

## Family and Nation in America\*

Maurizio Vaudagna

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### Abstract

Public narratives regarding what constitutes a 'healthy family' change over time and are closely linked with national history and contingent needs. This essay analyses the interdependence between the American family and the nation from the 1950s to the emergence of the so-called pluralist family in the 1960s and 1970s, up to the revival of family values from the 1980s to the present. It exemplifies how the connection between family and nation tends to strengthen during circumstances of danger, such as wars and economic crises, and to weaken when multiple familial setups are considered.

**Keywords:** Family History; American Family; Nation and Family; Public Narratives; Gender Roles.

**Maurizio Vaudagna:** Università del Piemonte Orientale (Italy)

✉ [maurizio.vaudagna@uniupo.it](mailto:maurizio.vaudagna@uniupo.it)

Maurizio Vaudagna is professor of contemporary history, emeritus, at the University of Eastern Piedmont.

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## 1 Introduction

“American society today is deeply divided by conflicting perceptions of what constitutes a family.”<sup>1</sup> This heterogeneity can be detected in the definitions of the family. The most frequent distinction contrasts nuclear, monogamous, heterosexual families with diverse partnerships cohabiting “under the same roof.” In the former instance the family is “a social unit based on marriage,” which is “the legal union of a man and a woman as husband and wife.” In the latter there is no requirement of heterosexuality and monogamy, i.e., in the definition: “All the members of a household living under one roof.”<sup>2</sup>

In many historical occurrences, public leaders, moralists, and thinkers have seen the family as the fundamental unit upon which society is built, a micro-representation of the social order. The result was that if the family was ‘healthy,’ whatever that might mean, then society was too. But if the family declined, or a cry was heard of the ‘death of the family,’ then society would also wither away and die.

In the course of history, the family has positioned itself in multiple ways within the public/private dimension. In seventeenth-and-eighteenth-century America the colonial family was perceived as mainly public, that is aimed to stress familial honour and social standing, to be strengthened by matrimonial strategies, and inter-family and kinfolk alliances. Married couples were submerged in extended kin and community networks and no notion of privacy had yet emerged.

However, the family’s public relevance also had to do with historical circumstances that stressed the private estate, intimate affections, secretive home, which created, in historian Nancy Cott’s words, “public sanctity in a private space,”<sup>3</sup> to be considered the ultimate source of Christian and civil virtues.

Between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the emerging Victorian *bourgeoisie* of professionals, industrialists, financiers and large merchants redefined the emotionalism of family relations, originated the long-term trend toward the sentimentalizing and sexualizing of the family and shaped the controlled physical and relational space called *privacy*. The result was a new, stratified, more secretive and more detached bourgeois family. The notion of *home* emerged as both a physical dwelling and the temple of familial affections, while a *Christian home* was both a human habitation and a familial chapel. The civil and legal protection of privacy rights reflected public relevance for the private orientation of the family.

In the nineteenth century and beyond, the link between the public sphere and family well-being went together hand in hand with the national phenomenon. Family security increasingly corresponded to national security and the family lent the nation strategic metaphors in many idioms: from *patrie*, to *motherland*, *vaterland*, or *madrepatria*. National emergencies were conceived as the defence of a public/private familial order, as the magazine *Better Homes and Gardens* stated during World War II, “the status of the home [is] the supreme issue in this titanic struggle.”<sup>4</sup>

In the United States, familial setups have never been one-dimensional. On the contrary, their variety reflected the country’s never-ending ethnic, racial, environmental and cultural multiplicity and the consequent diversity of its familial arrangements. However, just as nationalism is a narration, at different moments in time the role of the micro-bedrock of the nation has been assigned to only one type of family. Throughout the nineteenth and most of the twentieth century, the *national family* quality has been conferred to the white, nuclear, suburban family, while immigrant, native, and African-American families have been relegated to the margins of the national narration.

The changing link between family and nation is exemplified in this study by the shift from the domestic 1950s to the emergence of the so-called *pluralist family* in the 1960s and 1970s, up to the revival of family values from the 1980s to the present. The main feature of this case study is the transition between historical periods when an exemplary familial model of the national narration, and the spirit of moral duty that went with it, went through sweeping changes. If the interdependence of

1. Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History Of American Family Life* (New York: Free Press, 1998), 235–236.
2. Joseph P. Pickett, ed., *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (New York-Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 851.
3. Nancy F. Cott, *Public Vows. A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 157.
4. Robert L. Griswold, *Fatherhood in America: A History* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 163.

family and nation tends to increase during circumstances of national danger, such as war emergencies first and foremost, and economic depression, other criteria are equally useful for understanding the nature of this link. When the narration insists on one family model, which is supposedly the 'right one,' then the ethic of duty allows little room for individualist self-gratification. This is the moment when the family role as the founding atom of the nation grows more intense. When, instead, the narration of familial arrangements takes multiple setups into account and the appeal of pleasure becomes more pressing than moral duty, then the call to family-nation interdependence becomes more tenuous.

## 2 The Myth of the Suburban Family as the Banner of Americanism

The end of World War II saw the opening of an age of economic expansion stimulated primarily by private consumption. Middle-class service jobs for returning GIs multiplied, while a strong national campaign pressured woman to leave their wartime jobs and go home.

After the various shocks of the previous fifteen years, what emerged was an updated domestic project, centered on the need to reconstruct family life. The suburban nuclear family was publicized as the best place for enjoying the new security and prosperity. In both social data and dominant narrations, the 1950s witnessed the peak of the normative popularity of the monogamous, heterosexual, filial, prosperous family, which was characterized by the so-called *neo-Victorian cult of domesticity*. The familial unit was ideally made up of a breadwinner husband/father, a suburban housewife and mother with two, three or four dependent offspring enjoying an extended childhood. This model seemed to embody the ideal of individual self-realization in American life.

Both the 1950s middle-class family and the so-called *companionate family* of the 1920s, which was more cooperative, pleasure- and public-oriented than its turn-of-the-century predecessor, enjoyed an age of consumer expansion while, however, their contexts were very different. If in the 1920s the country felt secure, the 1950s were instead the high time of the Cold War, which was not over, it had just turned 'cold,' and both the U.S. and humanity as a whole feared that it might heat up again and turn into a universal atomic holocaust.

The difference implied that, while in the 1920s the companionate family had de-emphasized its task as a patriotic bulwark of national life, in the 1950s, instead, the suburban family typified the foundation stone of the *American Way*, a banner to be waved against the dreariness of the adverse political order. In a famous insect repellent ad, a slender, helmeted Yankee housewife, firmly holding a hand pump as a machine gun, annihilates soviet bugs invading her kitchen and sink.

As in the case of the companionate family, in the 1950s public thinking of private life stressed the importance of sexuality as a source of marital harmony, but, different from its predecessor, the post-war version was first and foremost filial. The *jazz age*, by dissolving the earlier 'natural' link between sexuality and reproduction, was preserved, however, the public imagination stressed a calling to create large families of three to four children as the ideal of conjugal and familial happiness. During the years immediately after World War II, the fertility rate, in contrast to its multi-century decline, registered an unexpected rise which was referred to as the *baby boom*. Rearing numerous good, patriotic citizens became central to the family's national mission. Family happiness and personal maturity were mainly reached by rearing and educating children, even more than by harmonious marital love, even if the two were obviously interdependent. Both parents must embody role models without which their children's future would be compromised.

As shown in a 1967 study by sociologist Herbert Ganz, another cornerstone of familiar and personal self-realization was owning a suburban, single-family home. Ganz emphasized that owning a home provided men with an amount of self-expression and self-government that was unthinkable for a tenant. Home ownership permitted families to become stabile, as a symbol of success,<sup>5</sup> and resulted in the protection of democratic institutions and American values.

Aided by low real estate prices, the epitome of the new prosperity for millions of former GI families consisted in the huge wave of small prefab houses in uniform suburbs called Levittown from the

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5. Jan Cohn, *The Palace and the Poorhouse. The American House as a Cultural Symbol* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1979), 239.

name of the ubiquitous construction firm Levitt, which characterized the expanding suburban real estate boom in the America of the 1950s.

The suburban family's rehabilitation required that it be carried out far away from the intense public dimension that had characterized family life during the traumatic emergencies of the previous two decades. The domestic ideology reached a peak as a life-sustaining position, an economic and emotional support, a place to raise children and to fulfill one's personality and happiness. If in the 1920s the advertising of new domestic technologies had emphasized more leisure for enjoying the resources of public space, instead, in the 1950s ads stressed that less domestic work allowed for more opportunities for achieving one's personal and family happiness at home.

From the late nineteenth century, the middle-class family mission, which had up to then coincided with the Victorian morals of sacrifice and self-control, began to compete with the idea of an America culture of abundance. The prosperity and conspicuous consumption in the twenty years after World War II signified the emergence of the so-called 'two-thirds society,' where the majority of the population had the economic means to conduct a comfortable, or at least sufficient, life. In the past, the morals of self-control and the one-dimensional nature of the 'good' family model coincided with the peak of its national mission. When, on the contrary, the ethics of self-gratification and the plurality of family models grew stronger, the sense of national duty tended to decline.

In a nutshell, the domesticity of the 1950s framed an original compromise between the patriotic task and relaxed enjoyment. It consisted in a strong national mission based on the merging of the neo-Victorian ethic and the *companionate* lightness, a family of self-control and that of abundance. Of the latter, it emphasized a pleasurable life, relative marital equality, relevance of sexuality, importance of feminine beauty, desire for prosperity and consumption. Of the former, it revived the tradition of the separate spheres, the sense of familial commitment, the central role of filiality, the calling to act as the bulwark of stability and morality in national public life.

### 3 The Emergence of the Pluralist Family

The suburban family was, however, affected by prejudice, exclusions, and inconsistencies. Since the mid-1960s the consequence was an unprecedented breakdown of the prevailing idea of the family, and the emergence of new, plural familial arrangements. Middle-class models that had prevailed in the previous century and a half started to decline. Moreover, changes in sexuality, filiation, gender relations and the weight of economic, social and emotional factors were so drastic as to prevent a new general consensus on what was family, and even less, on what was the quintessential 'American' family. As a result, the formerly shared sense of a familial national mission declined or, to say the least, became a field of intense public controversy. At the same time, the rediscovery of the other America of poverty and exclusion denied the middle class its former self-imagination as the universal class of all Americans.

The birth of the new *pluralist family* has been supported by the sexual revolution which discarded the traditional link between sex, family and social context. Meanwhile, the birth control pill liberalized sexual encounters, gave couples the choice of limiting their fertility, and encouraged a sexuality geared to self-gratification, intimacy and the fulfillment of physical love.

The youth, and students in particular, who described themselves as *post-economic* after twenty years of expansion, were the initiators of the sexual revolution. The culture of abundance allowed them to pursue their goals of self-realization and of a quality of life, which was preferable to simply maximizing earnings.

Their countercultural movement insisted on physical self-awareness. In the earlier history of public and private life, which parts of the naked body were visible, or concealed, had been a great moral and relational subject. Now the unorthodox shift consisted in the cult of nudity, widely exhibited by young men and women in public places, parks, and concerts. The claim was that of authenticity which, against an idea of intimacy based on secrecy, regarded the body as an essential site of emotional self-realization and gratification.

Sexuality was, therefore, an added value, publicized and intensified both as an avenue of interpersonal communication beyond traditional codes, and as a chance to experiment with new ways

for relating in communal circumstances, shared groups and multiple sexual encounters. The slogan 'make love, not war' politicized the relational and gratifying role of sex as a critique of warmongering drives.

In the meanwhile, the so-called *culture of intimacy* managed to free people from the margins of those who did not share the prevalent sexual preferences, such as gays, lesbians and other groups, who could more openly disclose their choice to both the greater public and to themselves, while earlier this self-awareness had often been a source of deep pain.

In the history of homosexuality, as an effect of the tensions between alternative identities and conformity to the prevalent codes of conduct, the gays' opinion of the family has been ambiguous. Until the sixties gay history has been one of individuals. Once the idea of the gay family came into existence, it took two different paths. On the one hand, it wished to reproduce the model of the middle-class family; on the other it emphasized the denial of the 'orthodox' family lifestyle, and a search for more libertarian familial and group relations.

Another strategic factor, which was less dependent on the national mission, helped the pluralist family to prevail: the new women's activism, supported by the revived feminist movement and by the changes in women's social and economic status. According to the historian Marilyn Coleman, in 1975 more than 36% of married women with infants less than six years old had a job, compared to 10% in 1940.<sup>6</sup> The idea that women 'naturally' belonged at home was rapidly disappearing.

These working mothers emphasized not only pay equity but also the double shift worked at home and on the job, shouldered by women who wanted to stick to both commitments. Since 1966, the National Organization of Women (NOW) highlighted a new emancipatory feminism, which was to achieve a "truly equal partnership with men...it is no longer necessary or possible for women to devote the greater part of their lives to child-rearing."<sup>7</sup> NOW demanded the full participation of both spouses in caregiving and childrearing obligations.

It was, however, a new generation of young, radical feminists, originating from the New Left and revolting against its sexism, who focused on 'women's lib,' meaning women's social and sexual liberation. Since 1968, the new feminists proclaimed that 'sisterhood is powerful' and 'the private is political,' and founded separatist groups, movements and venues, including many children's daycare centers.

After 1970, one of the most contentious trends of women's separatism was the emergence of the lesbian issue. It seemed to be a revolution in women's sentimental and sexual life, which aimed to reject middle-class respectability without falling prey to the new ways of patriarchal domination.

If in a peculiar way, the state of the black family was most important in the family revolution. The black movement did not emphasize interracial sentimental, sexual, and matrimonial encounters. Its purpose was to maintain the cohesion of the black community and to counter interracial mix, *mongrelization*, that opponents kept shouting out.

Throughout the 1960s, despite the Supreme Court sentence of the anti-miscegenation laws as unconstitutional, interracial weddings were quite unusual. In September 1967, Foreign Secretary Dean Rusk gave President Johnson his resignation when the front cover of *Time Magazine* published a photograph of his daughter Margaret Elisabeth marrying a black man.

At the same time, in contrast to the declining family-nation link, the black family became the focus of a heated controversy on the nature of the 'right' family in America. The case originated in 1965 when the so-called *Moynihan Report*, entitled 'The Black Family: The Need for National Action,' was made public. It was written by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Undersecretary of Labor in the Johnson Administration. The impoverished black family in the ghettos, said the report, was trapped in a "tangle of pathology" of innumerable divorces, desertions, out-of-wedlock births, and single mothers, causing a steep rise in delinquency, drugs, unemployment and school dropouts. Implicitly, the failed black family became the 'anti-American' family *par excellence*, and encompassed everything the proper family should not be. The tough national polemic that followed questioned the pathological origins Moynihan had selected. Slavery had made it impossible for a black male to lead his family, this

6. Marilyn Colman, Lawrence H. Ganong and Kelly Warzink, *Family Life in 20<sup>th</sup> Century America* (Westport, CN: Greenwood, 2007), 147.

7. Sara M. Evans, *Born for Liberty. A History of Women in America* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 277.

'humiliation' had perpetuated itself, and made him inclined to flee familial responsibilities, while producing the needy matriarchy that replaced absent fathers. The entire African-American community retorted that the black family's problems did not originate from within the black community itself, but from the poverty and discrimination that had plagued it long after the end of slavery.

To sum up, the matrimonial revolution consisted first and foremost at the end of its universality as a regular lifestyle. As the median marriage age increased from 20.3 years in 1960 to 23 years in 1984; in 1988, 20% of the families consisted of only one-member. In the 1970s in particular, a large number of single women decided to never marry, or remained single because of divorce, which in 1980 had reached the enormous percentage of 50% of all marriages. The very notion of divorce underwent a drastic change. If earlier it had to be caused by the gravest reasons, with one of the spouses being the guilty party, after 1970 it became the "no-fault divorce," which could be authorized by mutual consent or by one of the spouses deeming that marital life was irreparably fractured. Thanks to birth control, numerous women started thinking it possible to have children without being married, or cohabiting with the father or with another man. Moreover, in 1973 the Supreme Court legalized abortion, which empowered women in the self-government of their reproductive rights, and made unwanted pregnancies, which earlier amounted to half the total, much less dramatic.

What resulted was, as mentioned, the so called 'pluralist family' characterized by many different settings, none of which could claim a prevalent national mission.

Two-parent families now account for 15% of the family units, while two-earner families are in need of nursery schools, childcare centers, or infant caretakers. The numerous single-parent families, mostly working mothers, are often affected by familial and filial poverty and in need of pay equity and flexible working hours. 'Recombinant' families coincide with the second, third, or fourth marriage or partnership. The relevant issues here are the economic status of former spouses and offspring and the psychological adjustment of infants and children to non-biological parents and complicated networks of brothers, sisters and relatives from other marriages. Childless couples are very numerous because of the decreasing fertility rate, and 2% of the total population are lesbians and homosexuals, who very often contribute to a large cohort of cohabitations, who long for the same rights as married couples.

Feminist historian Alice Kessler-Harris has summarized the implications of the family revolution: "The most dramatic transformation of our generation has been the diminution of the importance of marriage for the distribution of goods, income, policies in our society. That we have now come to rely much more on individual effort within and outside of marriage,"<sup>8</sup> is evident.

At the end of the seventies the interdependence between family and American national identity could hardly be perceived as both concepts were undergoing fractures and segmentations. The context had changed: the Cold War had pushed many Americans to cling to the flag and the family that personified it. Instead, the emergencies of the sixties and seventies, the war in Vietnam, the black revolt and economic decline had convinced large segments of the American population to censure traditional definitions of *Americanness* and search for *another America*.

The simultaneous revolution in family law stressed that familial *Americanness* consisted in recognizing the primacy of individual rights over public priorities. Up to that time the obvious premise of family law had been that the nuclear family, being the preeminent national unit, had enjoyed a privileged status and that government benefits could discriminate against non-nuclear families.

The legal revolution stressed, instead, that the family decline as the foundation for legal prerogatives. The noted 1965 case, *Griswold vs. Connecticut*, sentenced matrimony as a basic *private* right of American citizenship. What emerged were *children's rights*, *privacy rights*, *gender-equality rights*, *reproductive rights*, and courts sentenced that the government could not define the family in restrictive terms. Rights emphasized individual personality in relation to family membership, which, for example, applied to the contentious field of reducing parental authority over minor offspring. It was legal for a 'competent' minor woman to have an abortion or use contraceptives with no parental permission. This constitutional trend contributed, according to Nancy Cott, to "knock marriage from its position of preeminence as 'pillar of the state'."<sup>9</sup>

8. Alice Kessler-Harris, interview by New River Media, *The First Measured Century*, PBS, <http://www.pbs.org/fmc/interviews/kesslerharris.htm>.

9. Cott, *Public Vows*, 199.

The law has distanced itself from obligations ascribable to family membership, but it has become more intrusive in the defense of individual rights; for example, such as in the case of domestic violence, domestic rape or women's exclusive right to have an abortion, while the approach of earlier family law was to not intrude beyond domestic walls.

The link between democracy and the family was also echoed by young critics who, on the one hand, stressed individualist self-government, but on the other emphasized the pluralist principle as a cornerstone of democracy. If pluralism was the eminent democratic quality of American life, why wasn't it extended to the family as well? If, in the past, the narrative of the national family had been based on one prevalent model, now the families of the 'other America' were multicultural, diverse, characterized by multiple arrangements which were all equally acceptable, and were the result of personal freedom more than a national imperative.

#### 4 The Revival of Family Values from the 1980s

Since the emergence of the pluralist family in the 1970s, the link between family and nation has been converted from the earlier normative *American family* to the national controversy on *family values*.

The pluralist family has remained prevalent. Some of its features have been generalized and *normalized*, others have seemingly remained *extreme* and some have been revised or abandoned. There has, however, been no comeback to one dominant and national model.

From the 1970s, however, familial innovations have been so drastic, preventing a general consensus to be reached on what the *right* family might be, and the 1980s saw a change of direction in the perceptions of a *healthy family* throughout American public life. Against the individualistic spirit of the late 1960s and 1970s, the old concept of *family values* was revived and re-interpreted by the 'Reagan Revolution' of the 1980s, and Bill Clinton's 'Third Way' of the 1990s. The family was redefined as the fundamental source of social and national values and the patriotic cornerstone of what it meant to be American. The national mission of the family was back in a big way, even though the controversy kept raging regarding what defined a *healthy family* for embodying the *American Way*.

The national family debate has been deeply influenced by the shifting public climate due to the rise of neo-conservatism. Opponents in conservative and Reaganite ranks stressed that pluralist families are less stable, less responsible, easier to be fractured, and that divorced or deserted women are abandoned in hard circumstances and that children's interests and rights to self-realization are sacrificed.

Since the 1980s, a powerful political, ideological, and religious movement has emerged which has vigorously, and sometimes successfully, contrasted the pluralist family on behalf of the morality and centrality of a modernized version of the 1950's suburban family, regarding the very idea of the American nation. Numerous campaigns have vindicated individual responsibility and self-control on issues of drugs, alcohol, food, physical and mental fitness and sexual habits. Opposition to abortion has sometimes become extreme, and various states have banned it from publicly-funded clinics.

The democrats' appreciation of family life has also been changing in light of the so-called *New Democrats*, the party leadership that emerged in the 1990s as a response to neoconservative success during the previous decade, who distanced themselves from the New Deal legacy in favor of a 'new centrism.' Especially in the presidential campaign of 1992, the *New Democrat*, Bill Clinton, tried to steal from republicans their cherished theme of 'family values,' to become the cornerstone of a *New Covenant* of progressive politics. The shift, as indicated by 'family values' scholar Melinda Cooper, was a step away from the New Deal's focus on the government's duties in favor, instead, on familial obligations.

The Clintonian innovation consisted in pairing opportunity and responsibility. Republicans objected as New Democrats loudly proclaimed 'family values,' while they were doing nothing more than sounding moral tirades to actually help 'healthy families.' Clinton stated, "we will demand more from families, but [...] will offer more, too."<sup>10</sup> The government was to stop dispensing welfare, and the peak

10. Linda C. McClain, "Federal Family Policy and Family Values from Clinton to Obama, 1992–2012 and Beyond," *Michigan State Law Review*, 1621(2013), 1627.

family legislation of the Clinton administration was the 'welfare reform' of 1996, cancelling AFDC, the leading federal support for poor families, which had built a system of money transfers in favor of nontraditional units headed by unmarried poor mothers. Clinton's reform overturned sixty years of federal responsibility for poor children and their caregivers.

Instead, the government was to create work opportunities that people in need had to actively take advantage of, while at the same time, following responsible family and parental behavior. The AFDC was replaced by the TANF program (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families), which was much shorter in time limits, less generous in money subsidies and conditioned by compulsory retraining and job hunting (the so-called welfare-to-work precondition). "The new legislation," said sociologist Sharon Hays, "was to train poor families in 'mainstream' American values."<sup>11</sup> Jobs and responsible family ways would liberate the poor from the shame of dependence on welfare payments.

Obama's family policy mainly followed Clintonian precedents, but also introduced some new guidelines. As legal scholar Linda C. McClain has emphasized, "one striking feature is the way in which he [Obama] and First Lady Michelle Obama have made the personal political in relating the stories of their upbringing, marriage, and experience as parents to concrete policies such as workplace flexibility, promoting responsible fatherhood and healthy marriage [...]. The Obama administration's distinct focus on women and girls [has insisted] that many economic and social issues are not just 'women's,' but affect families, men, the economy, and the nation."<sup>12</sup> According to the Pew Research Center, the presidential couple's focus on gender issues has convinced many American women to favor active government and its social services.

Whether understood in a liberal or a conservative vein, both interpretations of 'family values' stressed the social engineering task of governmental family policy in that benefits and opportunities were to be framed in such a way as to encourage moral and socially beneficial family setups. Scared by out-of-wedlock births, teen-age pregnancy, the rise in the number of divorces and family desertions, both parties emphasized that legislation was to foster the *right* family life.

What it actually meant, however, differed. Clintonism denied that the legal, nuclear family was the one acceptable arrangement since cohabitants, remarried or single parents could also fall within the boundaries of the *healthy family*. The emphasis fell on the 'responsible father' regularly supporting his children's emotional, educational and economic lives and keeping constructive contact with their mother.

Instead, it was for republicans to proclaim that the only way toward family responsibility was marriage. In George W. Bush's welfare plan, *Working Toward Independence*, it was openly stated that child well-being and responsible fatherhood were achieved via work and legal marriage. In the republicans' understanding, only the 1950's-style nuclear model was the 'right' one.<sup>13</sup>

The current president, a 'plutocratic populist' according to distinguished public commentator Fareed Zakaria, has not placed family values at the center of his message. The focus on healthy domestic units is usually aimed at encouraging national cohesion because of the universality of the family condition. Trump's populist message is divisive, stressing 'us' versus 'them,' and 'family values' are not fitting in his rhetoric.

Trump is perceived to have widened the gender gap, compared to his presidential predecessors, and his access to power has been interpreted as the backlash of whiteness and masculinity against the democrats' 'rainbow society.' This has deepened the gap between men's and women's evaluation of his presidential performance. While in early 2019 men's opinions were evenly divided, 63% of women were, instead, critical and only 32% were supportive.

However, on individual family issues the president has erratically fluctuated, mainly responding to personal popularity goals and electoral expediency. Trump has supported abstinence campaigns against sex education, as well as anti-contraceptive advertising, because condoms would incite 'risky' sexual behaviour. He has also prohibited public funding for family planning agencies if abortion was mentioned in their pamphlets; he has appointed new anti-abortion justices on the Supreme Court,

11. Sharon Hays, *Flat Broke with Children. Women in the Age of Welfare Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 4.

12. McClain, "Federal Family," 1716.

13. Ibid, 1650–1651.

but he has avoided insisting on the repeal of the Roe vs. Wade ruling. Trump has stated that marriage is by nature heterosexual, but has at the same time held that the Supreme Court DOMA sentence, which legalized same-sex marriage, is here to stay.

The same volatility shows in Trump's view of work-family balance. In his words, pregnancy is an inconvenience for employers, equal pay requires that women show that they are as good as men on the job, and childless families are free riders because children will pay our future entitlements.

Trump is not a family moralist or traditionalist. His contempt remarks about women and the style of his own sexual escapades makes him appear as a kind of predatory sexist. On family issues, the president perpetually oscillates between Reaganite Republicanism and the authoritarian sexist tradition.

## 5 Conclusion

Since the 1980s the *healthy family* has had a comeback as a signpost of the *American way*. The main political and intellectual forces of the nation have reiterated that family life is the universal condition for human life and that the family is a synthesis of political and civil principles which act as a lens for assessing the health of society as a whole.

It is, however, equally true that "today the United States is a society without a clear, unitary set of family ideals and values."<sup>14</sup> While in earlier periods of intense familial, national symbolism the middle-class family, however defined, was the one *American family*. Now which family setup best personifies American values is the terrain for sharp national controversy.

Out of the heat of the battle has, however, emerged the shared awareness that the core measure of the American family's success is the well-being of children and infants, who are often seen as the victims of the familial restructuring of the 1960s and 1970s. Critics object that the pluralist family has created a generation of infants affected by a 'new precocity' due to the crisis of parental authority, the laxity of a permissive family and the life span experienced in a single-parent setup, by 50% of the less-than-sixteen-year-old minors.

While traditionalists miss the stay-at-home moms of the 1950s, child-friendly policies include tax credits for small children, family-friendly jobs, tougher obligations for non-cohabiting parents, easier access to quality childcare and new divorce and custody procedures to support the children's interests.

In a nutshell, the nature of the national *healthy family* is an embattled terrain in today's United States. Amidst this confused familial landscape, the 21st century's national mission of the *American family* is no more a single sanctified arrangement, but is mainly measured by its ability to guarantee children's well-being.

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14. Mintz and Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions*, XVII.

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