

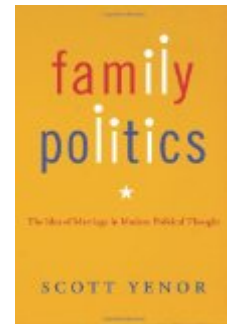


Scott Yenor. *Family Politics: The Idea of Marriage in Modern Political Thought*. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2011. xiv + 362 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-60258-305-4.

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The History and Politics of the Family

Scott Yenor's book, *Family Politics: The Idea of Marriage in Modern Political Thought*, tackles an incredibly ambitious task in its aim to understand marriage in political thought over the last several centuries. How does one survey a topic that is simultaneously as complex and as well trod as marriage? Yenor narrows his task via a couple of means. First, he surveys only a selection of well-known political theorists beginning with John Locke and ending with Pope John Paul II. According to Yenor, he has considered a mixture of influence, profundity, and representation to make his selections. Though he excludes Mary Wollstonecraft and Charles Darwin, for example, he examines Jean Jacques Rousseau, G. W. F. Hegel, John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx and Friederich Engels, Sigmund Freud, Simone de Beauvoir, David Popenoe, and a number of other thinkers. Yenor also narrows this ambitious topic by focusing on one question: how has the rise of individualism affected marriage and the family? To answer such a question, Yenor has to tackle some intersecting queries, such as what is marriage for? Does its purpose depend on gender difference? Does it depend on a division of labor? Must it last forever? Is independence or interdependence more important for the people in the marriage? What changes to marriage over the past few centuries have been good? Of central interest to subscribers of H-Childhood is the question of whether a good marriage provides cooperative child-rearing in order to produce the best citizens, the restraint of male drives, or something different entirely.

All of these questions help Yenor address the ef-

fects of individualism on the family. Yenor's approach to investigating each theorist's thought on the matter is comprehensive and insightful. He repeatedly brings the task of child-rearing back into conversations that focused only on relations between husbands and wives. For example, he condemns John Stuart Mill's belief that equality could arrive between men and women without addressing the problem that women perform most of the labor to raise a child. This is an important correction not only to Mill, but also to many contemporary conversations about marriage. He also shows significant overlap among various thinkers. Hegel and Pope John Paul II share an understanding of love as mystical, perpetual, and necessary for the fulfillment of human longing. De Beauvoir and Freud agree that the family is too child-centered. All the thinkers embrace the concept of freedom from paternal influence for children. Through his insightful reading, Yenor shows that thinking about family can lead to otherwise unexpected ideological alliances.

By covering so much, Yenor must necessarily leave out other issues. His thinkers mostly exist outside of their historical context without much of an acknowledgment that Locke was writing at a different moment than twentieth-century feminists in ways relating to the economy, the state, birth control, technology, etc., except in passing. Changes in what it means to raise and educate a child over time receive almost no scrutiny. In the end, Yenor concludes that many of the changes to marriage related to the rise of the individual have been problematic for children and for human society as a whole. The tri-

umph of liberalism has nearly destroyed our most important social value, interdependence. Contemporary social mores treat mutual dependence as degrading rather than as a source of social good. In this, Yenor shares some critiques with otherwise improbable allies like marriage-equality-critic-from-the-left Nancy Polikoff or feminist legal theorist Martha Fineman, whom Yenor dismisses in a footnote.[1] Like these two critics, Yenor considers the introduction of gender equality to marriage a welcome development. While Yenor sees a division of labor as necessary to produce dependent love, he states that that division does not have to accord with the gendered breadwinner-homemaker roles of yore. Women might perform “traditional” roles as homemakers, but men might engage in a larger share of household labor. For Yenor, both parents often do, and perhaps should, go to work outside the home.

However, Yenor’s other critiques of liberalism differ greatly from those of Fineman and Polikoff. Theorists on the left see the rise of the neoliberal individual as a fiction that perpetuates inequality within the family and among families. Women and the poor increasingly bear the whole burden of taking care of dependents, including children. But for Yenor, liberalism creates widespread selfishness even within the family, rather than inequality. Focusing upon the self hurts children. The rise of cohabitation with an aim for independence produces a weak love. The ability to divorce at one’s whim is problematic because consent is meaningless without durability (p. 260). Yenor seems to think that hallmarks of liberal individualism, like cohabitation, divorce, homosexuality, and birth control, all endanger marriage, the family, children, and even the future of the human race.

Thus, Yenor’s concession to the benefits of gender equality in marriage is limited. Yenor embraces Pope John Paul II’s refusal to separate mind and body. He, therefore, believes that interdependence must have a physical manifestation in both sex and procreation. This has two implications. First, the necessity of procreation for achieving interdependence bars the possibility of same-sex marriage and therefore makes Yenor’s early promise to consider the question of gay marriage seem

disingenuous. In fact, Yenor suggests that gay couples cannot even love because they cannot have procreative sex. Adoption or other means of child-rearing does not merit reflection on this point. Second, the importance of procreation allows Yenor to insist interdependence must trump gender equality if the two conflict. This relative subordination extends to issues unrelated to childbearing. For example, Yenor asserts that having fathers file taxes for the family may encourage them to see the family as theirs, but this mild patriarchy serves an ethical, communal purpose (p. 72). Feminist historians have written extensively on the effects of even the mild patriarchy of U.S. tax policy.[2]

The importance of procreation to Yenor’s scheme is perhaps a good reminder to scholars that gender and sexuality are still intertwined. Thinking that politics for these two groups are independent betrays the causes of gay liberation and feminism alike. Yenor’s call for interdependence is also narrow. For Yenor, only husbands and wives who bear children can be truly interdependent. A gay couple that has adopted a child does not fit Yenor’s definition of interdependent. A grandmother and grandchild, an infertile husband and wife, and members of a church, synagogue, mosque, or other religious institution do not fulfill his definition of interdependent either. We know citizens building a welfare state together do not qualify, because Yenor cites the growth of government services as one of the largest dangers facing the family. Interdependence is clearly the highest calling for Yenor, but predicated as it is on procreative sex, it is certainly one of the least accessible social goods on the planet.

Notes

[1]. Nancy Polikoff, *Beyond (Straight and Gay) Marriage: Valuing All Families under the Law* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009); and Martha Fineman, *The Autonomy Myth: A Theory of Dependency* (New York: The New Press, 2004).

[2]. See for example, Alice Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in 20th-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

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