

Interrelationships Between Economic Institutions and the Family

by OTTO POLLAK*

A group of social scientists—five sociologists, a psychiatrist, and a psychologist—met in Washington June 20 and 21 at the invitation of the Commissioner of Social Security. They discussed “the compelling priorities for sustaining and enriching family life in the United States that should guide the Social Security Administration.” The following paper by Dr. Pollak was presented at the meeting.

THE DISTRIBUTION of economic functions among the members of the family unit in the United States has changed significantly with the degree of urbanization and industrialization that we have witnessed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In order to understand the nature of this change, it is necessary first of all to dispel the Victorian stereotype, that the man is the worker and the woman is not, and that we have only recently introduced the woman into the work force. Actually women have always been part of the work force under agricultural arrangements. They have been temporarily removed from productive work only in the city life of the Victorian bourgeoisie and have in the last half century entered new lines of work.

FAMILY LIFE IN AGRARIAN SOCIETIES

Where nonmechanized agriculture is the main form of economic effort in a population, we have and have always had husband and wife, children and aged parents, bound together in one economic unit and engaged, or at least potentially engaged, in productive work as well as in consumption. Three-generation families and patriarchies are likely to be found in such a system together with a clear-cut division of labor between husband and wife, male children and female children.

One of the most beautiful descriptions of these arrangements is Arensberg's work, *The Irish*

Countryman, but there are many others. “Growing Up and Its Price in Three Puerto Rican Sub-Cultures,” by Wolf, presents a similar situation closer to our current concerns.¹

Under such agricultural conditions we have role patterns of male and female behavior which are characterized by great distinctiveness. Furthermore, fathers at work are seen by the children, and in consequence the economically productive functions of both parents are neither distant from the children nor interchangeable. One of the great problems of socialization, the development of sex-appropriate behavior, is thereby greatly facilitated by expedient learning of role absorption.

In addition, all family members share in the resource quality for one another not only in emotional and interactional terms but also in economic terms. Children are not only responsibilities, challenges, bridges to immortality; they are also economic assets. They do not only serve the parents' needs for self-perpetuation but also the parents' needs for self-maintenance. As long as the three-generation family is universal they also present an insurance for support in old age. Thus, having pronounced economic resource quality for their parents, children are in a better position to counteract the negative elements in the ambivalence which all child rearing with its demands and its stimulation must create in the parents.

This is not to say the children would not rather play than work and that they do not resent the chores, the supervision, and the harshness which growing up in rural families of patriarchal structure usually implies. It does mean to say, however, that these children are likely to have the reality of economic value as a base line for interaction with their parents.

¹ Stuart A. Queen and John B. Adams, *The Family in Various Cultures*, Lippincott Company, 1952, pages 239-258; Melvin J. Vincent and Jackson Mayers, *New Foundation for Industrial Sociology*, D. Van Nostrand Co., Inc., 1959, page 11; Conrad M. Arensberg, *The Irish Countryman*, Macmillan Company, 1937; K. Wolf, “Growing Up and Its Price in Three Puerto Rican Sub-Cultures,” *Psychiatry*, August 1947, pages 261-269; and others.

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FAMILY LIFE UNDER INDUSTRIALIZATION

With the shift of work from the field to factory and office, with the move of families from the farm to the city, productive work and the worker have been largely separated from family life and the absence of the breadwinner during daytime hours has become the outstanding effect of our economic arrangements upon the composition and the functioning of the family.² On weekdays the average American family is, for all practical purposes, fatherless and spouseless. Children have evening fathers and weekend fathers. Some infants, whose bottle feeding permits this contact, have also night fathers. Wives have evening husbands, night husbands, and weekend husbands, but the daytime hours on weekdays are shared exclusively by mothers and children. Unemployed or sick would have to be the father in our society who is within the experiential range of his preschool child sufficient to permit an easy incorporation of the father's self by the child. For this reason our children encounter parenthood largely in terms of femininity before they enter school, and there they continue the experience, at least in grade school, because salaries for grade-school teachers are so low that men cannot afford to make grade-school teaching a way of earning a living. There again we have an economic factor of great weight in the sex typing of behavior of our children.

Thus, in our society, due to our arrangements of work and the economics of teaching, boys and girls grow up under an overwhelming impact of femininity, with consequences which have frequently been misperceived as expressions of pathology rather than as the results of social unavailability under present economic conditions.

The nature of this femininity again is largely conditioned by the absence of the spouse and father from the home. Decisions have to be made on the basis of immediacy in the daily routine of living and thus do not permit consultation with the father. Discipline cannot always be deferred, and what is perhaps equally significant, the burden of company with children cannot be distributed equitably between father and mother. The mother is by force of circumstances a decision-maker, a disciplinarian, and a victim of her daytime confinement with children. To find her de-

² Theodore Caplow, *The Sociology of Work*, University of Minnesota Press, 1954, page 253.

scribed as loudmouthed, emotionally rejecting, masculine, a "Mom," represents, in my opinion, often a clinical injustice.

In the light of our economic arrangements it cannot be considered as pathology but as the result of economic enforced conditions of family life which amount, for all practical purposes, to single parenthood during daytime. That this condition is endorsed by the social desirability of the product, the personality type which it produces in children, has been pointed out by Erikson.³

Of course, such a mother—having to perform originally male as well as originally female roles, frequently burdened to the point where she cannot control her resentment, and for all her pains accused by psychiatry and social work of having failed in emotional mothering and sometimes also in physical nurture—could not help but produce children who in adolescence and early childhood are ready to pick up and go.

The historical mold which has produced the identity of him who is going places and doing things is, of course, also in part a result of learning which was produced by the economic conditions favoring social and geographic mobility in our history.

CORPORATE LIFE

The impact of the frontier and of opportunity on a new continent is, of course, part and parcel of our historical understanding, of our folklore, and of our psychological analyses of the American national character. What is perhaps not stressed enough and sometimes positively and dramatically denied is the fact that our modern form of corporate life requires the same type of personality.⁴ In order to be promoted in a corporation it is helpful if you are ready for a transfer to another place.⁵

To become the superior of people who have

³ Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1950, pages 247-257.

⁴ William H. Whyte, Jr., *The Organization Man*, Simon and Schuster, 1956.

⁵ Dr. Maccoby, a member of the panel, interrupted: "I can substantiate that very nicely in an industrial study I once did in which a classmate of mine, an actuary, was being assigned to a job in an insurance company he didn't want, but he said, 'There is one thing I have learned around here. You don't turn these things down.'"

known you as an equal or as a subordinate is wrought with difficulty. The start in an executive position where nobody has known you in a lower echelon is much more feasible than promotion in the same location because it is free from the perceptual and emotional trap of viewing you in terms of what you have been in the past. Apparently it is almost impossible to incorporate new experiences into a perceptual schema that you have developed of a man or woman. People don't age for us easily, perceptually, at least.⁶

The new American pioneer moves on to frontiers in the echelons of management. In growth industries there is also the call of competitive bidding for manpower from one firm to the next, and engineers in order to be fast risers must always be on the move.

Lest this picture become one-sided it should be pointed out, however, that automation is shortening the absence of the father from the home in certain strata of the population and that the increase of demand for skilled and semiskilled people is conducive to relative geographic stability of many persons in the labor force.

Unquestionably, there are several patterns of family life in our society today, and perhaps one of the most important differentiations is that between the blue-collar family and the white-collar family.

Since the investment in training a workman today is too great to make his dismissal a feasible disciplinary measure, greater stability of employment seems to be in the making for the blue-collar worker. In the visible future, therefore, we seem to be heading for two categories of father's absence in the experience of family living: In the professional and managerial group, relatively long absences during daytime without any traceable indication of shortening; in the working class, relatively shorter daily absences with some suggestion of further shortening. Connecting with these two trends there will be the likelihood of change of residence for the whole family in the white-collar group as the father moves from job to job in the company or from company to company, and relative family stability of residence in the blue-collar group as father's training makes him a personal asset where he is.

In spite of these differences, the effect of ab-

⁶ Gustav Ichheiser, "Misunderstandings in Human Relations," Special issue of the *American Journal of Sociology*, September 1949, part 2, pages 43-44.

sence of the spouse and father during the daytime hours of the week will remain pronounced. Having considered this impact on the roles of the wife and mother, we might also consider the aspects of masculinity which the breadwinner who leaves for work in the morning and returns home in the evening presents to the wife and children.

MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY

In recent years we have largely thought that women have become masculine. This is one of our national concerns, at least in the mental health serving professions. And we have treatment goals, such as identification with one's own sex. But isn't there another side to the medal? How about the femininity in the man?

In the morning he is not a self-directing agent; he must leave because he is an employee, and he must leave relatively early because he is a commuter. When he comes home, most of his vitality is spent and he will show considerable dependency strivings and expressions of passivity which need not be more than the result of simple temporary depletion. If his hostilities have been stimulated during the hours at the office he has probably been forced to suppress them because employees had better get mad at home rather than on the job. There is then the likelihood of displacement upon the wife and children in the evening. Masculinity which has shown itself at its best in factory and office now appears at home in the reaction to the emotional demands of this effort. Dependency and displaced hostility will loom larger in the children's image of masculinity than could be visualized under other conditions of work.

When the children have reached school age a strange similarity in the use of time develops between them and their father. They are permitted alike to stay at home over the weekend. It is only natural that they gang up together for a good time and that the father, instead of being a model of authority, is tempted to become playmate and pal. Not only that, he becomes also weekend handy man, and it is difficult to see where, under such conditions, the American child, or the American wife for that matter, can form a picture of masculinity which can be considered as strong, as a resource in adversity, or as a model of identity worthy of cultivation and develop-

ment, particularly against a background of the perception of the Victorian father.

WOMEN AS WAGE EARNERS

Another economic factor which has tended to blur the distinctiveness of masculinity and femininity in our society is increasing participation of women in the labor force as earners both on the professional and on the occupational level. That is, any woman has the potential of being emergency breadwinner in the case of the father's unemployment, disease, death, or desertion.

Furthermore, women frequently fulfill preparatory breadwinner functions, such as are performed by the young secretary or teacher who helps her husband to attend professional school with a view to financial enhancement of the family's condition in the future. This, however, creates considerable role confusion. It gives the young wife a quasi-parental role. She sends her husband to school the way a father sends his son to school. The student father is a phenomenon better known to caseworkers in family service agencies and to personnel in deans' offices than to social scientists, but it needs no great psychological sophistication to see that here defenses may be pierced, Oedipal attachments forced out from repression, and traditional self-images shattered.

Perhaps more universal and less loaded with dynamic difficulties is woman's modern role as raiser of the family's standard of living—the mother who works to be able to buy extras for the children, to finance a trip, or to provide special types of education. Still here, too, economic conditions and economic activities may change the picture of masculinity and femininity which are presented in our textbooks. The woman who works is not only an economic phenomenon; she also has through her action changed the masculinity pattern of her husband and both the masculinity and femininity image of her children.

In essence, therefore, I should like to present for consideration the proposition that our economic arrangements have tended to decrease the differentiation between male and female functions, have removed the father from the home, with the effect of providing at least our preschool and elementary school children with a preponderance of femininity in their experiences of adult-

hood, and have permitted them in the majority of instances to see fathers only in morning, evening, or holiday mood rather than in the important facets of functioning adulthood. Against our background knowledge of what maleness and femaleness used to mean in terms of social roles we have come to blame ourselves for failing in male and female role performance and are blamed by others for failure in sexual identification. What actually seems to be at work here is that both the client and the social worker, the patient and the psychiatrist, work with yardsticks of masculinity and femininity which in the middle of the twentieth century are obsolete.

EXCHANGEABILITY OF PERSONS AND THINGS

A corporate life and bureaucracy are irrevocably intertwined. Almost everybody has a supervisor. Everybody is at least potentially replaceable because otherwise the supervisor would not be an even imaginary threat. The more one appears to be likely material for advancement, the greater the necessity to be replaceable in the lower echelon because, obviously, if you are indispensable where you are it would be harmful to the corporation to promote you.

The division of labor which we have carried so far in our society similarly requires the replaceability of the human parts of an organization if the whole is not to be at the mercy of disease, deterioration, or ethical failing of the individual. Finally, one must be replaceable because one will have to retire from the job in order to create career opportunities for younger men who in turn will have to abandon the positions into which they are moving as a result of the retirement of their superiors. In consequence, employees in our world have little chance to consider themselves as individuals and ultimately as highly valued. A feeling of self-worth for replaceable people is a tenuous proposition indeed.

Similarly, our system of mass production has made tangible possessions replaceable. We have paid for our higher standard of living with an "open stock" way of life, where nothing is our own or anybody else's alone because we are likely to find it in the home of a friend, on the back of a stranger, and in the showcase of a store in a town other than our own. The American

woman is the best dressed woman in Western civilization, but except for a very few upper-class individuals she cannot wear any dress of hers without awareness that thousands, if not tens of thousands, of other women wear the same dress, and if they meet a woman wearing the same dress as they are doing at the moment they are annoyed if not disturbed. Although the man in the gray flannel suit and the man who wears a blue collar are less affected by such experiences, they also know that they use the same fountain pens, the same books, and the same tools as others. They cannot remain unmindful of the replaceability of their working equipment.

For people who are replaceable in their jobs and own things that are replaceable, family life represents one of the most gratifying compensations. It is true that in the family femininity and masculinity as our grandparents knew them may have become blurred, but in the family one is still an individual and replaceable only at the price of catastrophe, suffering, and heartbreak, if at all.

Divorce, though frequent, is still not a routine move. Interaction with one's spouse and one's children is still an individualized adventure. The quest for identity has its best chances in the family. The uniqueness of one's own development takes place there, is observed there, and nobody wants you to be replaceable. In that sense the family is interrelated with our modern economic arrangements in terms of point and counterpoint and it represents a balance without which our modern life would seem to be greatly impoverished. Also it furnishes an opportunity to so arrange and use replaceable goods as to furnish the impression of uniqueness. Corporate offices in large companies have a definite tendency towards similarity. Partitions for middle management personnel show this tendency to the point of making certain types of equipment status symbols of a personnel category rather than identity symbols of an individual. The size of a desk, the material of which the water bottle is made, the rug on the floor—and its size—are group characteristics rather than individual possessions or expressions of individualized usage. In this respect, too, the home is the last American reserve of individualism, and the do-it-yourself movement has recognized the need created by such conditions.

Even more significant, perhaps, the American

family home is pretty much the last and only place where most Americans still experience tangible private property. Our corporate and bureaucratic working conditions have deprived most Americans, except farmers and professionals, of the ownership of their tools. This paper was written at a desk which belongs to the University of Pennsylvania, by a writer who sat on a chair which belongs to the University and who consulted books which he had taken from the University library. Blue- and white-collar workers alike have become separated from the ownership of their equipment.

Our savings and other provisions for the future consist of pension expectations, social security claims, annuities, stocks, and bonds. Whatever their legal enforceability, their purchasing power at the time of maturation, their qualities of investment or speculation, they are intangible and thus require great powers of abstraction to be enjoyed as expressions of private property. Except for rental properties and farms, which form part of the experience of only relatively small numbers of people, today the family home represents the major tangible property experience of the American people.⁷

AFFLUENCE

The last major characteristic of our economic institutions which I want to submit for consideration is the unprecedented distribution of financial adequacy of earnings in the population. One of the first impressions of the European coming to the United States is that it was easier to be poor in Europe than it is in this country.

The reasons and implications of a state of affairs which can create such an impression are numerous and complex. The impact upon family life is partly positive and partly negative. It is interesting to note that a professor of economics at Harvard, that is, a man who was trained to earn his living by teaching the science of scarcity, found it possible to publish a book under the title, *The Affluent Society*.⁸ This unique distribution of relative financial ease makes the economically disadvantaged family in this country, at least in popular perception if not

⁷ Otto Pollak, "A Family Diagnosis Model," *The Social Service Review*, March 1960, page 24.

⁸ John K. Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1958.

in terms of statistics, a deviant family. In Europe it is the common lot. In this country it is an exception. The American family simply has enough to live on in such numbers that we can define such well-being as a state of normalcy. This robs the poor of their status of being representatives of mankind and demotes them to the status of failures. Failures, however, in America have a moral connotation⁹ unless overwhelming evidence to the contrary suggests itself, and it is frequently a function of organically oriented medicine to show that failure is fate, rather than demerit.

Here we are faced with an extraordinary error resulting from a theological proposition which presented a psychological burden exceeding human tolerance. Calvin's theory of predestination and the resulting division of mankind into a group irrevocably doomed to damnation and a group irrevocably selected for salvation brought to the pastoral work of the Presbyterian clergy the ever-recurring quest of the parishioners for a criterion which would permit them to identify themselves as saved.

With considerable psychological truth the pastoral reply given was that not to doubt one's salvation was the criterion—in other words, freedom from anxiety. The human mind being what it is, this answer provided no psychological relief, and the question arose now how the believer could manage not to doubt his salvation—somewhat similar to the question of the obsessive neurotic, how he could be helped to think of other things.

To this the answer, partly given in pastoral practice and partly discovered almost in the nature of an ever-repeated "Aha!" phenomenon, was activity in the here and now, the praise of the Lord through secular activity productively and ascetically performed.¹⁰

Such a mental discipline with the opportunities available in the area now comprised by the United States had to produce tangible economic success, and this in turn led to a far-reaching change in the Puritanical value system. Through the ever-recurring experience of economic success as a result of anxiety-reducing activity, the Puritans began to conceive of secular success as a

criterion of salvation and thus of the worth of the individual. And in the long run, through the influence of New England-bred and New England-trained writers and school teachers, large numbers of non-Protestant and non-Anglo-Saxon people in the United States came to accept economic success as an index of personal worth.

Actually, this success criterion spilled over into other areas of life such as success in child rearing, success in achieving sexual satisfaction, success in making friends and influencing people, success in identifying with one's own sex. The American has become beset with the idea that failure is the indication of a personality defect, and against this background of evaluation the low-income family has become not only an economic problem but also a problem of self-devaluation and a problem for the justification of welfare services.

In this context a paper by Robert J. Lampman on the study of employment, growth, and price levels, prepared for consideration by the Joint Economic Committee of Congress, has considerable significance¹¹ for the understanding of interaction between our economic institutions and family life. By pointing out that women breadwinners, Negroes, and the old-age group appear to be the major sources of family poverty in the United States, it clarifies the untenability of the moral and psychological condemnation of economic inadequacy. Actually the identification of these three groups suggests the likelihood of social change as an ameliorating factor as well as a chance for social intervention. That womanhood, Negroes, and age are not personality deviations is a valuable awareness to hold on to in periods such as ours, in which, on the basis of a Puritanical heritage and with the help of psychiatric interpretations, we tend to trace economic difficulties to failure of personality development. Over and beyond this gain from institutional analysis of trouble spots in our social fabric, there is also reason for optimism. That women are increasingly participating in the labor force and achieving equal pay for equal work is common knowledge. That nonwhite color—in the perspective of time—is a decreasing handicap, albeit presently still a severe one, is equally a matter

⁹ Gustav Ichheiser, op. cit., pages 40-41, 50; Otto Pollak, "Cultural Dynamics in Casework," *Social Casework*, July 1953, page 284.

¹⁰ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Scribners, 1930.

¹¹ Robert J. Lampman, *The Low Income Population and Economic Growth*, prepared for the use of the Joint Economic Committee, 1959 (Joint Committee Print, 86th Cong., 1st sess.).

of record and suggests need for vigilance and continued encouragement rather than a stance of defeatism.

THE AGED

As far as the aged are concerned, we are, of course, faced with a new family problem. The aged more than any other group are exposed to the aggravating impact of inflation. Furthermore, they are exposed to incongruities in terms of development which we consider healthy. Since we have decided to render the interaction between labor and management relatively peaceful by slowly devaluating the purchasing power of the dollar, since our defense expenditures suggest the same palliative for the financial manageability of our national armament, and since bad money always in human history has replaced good money, longevity presents a monetary problem that cannot be prefinanced. It therefore presents a potential source of demand upon adult sons and daughters which in our society will become increasingly burdensome due to lack of living space, straining of resources to meet our ever-increasing standards of living, the competing claims of the cost of child rearing, and the impact of taxation.¹²

Moreover, in our society where everything must grow if it is not to be considered as sick or requiring improvement, fixation of any type of in-

¹² Dan M. McGill, *Fundamentals of Private Pensions*, Pension Research Council, University of Pennsylvania, 1955, pages 3-5.

come on whatever level has negative implications. A fixed pension, a dividend that has not been increased in a long time, a fixed rental income, and a fixed annuity do not suffer only from loss of purchasing power; they also suffer from the social malaise with which we react generally to a stoppage of growth. Thus, aged households do not only present a claim for supplementary help from family resources. They present also a reminder to the younger family members that the good life is coming to an end with retirement and thus present a stimulus to individual and social anxiety.

If the economics of retirement in our society are to be brought in line with our other economic institutions, we will have in effect to schedule increases in social security benefits (in the past not only delayed but frequently not fully adequate to make up for inflation). We will have to schedule increases in annuities and in pensions and generally provide income experiences which do not have for the recipients and their family members the impact of anxiety and deterioration. No matter how small the basis with which we let retirement income start, as long as it is so structured that it will increase in the course of time, it will be in harmony with the demands of our culture and the hopes of the individual. No matter how substantial we make retirement income at the start, as long as it is so structured as to remain static, it will be felt to be out of tune with the demands of appropriate income development in our society and a source of apprehension and anxiety to the individual.

Recent Publications*

SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

CHILDREN'S BUREAU. *Comparison of Expenditures and Estimated Costs for Selected Juvenile Delinquency Services*, by Government Consulting Service, Fels Institute of Local and State Government, University of Pennsylvania. (Juvenile Delinquency: Facts/Facets, No. 10.) Washington: U. S. Govt. Print. Off., 1960. 48 pp. 25 cents.

* Prepared in the Library, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Orders for items listed should be directed to publishers and booksellers. Federal publications for which prices are listed should be ordered from the Superintendent of Documents, U. S. Government Printing Office, Washington 25, D. C.

Considers police, detention, and probation services and training schools.

CHILDREN'S BUREAU. *Handbook for Recreation*. (Children's Bureau Publication No. 231, rev. 1959.) Washington: U. S. Govt. Print. Off., 1960. 148 pp. 75 cents.

CHILDREN'S BUREAU. *In Search of Staff for Child Welfare*, by Bessie E. Trout. (Child Welfare Report No. 10.) Washington: The Bureau, 1960. 21 pp. Processed.

Outlines some current experiences in recruitment, with conclusions based on agency experience. Limited free distribution; apply to the Children's Bureau, Social Security Administration, Washington 25, D. C.

CHILDREN'S BUREAU. *Selected, Annotated Readings on Group Services in the Treatment and Control of Juvenile Delinquency*, compiled by Mary E. Blake. (Juvenile Delinquency: Facts/Facets, No. 3.) Washington, U. S. Govt. Print. Off., 1960. 17 pp. 15 cents.