporary family is no longer a source of social reliability and corrective measures are needed.

3. How far back in time should we go? Years, decades, centuries?

To give an idea of the suggested step backwards, some speak of the natural family, referring to article 29 of the Italian Constitution, which recognises the family as a natural society founded on marriage. This expression is an oxymoron both from an anthropological and a sociological perspective: if the family is founded on marriage, it cannot be natural, while if it is natural, it cannot be founded on marriage; at most, the latter might constitute a formalisation of the former. Nature is governed by its own laws, whereas society is ruled by the laws of man. Natural laws are universally valid, whereas human laws are only valid among those that promulgated them. There are no contracts in nature, while society is based on contracts. As Lévi-Strauss put it (1967), society exists wherever there is exchange. It is created as soon as relations between men and women are regulated; the first rule concerns exogamy, based on the incest taboo. In places where this first rudimentary prohibition exists, we can no longer talk of nature, but society. The law of man replaces the law of nature that controls the reproduction of animal species. Indeed, man is the only animal species whose reproduction is not governed purely by instinct alone.

The Italian word *famiglia* (which derives from the Latin *famulus*, servant or attendant) may be an Oscan loan word. It was first used to indicate a group of slaves and servants living under the same roof before it took on its more common present meaning. Slaves and servants are wide-ranging concepts and the term family was always used in the past to describe human communities constituted in different ways but with an ever-present underlying principle of ownership and/or authority. These communities were fundamental to every society as they were focused on the perpetuation of the species through

reproduction, which always occurred within an extremely precise, structured and comprehensive regulatory system, taking on varying characteristics at different times and places.

The idea of the natural family recalls a mythical social imaginary: the myth of the state of nature and the noble savage (savage due to a lifestyle following the laws of nature), often used as a counterfactual element to explain why order and society are needed. As with all legends, it cannot be attributed to specific points in space or time, although it may have played an important role in the configuration of various social and ideological structures and the formulation of certain utopias.

The exhortation to revive the natural family raises a question that is more anthropological and philosophical than social. Those who call for such a return are ideologically opposed to same-sex families as they 'go against nature'. These families are stigmatised using the same expression adopted by the Catholic Church to condemn any sexual act other than heterosexual copulation for the purpose of procreation as sinful. The same Church still views contraception as a sin for this reason.

In this form of retrotopia, the naturalness of the family, stripped of its many cultural embellishments, simply means that despite all the new reproductive techniques an embryo can still only develop when an oocyte meets a sperm. Although this is something the human species shares with other animal species, the latter have never produced 'families' in the sense that we understand them. The family is thus a human construct.

Despite its extreme variability, to borrow Durkheim's phrase the family is a 'social fact' and as such needs to be studied and analysed. Those imploring a return to the 'traditional' family draw on various resources because tradition seems to have a more concrete social dimension. However, this is only true in appearance. In this case, the adjective does not refer to a specific family form or any special characteristic (a sort of ontological *quid*), but to tradition in general, seen as the set of habits, historical memories of social and historical events, and religious rites and beliefs shared by a group and transmitted through time from one generation to another. The traditional family is thus the value-idea of family with which the majority of subjects sharing the same social imaginary identify. However, social imaginaries change over time, just as a variety of family forms can be observed in the past. At the start of the industrialisation process, could it be said that family had the same value and importance for the middle class as it did for the working class, aristocracy and peasants? And within these groups, did marital fidelity, marriage, the transmission of inheritance, the procreation of children and relations between men and women have similar meaning and value? Demographic, historical and sociological literature has shown the extreme variability in the different ways of

forming families and family life over time and space, combined with a similar variance in habits and practices within the family.

It is therefore meaningless to refer to the 'traditional family' in the singular as it reveals everything and nothing about a hypothetical ideal family model. The issue would not even be solved by using the plural form 'traditional families', inasmuch as the restoration of the many different traditions encompassed by the term is highly improbable.

4. Going back in time, but to what?

Those who suggest a return to the natural family are thinking of a mythical past lost in the mists of time, assuming that it ever existed in the first place. It is a 'tribal' retrotopia (Bauman, 2017) which restores the values of indelible blood ties, a strong sense of belonging and the ascriptive communities of the past. At a political level, these are expressed by nationalist and sovereignist movements that defend a geographically, culturally and biologically defined 'people' or 'peoples'. In this way, the borders of countries are seen as closed and impenetrable to foreigners and migrants.

Those opposing the return to the natural family – assumed to be heterosexual – tend to underline that homosexuality was an extremely widespread practice in the past and that heterosexuality is a social construct. However, this stance overlooks the fact that although homosexuality was present and at times tolerated in the past (such as in the Greek and Roman worlds), these sexual practices had nothing to do with family, which was always characterised as a separate and special realm of life, which, lest we forget, is not at all natural or primordial.

Generally speaking, people resisting the idea of a return to the traditional family tend to underline the extreme variability in family forms both in diachronic and synchronic terms³. It should be stressed, however, that the number of forms that the family can assume is high but not infinite. The main criteria that determine the assumable forms – at least in the West – are type of marriage (monogamous or polygamous), type of descent (patrilineal, matrilineal, bilateral), form of residence (virilocal, uxorilocal, neolocal), inheritance laws (only male offspring, only the firstborn, male and female offspring, offspring

³ There are numerous studies on past family forms (structures and relationships), including for example: Anderson (1982); Ariès (1968); Ariès, Duby (1987-1988); Badinter (1981); Barbagli (1984); Casey (1991); D'Amelia (1997); De Giorgio, Klapisch-Zuber (1996); Flandrin (1979); Goody (1984); Kertzer, Saller (1995); Laslett (1972) and (1979); Manoukian (1974) and (1983); Seccombe (1997a) and (1977b); Shorter (1978); Stone (1983).

and spouses) and access to means of subsistence. There are also some specific variants that can be explained in the light of local cultural habits and traditions. These family forms are connected by being expressions of a social system in which men hold power, dominate political leadership, exercise moral authority and have control over private property. In the family sphere, the father exercises authority over his wife and children, while in matrilineal societies it is the maternal uncle – not the mother – that exerts power over his sister's children. The traditional family becomes synonymous with the patriarchal family, a miniature society in which the adult male wields power and authority over younger members and women.

Defenders of the traditional family who wish to restore it are actually referring to a hierarchically ordered unit within which 'someone' – usually the male figure – is more important than the other members, represents their interests and protects their integrity and unity. Without even referring to the nineteenth century, they suggest a return to the pre-1970s Italian family: before the introduction of divorce, before the decriminalisation of contraceptive practices, before the new family law that gave husband and wife equal rights and duties, before children born out of wedlock were placed on an equal footing with those born in matrimony, before the idea of same-sex marriage was even imaginable.

The family that they wish to return to is in the Judeo-Christian, Greek and Roman tradition. Nostalgia for this type of family unites those who focus on both the natural family and those who desire a return to tradition, hoping to provide a lifeline for the West.

The family that they wish to return to will no longer focus on individual rights within the family, but only collective rights. It is no coincidence that nostalgia for the traditional family is accompanied by sometimes explicit criticism of women's behaviour; their increasing level of education and independence is seen as responsible for the crisis of the family, the empty cots and the increasingly imminent danger of the population being replaced by immigrants.

It is above all men who hold forth about family and women, referring to the latter's bodies and sexuality as if they were items of their property at their full disposal. As in times gone by, men claim to speak on behalf of women and voice their desires, needs and aspirations.

Limiting the impact of this new family retrotopia by adopting a counter-stance is a battle not only to defend newly emerging family forms but also to protect individual rights. Already significantly eroded in the world of production, these rights are now being called into question in the world of reproduction (following the period of assertion of individual rights between the 1970s and the 1990s in Italy). In this way, a woman's freedom to procreate is

once again subjugated to the demands of a male collective that fears what the future promises or threatens.

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