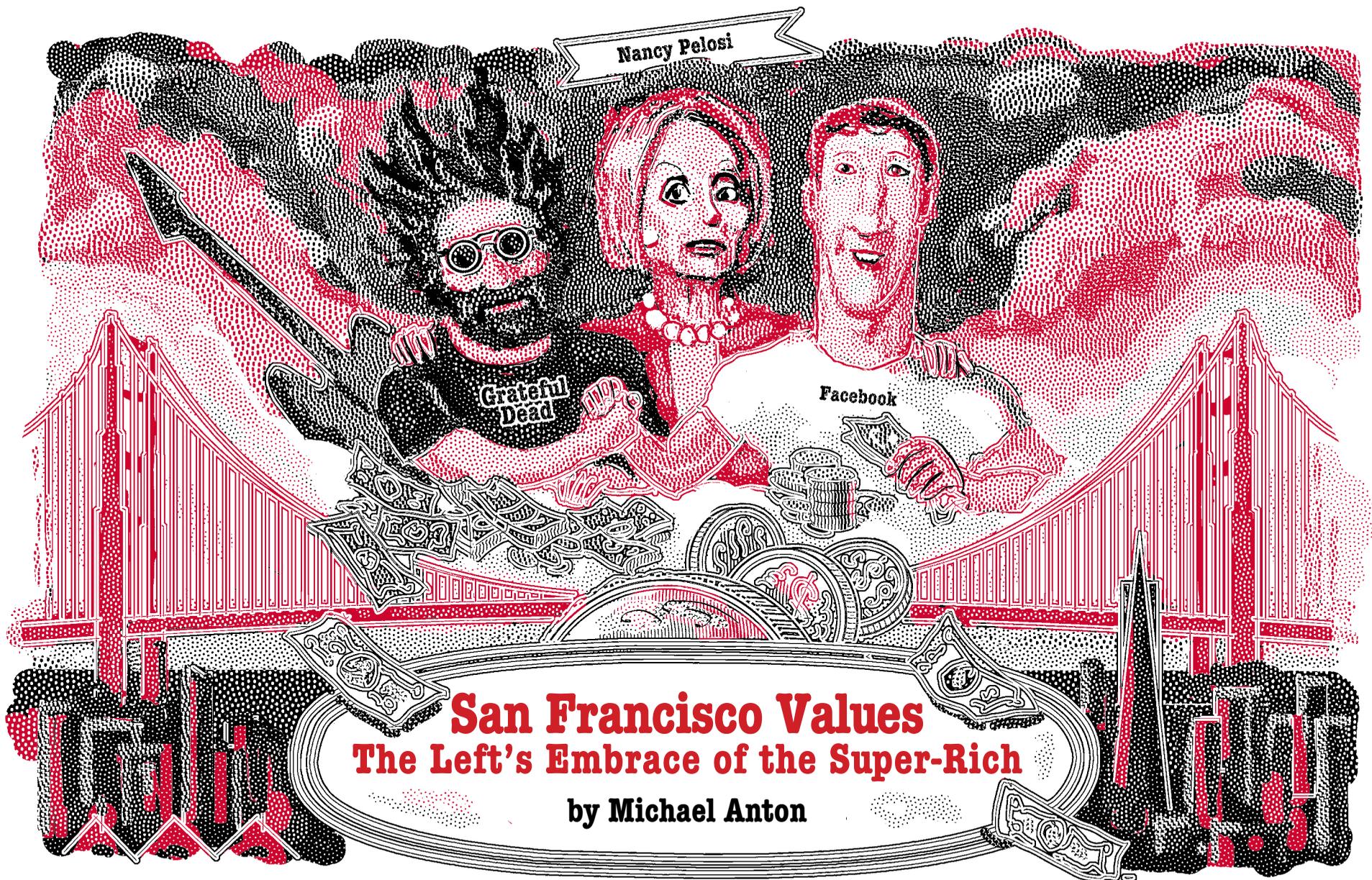


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Book Review by Mollie Ziegler Hemingway

ARE FAMILIES FINISHED?

Broken Bonds: What Family Fragmentation Means for America's Future, by Mitch Pearlstein.
Rowman & Littlefield, 184 pages, \$35

Generation Unbound: Drifting into Sex and Parenthood without Marriage, by Isabel V. Sawhill.
Brookings Institution Press, 212 pages, \$32 (cloth), \$25 (paper)



SIX MONTHS BEFORE HE WAS RE-ELECTED in 2012, President Barack Obama unveiled a cartoon storybook ad called “The Life of Julia.” The interactive slideshow followed a faceless middle-class woman at various points in her life from age 3 to 67, enjoying the benefits of the state.

As a toddler, she’s enrolled in Head Start. Her high school is part of a federal education program. In her twenties, she goes on birth control, covered at no charge to her under Obamacare. At age 31, Julia “decides to have a child.” In her forties, Julia starts her own business, thanks to a Small Business Administration loan. We don’t hear from her again until she’s 65, enrolling in Medicare. Julia retires at 67, when her years of contributions to Social Security mean she can “retire comfortably, without worrying that she’ll run out of savings.”

The ad was part of Obama’s successful “War on Women” messaging, designed to get single women to vote for him. Outside of African Americans, single women are the most reliable voting bloc for Democrats. The targeting worked. Obama won 67% of unmarried women, even as Republican opponent Mitt

Romney won 53% of married women. Never mind that the ad was based on fiction—it’s laughable to suggest that Head Start improves education or that entitlement programs are solvent, much less that they offer a comfortable retirement. The ad was truthful in one respect: at no time was a man in the picture.

LIFELONG DEPENDENCE ON THE STATE IS increasingly common for single mothers and their children. Rutgers anthropology professor Lionel Tiger refers to this state of affairs as “bureaugamy,” where the state becomes for many women a more suitable marriage partner than a man. A whopping 40% of American babies are now born outside of marriage. This ranges from nearly 30% of white children to more than 50% of Hispanic children and more than 70% of black children. Almost 60% of women without a bachelor’s degree are having children outside marriage.

And far from being the wonderland depicted in the Julia cartoon, out-of-wedlock birth has deleterious effects on everyone involved. As Center of the American Experiment president Mitch Pearlstein writes in *Broken Bonds: What*

Family Fragmentation Means for America's Future, “I know of no aspect of life in which children who grow up in broken or never-formed two-parent families do as well, on average, as boys and girls who grow up with both their parents.” He cites increased rates of drug abuse, criminal behavior, mental illness, physical illness, early sexual initiation, and widespread educational shortcomings. *Broken Bonds* is based on candid interviews with 40 leading family experts across the political spectrum—from liberal historian Stephanie Coontz to conservative political scientist Terry Moe.

Isabel Sawhill is a senior fellow in economic studies at the Brookings Institution. She’s also the board president of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. In *Generation Unbound: Drifting into Sex and Parenthood without Marriage*, Sawhill observes that “Marriage as an institution is disappearing in most advanced countries, including the United States.” The decline in marriage and rise in out-of-wedlock births is leading to two distinct and wildly disparate classes of Americans. Those who do marry are at the top rungs of the income ladder and those who don’t are

relegated to a life of decreased opportunities for advancement. Things are relatively good for those in the upper classes.

SAWHILL CONTENTS THE COUNTRY IS being divided into “drifters” and “planners” when it comes to how families are formed:

Growing class divisions in America are not just divisions of income. It’s not just income inequality. It’s also gaps in family formation patterns and it’s a matter of gaps in educational achievement. When you put all those things together, it seems to me we have a bifurcating society in which the children of very advantaged parents who are raised in stable families, who get good schooling, and who go on to be successful have very different life prospects than children who are born to single-parent families; usually to parents without much education, who don’t do well in school, and who go on to have a lot less success in life.

Stable families help children learn how to control impulses, delay gratification, and deal with anger. The problems are reinforced when the children of never-married mothers have children themselves. And children of divorce

look as if they’re privileged in comparison to kids born outside of marriage. Girls are less harmed by broken and never-formed families than boys are.

The scholars interviewed by Pearlstein, a conservative, told him that family fragmentation rates might be high because of a growing secularization of society or a rise in “hyper-individualism.” Some pointed to racism or a loss of the cultural norm of seeking the common good. Most predicted that family fragmentation would lead to a decline of the republic, “A wasting disease, not a heart attack.” “A slow decline, nothing apocalyptic.” “We’ll manage problems, not resolve them.” “Maybe we’ll muddle along.” One said, we’ll “just keep trying to spend more money to fix things that we cannot fix without addressing cultural questions.” Another said that Americans would have a pleasant experience in decline so long as the country had “a protector out there” to depend on. “I see the United States drifting quietly into some sort of dependent position in the world.”

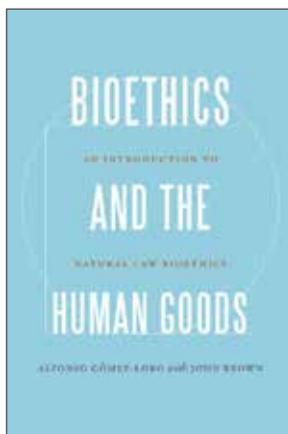
None was confident that Americans in general, particularly in the classes that continue to marry, had even a slight sense of how bad the problem was for lower socioeconomic classes. The Manhattan Institute’s Heather Mac Donald said Americans were “oblivious,” and that there was real naïveté about “the fact that atomized individuals are just not able to

carry on the socializing functions that families can.” The scholars, generally, said they didn’t see avenues of opportunity as quite open in America. One noted that the only category of American men who have earned more than their fathers since 1974 was those who had gone on to graduate school.

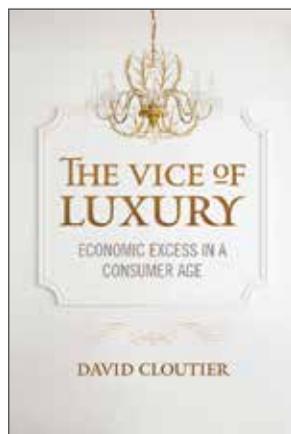
AS IT HAPPENS, IT’S THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY of Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action” report. Then a sociologist and assistant secretary of Labor, Moynihan warned that poverty among black Americans had a lot to do with black families’ being in disarray. At the time he wrote the report, what was then called illegitimacy was at 23.6% among blacks and 3.07% among whites. He noted that one quarter of black families were headed by women and that one quarter of black marriages had ended in divorce. All of this had led to a startling increase in welfare dependency.

The report was vilified as racist. The phrase “blaming the victim” entered the parlance from William Ryan’s 1971 book of the same name. Moynihan’s call for major governmental and societal change was ignored, at best. Within 15 years, though, out-of-wedlock birth rates among blacks had more than doubled—to 56%. The problems were getting worse, but progressives still didn’t want to talk about

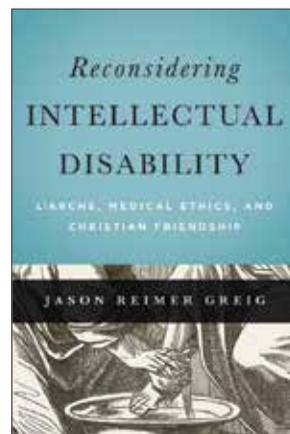
INSIGHTFUL AND CHALLENGING



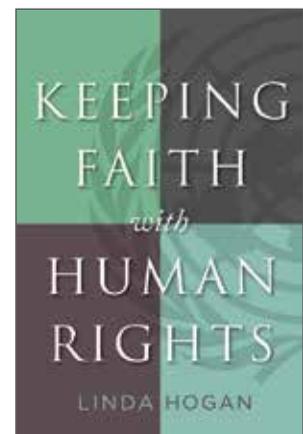
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family structure. They instead responded by starting groups such as the Children's Defense Fund and talking, as the Manhattan Institute's Kay Hymowitz objected in 2005, "about children not as the offspring of individual mothers and fathers responsible for rearing them, but as an oppressed class living in generic, nebulous, and never-to-be-analyzed 'families.'" Such a perspective meant the administrative state had a blameless client for whom to provide a host of services.

The other response was to talk about teen pregnancy. Planned Parenthood's research arm got the ball rolling in 1976 with a report on the millions of teenagers who were pregnant. The 1978 Adolescent Health Services and Pregnancy Prevention and Care Act was passed. The normal population growth charities joined the cause, including the Ford Foundation and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. But teen pregnancy rates were actually down. The problem wasn't teen pregnancy but out-of-wedlock teen pregnancy. Campaigns to stigmatize teen pregnancy began—and rates of teen pregnancy have declined by over 50% since 1991. Still, out-of-wedlock pregnancy keeps growing—it's just moved up the age ladder. Only 23% of out-of-wedlock births are to teenagers. The median age of women at their first child's birth used to be higher than the median age at first marriage. By 1991, a "great crossover" had occurred and the median woman was younger at the time of her first child's birth than at her first marriage.

IN *BROKEN BONDS*, HYMOWITZ SAYS THAT in the face of family ruin, "all that many upper-income people have to offer is better birth control. That's the only thing they'll talk about. They think that's the problem." And in fact that's precisely what Isabel Sawhill prescribes in *Generation Unbound*: "A social norm that once called for parenthood only within marriage contributed to achieving that goal. But now that that norm has all but disappeared, something else must take its place." In short, she recommends replacing the norm of marriage with contraception, sterilizing poor people with long-acting contraception that lasts up to 12 years. She emphasizes the sterilization would be voluntary, though her plan would include various nudges. She prefers using intrauterine devices and other long-acting contraception because unlike condoms and the birth control pill, "They are forgiving of well-documented human frailties (like a desire for sex)."

Sawhill reasons from acute social science insight, through iron-clad logic, to a confident policy conclusion: people have trouble thinking about long-term consequences when they're sexually aroused; children are

conceived at precisely that point when long-term consequences of procreation are least considered; failure to plan for children and their needs means greater likelihood of family fracturing; those who grow up without stable families suffer; ergo, the status quo should be barrenness. The state should make such long-acting contraception a required part of all insurance coverage mandated by the state and provide it free of charge for those on government insurance. What could go wrong?

THERE ARE, OF COURSE, MANY THINGS that could go wrong. And it's not that Sawhill doesn't devote a few paragraphs to considering them. But her imagination is impossibly narrow. "One of the great mistakes," as Milton Friedman used to say, "is to judge policies and programs by their intentions rather than their results." In 2005, columnist Megan McArdle wrote an essay on this theme and on the fragility of marriage in the face of government reworking of norms. One of the examples she gave was of welfare reforms that enabled unmarried mothers to get government benefits. She noted that public housing in the 1950s was full of functioning families. A debate began over whether to limit welfare benefits to such families or extend them to single mothers. Advocates of extending benefits argued that "The brutal societal prejudice against illegitimacy was old fashioned, bigoted, irrational." Opponents of extending benefits worried that subsidizing unmarried mothers might lead to more unmarried mothers. They were mocked. Who would have a baby out of wedlock simply for a few paltry benefits?

More women than you might think, McArdle writes:

Of course, change didn't happen overnight. But the marginal cases did have children out of wedlock, which made it more acceptable for the next marginal case to do so. Meanwhile, women who wanted to get married essentially found themselves in competition for young men with women who were willing to have sex, and bear children, without forcing the men to take any responsibility. This is a pretty attractive proposition for most young men. So despite the fact that the sixties brought us the biggest advance in birth control ever, illegitimacy exploded.

As Pearlstein and Sawhill both note, marriage in the inner city has now more or less been destroyed. Sawhill further observes that sexual norms that encourage sex prior to marriage have a profound effect on men. "[M]en no longer have to provide much, if anything,

in return for as much sex as they want." She points to studies showing that the most striking thing about the sex lives of the recent generation isn't that they're having more sex or even sex with more partners—they're not—but that their sexual relationships have become much more casual. Yet, she then inexplicably writes: "Men's failure to obtain higher levels of education at a time when the job market requires and rewards it—while their sisters breezed right past them educationally—is one of the great puzzles of our era."

IT IS A FEW PAGES LATER WHERE SHE notes that divorce hurts boys more than girls and that that may be one reason men trail women in educational achievement and job prospects, which in turn leads them to be less marriageable. Now imagine that women are simultaneously made barren by the state, which is at the same time further encouraging women to lean into careers, while men have less incentive than ever to do the same. One doesn't imagine sexual relationships becoming more serious. Who knows how mass sterilization would play out, but it is not unreasonable to suppose it could make the dystopian novel *Children of Men*, about the consequences of worldwide infertility, seem like a documentary.

Pearlstein interviewed Lawrence Cooper, a political scientist at Carleton College. He argued that

The success—and in the long run, even the survival—of self-government requires more than a wise constitution supplemented by prosperity. Self-government also requires a citizenry with certain dispositions and character traits. Some of these traits, or virtues, are private or domestic. These are the qualities necessary for success and satisfaction amid a modern, commercial society: moderation, self-control, the ability to defer gratification, and the like.

He also called for "public virtues, the qualities that make for spirited, intelligent, and responsible citizenship." These, as he puts it, are the "vigorous virtues," qualities such as "respect for the rights of others, protectiveness toward others, patriotism, and the ability and inclination to engage in civic life."

If we are lucky, such virtues may still be cultivated in the few families we have left. But no one should imagine them being nurtured by a mass, government-nudged sterilization of the fecund.

Mollie Ziegler Hemingway is a senior editor at The Federalist.

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