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A Call for a New Revisionism

Scholarship on the Black Family since the Moynihan Report

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The decline of marriage among African Americans has been one of the most dramatic social changes in recent American history. Since 1940, rates of divorce and nonmarriage have soared among Black adults, and, as a result, the percentage of Black children born to unmarried mothers has risen from 17 percent to 70 percent.

Since 1965, scholars have taken two distinct positions on these trends. One view, which we call the "economistic" position, maintains that the decline in marriage has been harmful for African Americans and that the root cause of the decline has been a lack of economic opportunities for Black men. The second position, the "revisionist" view, agrees that structural forces have placed pressure on Black families—but it sees the rise of the single-mother family as a viable and in some ways beneficial response to these pressures. Thus, economistic and revisionist scholars agree that economic forces discourage marriage for many African Americans, but they disagree as to whether or not the corresponding rise in single-mother families is a good thing.

We argue that both schools of thought are flawed. Both place an inordinate amount of emphasis on economic forces in analyzing African American family structure. The revisionist position in particular also ignores a large body of empirical evidence indicating that marriage fosters greater well-being for African American men, women, and children.

We call for a "new revisionism" in the field of African American family studies. This new approach acknowledges that economic forces have an important impact on family formation, and need attention. But, at the same time, it pulls the family back from the grip of an economic determinism that treats the family as a passive category, a mere product of economic forces. A new revisionism also recognizes anew that marriage matters, that civilizations depend in large measure upon the capacity of men to become good fathers, and that African American children, no less than other children, need fathers who will love and nurture them.

The Economistic Position, Part I

The economistic position is not so much the ideology of a particular group as it is a certain coherent perspective on African American family structure. It perhaps originated with E. Franklin Frazier, an immensely influential scholar who, in the 1940s, was one of the first to connect "racial barriers to employment," "the Negro family," and the problems of the inner city.

The economistic position, as a school of thought, rests on two interconnected arguments. The first is that the collapse of marriage among poor African Americans, resulting in high rates of father absence and the now firmly entrenched norm of single-mother households, does *not* represent strength or resilience as much as weakness and even pathology. To the economistic scholar, fatherlessness is a sign and source of social disintegration and it engenders many of the other ills associated with poor, Black communities. As Kenneth B. Clark put it in 1965, the Black ghetto is "a world of broken homes and illegitimacy," which creates "chronic, self-perpetuating pathology." In short, father absence is a problem that begets other problems.

The second key argument of economism is that marriage has declined in African American communities due to certain structural forces: Because Black men are economically marginalized and have limited job opportunities, they have a difficult time playing the traditional role of husband-as-breadwinner. This means that many Black men are unable to derive satisfaction from "settling down" and thus choose not to do so. Black women also have much less incentive to marry because they are unlikely to achieve greater economic stability by marrying. Thus, the argument goes, if more African Americans are to establish and maintain healthy marriages, Black men must first have improved employment opportunities. The overall economistic argument, then, postulates that economic hardship creates social ills by encouraging dysfunctional family structure. Broken families are a problem, but they are just a reflection of economic forces.

Undoubtedly, the economistic argument's heyday came in 1965 with the release of *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, better known as the "Moynihan Report." Written by then-Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the report sought to build support for more aggressive labor policies by drawing a connection between unemployment and family breakdown in Black America. Its thesis, which drew heavily from the work of E. Franklin Frazier, was essentially a recapitulation of economism: Without better economic opportunities for Black men, the Black family will continue its slide towards "complete breakdown," and, as a result, African Americans will be unable to achieve what Moynihan believed was the next step in the civil rights revolution, an "equality of results" with White Americans.

The report went to the White House on May 4, 1965. One month later, on June 4, President Johnson publicly endorsed the report's main thesis in one of the most important speeches of his presidency, "To Fulfill These Rights," delivered at Howard University. In the speech, using language borrowed directly from the Moynihan Report, Johnson declared, "This is the next and more profound stage of the battle for civil rights. We seek . . . equality as a fact and as a result." The most significant barrier to equality, according to Johnson, was "the breakdown of Negro family structure," which had to be reversed, first and foremost, by expanding economic opportunities for Black men. Specific policies for strengthening the Black family would be sought immediately, announced the president, in a White House conference called "To Fulfill These Rights," which was to be held in the near future.

Unfortunately, for the proponents of economism, Moynihan's depiction of the Black family as a "tangle of pathology" quickly became the subject of intense national controversy. More than any other utterance, that phrase stirred to action those scholars who, in seeking to rebut Moynihan, developed the basic principles of revisionism, which vehemently rejected the idea that the Black family was "breaking down." As a result of this backlash, the economistic argument quickly vanished from the

political discourse. The entire subject of family structure was not so much as broached at the very conference devoted to it. In academia, too, economism quickly fell out of favor.

The Revisionist Position

Writing in 1995, M. Belinda Tucker and Claudia Mitchell-Kernan noted that the Moynihan Report was "a turning point for both scholarly and political assessment of the African American family" and became "the single most important stimulus" for a "new direction of inquiry" among scholars concerned with the Black family. That new perspective, frequently called "revisionism," was first suggested by scholars like William Ryan in the immediate aftermath of the Moynihan Report, and then fleshed out and reinforced in a series of highly influential books on the Black family, including *Black Families in White America* by Andrew Billingsley (1968); *The Strength of Black Families* by Robert Hill (1971); *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* by Carol B. Stack (1974); and *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World Slaves Made* by Eugene Genovese (1974).

The key argument of the revisionist perspective is that the current reality of Black family structure, characterized by high rates of divorce and nonmarital childbearing, does not represent deviation or decline, but rather resourcefulness and resilience. As scholars Elmer and Joanne Martin say, what appears to the outsider "to be a broken home . . . may really be a vital part of a strong and flexible extended family." That is, African American single mothers, supported by relatives, friends, and boyfriends, can create a family environment that is as functional and supportive as the traditional nuclear family. In *Black Families in White America*, Andrew Billingsley insists that all contemporary "family structures" in the Black community "can sustain strong and viable family life." The Black family, in all its forms, is "an absorbing, adaptive, and amazingly resilient mechanism for the socialization of its children and the civilization of its society."

But what about the notion that fathers play a unique role in raising children, one that cannot easily be replicated? Revisionists commonly answer this charge with two arguments. The first is that fathers are just a cluster of variables that can be separated and reconstituted in new forms. "Parental role behavior," Carol Stack reports, "is a composite of many behavior patterns and these rights and duties can be shared or transferred to other individuals." Anyone, from a grandparent to a distant relative to a mother's boyfriend, can serve as a "play daddy" and do what a father does. In fact, "even a grandmother or aunt could be a father figure." The second argument is that there is no proof that father absence has any effect on children. Thus, revisionism completely rejects economism's claim that family structure matters.

The revisionists do, however, agree with the economistic scholars on one point: If there are any problems facing the Black family, they stem from outside structures and forces, especially racism and the absence of good jobs. "Whatever ails the Negro family is a reflection of ailments in the society at large." Case closed.

Another important argument of revisionism, which extends quite logically from its premises, is that renewing marriage as an institution is not a realistic or desirable strategy for improving the well-being of Black children. After all, if Black children do not need their fathers, then what would be the point in encouraging marriage? There would be none. And, if marriage were actually a good

thing, then the only way to promote it would be by changing American society, not addressing Black family life directly. Whatever the case may be, writes Donna L. Franklin, scholars and policymakers should drop the issue and "accept the irreversibility of the high levels of nonmarriage" in Black America.

Furthermore, many revisionists assert that pointing to fatherlessness as a core problem in African American families reveals an uninformed perspective that reinforces racism. It blames the victim when American society is the real problem.

Today, more than four decades after the Moynihan Report, revisionism still sets the tone for much of the scholarly discussion of the African American family.

Economism, Part II

Our overview of scholarship on the Black family would not be complete without mentioning the contributions of William Julius Wilson. During the late 1980s and 1990s, Wilson, then a sociologist at the University of Chicago, almost single-handedly revived the economistic argument as a subject for legitimate academic inquiry. His two highly influential works, *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987) and *When Work Disappears* (1996), firmly restated and defended the proposition previously put forward by Moynihan and Clark in the 1960s and by E. Franklin Frazier and others in the 1940s. He argued that the trend toward father absence in Black America, a result of economic forces, is a crisis, not a benign development, and certainly not an achievement to be praised, justified, or defended. In remaking this argument and drawing attention to "the fading inner city family" and the "antagonistic" male-female relationships in Black America, Wilson directly challenged revisionist orthodoxy and helped to create a space for post-revisionist analyses of African American family life.

Flaws in Revisionism and Economism

There are, to be sure, many good things about the revisionist and economistic perspectives. Economism has highlighted the important connections between father absence in Black America and the poor job prospects facing many young Black men. Revisionists have rightly pointed out, albeit perhaps in different terms, that it is wrong to assume that fatherless households are "broken" in some absolute sense and therefore to be described and understood solely in negative terms.

At the same time, we believe that there are serious and fundamental flaws in both perspectives.

To start with, the revisionist position is, to be blunt, demonstrably and empirically false. It is rendered incorrect not so much by what it chooses to discuss—the strengths and strategies of single-mother families—but rather by what it omits: It systematically ignores or denies the economistic argument that father absence is typically detrimental to children, women, and men alike—an argument that is now supported by a mountain of social scientific evidence.[1] Certainly, it is good to study single-mother families and to study them on their own terms as well as comparatively. But when revisionists go beyond this pursuit of truth and declare that family structure is irrelevant or that fathers can be simulated, they are constructing a story that has nothing to do with empirical reality.

Likewise, the revisionist axiom that Black family structure is *nothing but* resilient and that *all* problems facing African Americans are created by external forces is really an assertion and not a conclusion based on evidence.

How such flawed scholarship arose and has persisted seems clear: The revisionist school of thought was created, and has been sustained, as a rebuttal to the statement that the Black family sits amid a "tangle of pathology." By basing itself *against* this vague statement, rather than *for* the truth, or at least *on* the facts, revisionism has left itself without a real standard against which to weigh arguments and evidence. The result is that revisionist arguments, in practice, often drift into little more than the inverse of what is being argued against. Thus, William Ryan writes that the Moynihan Report "singles out the 'unstable Negro family' as the cause of Negro inequality," but Ryan then asserts that the current conditions of the African American family "reflect current effects of contemporaneous discrimination. They are results, not causes." Never mind that he exaggerates Moynihan's argument. The point is that he identifies a deterministic argument he doesn't like, but then simply offers its inverse, which is an equally deterministic argument. Andrew Billingsley, by way of criticizing the Moynihan Report for "singling out instability in the Negro family as the causal factor for the difficulties Negroes face in the white society," insists bluntly: "It is quite the other way around." That is, for Billingsley, White society is the causal factor for the difficulties that Negro families face. Billingsley reiterates this thesis of causation throughout his book *Black Families in White America*, even suggesting in the preface that it is his "major theme." He says, "Whatever ails the Negro family is a reflection of ailments in the society at large." Billingsley therefore takes an important and clearly valid proposition—namely, that families do not exist in a vacuum but are influenced by the surrounding society—and comes very close to making it an absolute.

It is also important to note that one of the premises of revisionism no longer applies. Whereas it may once have been at least theoretically possible to construe the Moynihan position as a racist attack on Black America, it is no longer possible to do so. The problems of father absence and divorce have skyrocketed in White America, too, and can no longer be associated only with a particular group.

The major flaw of the economistic position (also found in revisionism) is that, insofar as family problems are acknowledged by the analyst, they are immediately reconceptualized and subsumed into wider problems of social, political, and economic structure. In particular, for the economistic school of thought, economic structures are the cause and family structures are the effect. As a result, methodologically, these analysts treat the family largely as a residual category, or secondary phenomenon: a set of relationships that are passive and receptive, guided by active economic and political forces that are external to it.

Yes, economics matters in family life as in all areas of life. And yes, merely to blame individuals for their problems while ignoring the surrounding social ecology, including its economic dimension, is intellectually fraudulent and politically dangerous. But at the same time, it is scientifically erroneous to treat marriage, fatherhood, and family life as dependent variables in a model in which only one variable—usually the availability of good jobs—is deemed to be independent, or capable of causing large-scale change. As an empirical matter, in the real world, things simply don't work that way. In fact, there is a large and growing body of evidence that casts serious doubt on the economistic position.[2]

For a New Revisionism

For the reasons detailed above, we believe that the time is right for a "New Revisionism."

This new revisionism should embody two main principles. First, marriage is important and African American children, no less than White children, need their fathers. Period. No excuses, no equivocations.

Such a proposition should hardly be controversial. The available social scientific evidence indicates that African American children tend to do best when raised by their own two married parents.[3] In addition, the pro-marriage view was once apparently shared by a large majority of scholars. In 1966, even as the debate around the Moynihan Report raged, the revisionist-leaning scholar Elizabeth Herzog wrote that it was a "point of consensus" among scholars that "a harmonious two-parent home is better for children than a one-parent home."

Herzog also foresaw what was to become a major point of contention in the debates over the Black family: the issue of causality. She observed that most scholars agreed that "strong action is needed to remedy adverse conditions that have existed [for Black Americans] far too long," but that scholars disagreed as to where the roots of the problems lay. Some blamed economic forces, and others blamed fatherlessness.

This brings us to the second principle of our new revisionism: Scholars should cease treating causality as an either/or issue, as though phenomena were produced by one single, underlying cause in a linear fashion. In today's context, this means that scholars should stop treating the family, including the Black family, as a derivative institution, essentially a reflection of external forces. They should instead treat the family as a partly autonomous entity—an institution that produces as well as absorbs change. After all, the family does have agency. It creates personal and social realities, including economic facts. It shapes its members in deep and complex ways and is therefore greater than the sum of its parts. It is an institution that mediates and influences the external ecology. It generates, as well as sometimes ceases to generate, vital human and social capital.

Recognizing these facts, a new revisionism will make the family itself the central subject of inquiry and will incorporate within it a range of perspectives and disciplines. As it is, much of the nation's academic thinking about the state of Black families comes from two fields, sociology and economics. Furthermore, much—perhaps most—of this insight comes from scholars whose main area of expertise is not the family, but poverty or some other issue.

This intellectual framework is valuable, but it is ultimately insufficient if our goal is to understand *the family*. A topic of inquiry in which the family is a corollary concern, relevant but ultimately tangential to the main hypothesis, strongly increases the likelihood that the family will be viewed as a derivative of something else rather than as a crucial subject in and of itself. For these reasons, a new revisionism will first insist that *the focus is the family*, not some other topic. And because a new revisionism will insist on a complex, multivariate model of causation, it will also insist upon a thoroughly interdisciplinary approach, including psychiatry and psychology, anthropology, history, philosophy, theology, and other fields in the humanities and human sciences, as well as sociology and economics. It will be especially important to include psychology, psychiatry, and psychiatrically

informed anthropology, for these are precisely the academic disciplines most equipped to probe inside sociological generalizations about external structures and trends. These disciplines will help focus scholarly attention on the values, attitudes, individual behaviors, and interpersonal relationships that constitute the immediate, sensual reality of family life and some of the most important sinews of the family as a social institution. In short, these disciplines can help us get "inside" the family where, arguably, the most directly relevant data on family well-being is found.

Such an approach is not without precedent. Orlando Patterson, psychologist Brenda Wade, and others have argued that comparatively conflictual male-female relationships, stemming in part from the historic and current marginalization of Black males, have also contributed importantly to Black father absence and to the weakness of Black family structure. This thesis demonstrates how important psychological and psychiatric insights might be for enriching scholarship on Black families. Likewise, Christopher Jencks and others have argued that changing *societal* (not Black or subcultural) values regarding sexuality, procreation, and marriage are the most important reasons for changes in family structure since the 1960s, including changes in Black family structure. This approach also has the potential to greatly enrich our understanding of the African American family.

In the end, what we are calling for is not the victory of any one perspective on the family. Rather, we are calling for scholars to focus on the family itself as a subject of inquiry and to allow for a multiplicity of perspectives on the family within this endeavor. After years of determinism and reductionist analyses, the time for change is here.

Endnotes

1. Lorraine Blackman et al., *The Consequences of Marriage for African Americans* (New York: Institute for American Values, 2005); Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially* (New York: Doubleday, 2000).
2. See, for example, Christopher Jencks, *Rethinking Social Policy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 133; Robert I. Lerman, "Economic Opportunities of Young Men and Family Formation," *American Economic Review* 72, no. 2 (May 1989): 62-66; Robert I. Lerman, "A National Profile," in Robert I. Lerman and Theodora Ooms, eds., *Young Unwed Fathers: Changing Roles and Emerging Policies* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 42, 47-48; Robert D. Mare and Christopher Winship, "Socioeconomic Change and the Decline of Marriage for Blacks and Whites," in Christopher Jencks and Paul E. Peterson, eds., *The New Urban Underclass* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1991), 195.
3. Blackman et al., *The Consequences of Marriage.*

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About This Brief

This brief is based on a longer essay with the same title written in 1998 by David Blankenhorn. You can read the original essay at http://center.americanvalues.org/?p=72.

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National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI) was founded in 1994 to confront the most consequential social problem of our time: the widespread absence of fathers from children's lives. NFI's mission is to improve the well-being of children by increasing the proportion of children growing up with involved, responsible, and committed fathers in their lives. NFI accomplishes this mission through educating and inspiring all people, especially fathers; equipping and developing leaders; and engaging every sector of society.

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