

**PHILOSOPHY,
HISTORY, AND
METHODOLOGY
OF ECONOMICS**

The “American Way”: Family and Community
in the Shaping of the American Identity

Allan Carlson

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Allan Carlson’s revisionist history of twentieth-century America focuses on the role played by the concept of family in the self-understanding of intellectuals and policy-makers. The author is president of the Howard Center for Family, Religion, and Society based in Rockford, Illinois, and former president of the paleoconservative Rockford Institute.

Carlson begins with the surprising results of a 1999 international survey. Asked which institution society ought to be centered on, fully two-thirds of American respondents said “family,” while another 20 percent answered “church.” Both numbers are significantly higher than worldwide figures, even from Asia and other putatively more communitarian societies.

Noting Barry Shain’s observation that Revolutionary-era American identity was strongly communal, Carlson declares that his book “argues that ‘family’ and ‘religiously-grounded community’ also served in the twentieth century as the dominant imagery for American self-understanding, with important consequences” (x). Among its effects, this understanding provided a framework for the assimilation of new immigrants, led to a dramatic mid-century rise in marriage and fertility rates, and shaped the contours of Cold War foreign policy.

The book consists of six episodic chapters that address policies, ideologies, and personalities from the beginning of the century to the Reagan presidency. The dominant

vision of the family for most of that time included a working father, a childrearing, homemaking mother, and several children. Despite persistent challenges, this ideal of the uniquely “American family” shaped national policy on immigration, taxes, welfare, and defense for many decades. Its repudiation in the sixties and seventies, and Reagan conservatism’s failure to recover it meaningfully, constitute a pessimistic conclusion to Carlson’s narrative.

Chapter 1 addresses Theodore Roosevelt’s prophetic role in articulating family-oriented national policies. In his view, the family-centered home was central to the American identity, and Roosevelt saw its defense as a patriotic duty. As “the first president to describe in philosophical terms the importance of family life to national life,” he spoke and published widely on the needs of the family and its central role in defining Americanism (1). By grounding American identity in the concrete social reality of family life, Roosevelt rejected both a European-style ethnic nationalism closed to outsiders and the reduction of America to a shallow common ideology.

Chapter 2 examines the national challenge of assimilating millions of German immigrants early in the century. Before and especially during the First World War, communities throughout America faced the threat of friction between native citizens and a large German-speaking subculture. Amidst this furor, the expressly assimilationist Settlement House movement embarked on its “maternalist campaign.” This campaign attempted to combine German immigrants’ strong communal sensibilities and values with a vision of American identity centered on hearth and home as well as on the family as the primary unit of social order. In confronting the challenge of mass immigration, family-oriented assimilationists avoided the tempting but dangerous alternatives of Anglo-Saxon racialism and relativistic cultural pluralism.

The maternalists were largely successful in enacting their policies in the 1920s, though their victory in funding maternal and infant health programs across the country came at the price of governmental involvement. The pursuit of federal tax funding, resisted by some at the time as a “wedge for socialism,” had important consequences for maternalism’s eventual demise five decades later (53).

Prominent maternalists took the initiative in shaping New Deal policies in directions favorable to their family model. In this period, the subject of chapter 3, the structure of the Social Security system became the chief object of policy dispute. The underlying ideological struggle reflected an identity conflict within feminism. Maternalist feminists endorsed programs aimed at shoring up family wages for fathers and providing survivor pensions for widows. Liberal or equity feminists argued for equal treatment of the sexes in matters of public relief, work conditions, and Social Security benefits.

Maternalists saw themselves as defending the American family—especially mothers and children—from industrial exploitation. Their worldview animated the newly created programs: “The maternalists justified their work by interpreting society as an extension of the home. Accordingly, they supported the idealized domestic status quo—

the bread-winning father, the stay-at-home mother, and children enjoying a true childhood—while attacking the ‘industrial evils’ that threatened to undermine this system” (57). The maternalists were victorious in these battles, again at the price of increased government involvement in their programs, and equity feminism was stymied for a generation.

Chapter 4 focuses on the role Henry Luce and *Life* magazine played in bringing the vision of “the American family” to a mass audience. Luce envisioned *Life* as a vehicle for affirming the value of Western civilization in popular consciousness and for establishing “an American nation sufficiently unified to bear the responsibilities of international power” (79). He did this in part by reimagining the community-building role of a small-town newspaper editor on a national scale. This project saw some success in the fifties but ultimately failed on its own terms, in part because of changes in journalistic and editorial culture.

Chapter 5 addresses the role that the ideal of the family played in American foreign policy from 1946 to 1965. One of the book’s most interesting sections recounts debates over America’s identity and international struggle, guided by such personalities as John Foster Dulles, Talcott Parsons, Walt Rostow, and David Riesman. The Kennedy and early Johnson administrations were committed to the indivisibility of foreign and domestic policies. Both anticommunism abroad and domestic civil defense initiatives, for example, were firmly grounded in a “confidence that America’s domestic life was solid enough to support this national security agenda” (131).

By 1965, however, the relationship between foreign policy and domestic institutions had begun what would be an abrupt inversion. The suburban family went from being the wellspring of America’s optimism and ambition abroad to being an object of worry, reacting to rather than driving foreign policy. Citing indications that military escalation in Vietnam influenced the passage of Great Society legislation, Carlson observes that “this was a total reversal of the earlier approach, which considered social reform a means of providing strength for America’s international policy” (143–44). Confusion over Vietnam War aims was followed by a decade of foreign policy conducted without a consistent vision of national identity and its connection to domestic institutions such as the family.

The final chapter covers the collapse of the maternalist vision, its nearly complete banishment from policymaking circles in the wake of the sexual revolution, and the Reagan administration’s unsuccessful recovery attempts. The end began with the inclusion of “sex” as a protected category in the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This policy shift led in short order to administrative and court rulings that eliminated maternalist bulwarks such as family wages and sex-specific hiring and promotion. By 1975, maternalism was dead at both the federal and state levels.

Carlson suggests several reasons for why the maternalist policy consensus unraveled so quickly. Since the Settlement House days and the New Deal, advocates of family-protection policies had relied heavily on governmental intervention as a means.

Thus, when their grip on political power slipped, the end came in short order. Suburbanism, maternalists' lack of intergenerational influence, and the resurgence of equity feminism as a cultural force also played roles.

Although the Reagan years saw efforts to resurrect certain maternalist policies, the cultural change of the previous generation was too profound. The male breadwinner model of family economy seemed chauvinistic, even to advocates of family wages. The author concludes with modest suggestions for advancing a neomaternalist idea of the American family—one compatible with the deep cultural and political shifts of the past four decades (169).

Carlson's work is excellent: The histories are well-written and often gripping, and most sections are concise enough to hold the nonspecialist's interest. He employs little jargon while providing helpful summaries of key policies and movements. The book is well-edited, with two exceptions: The repeated misuse of "principle" for "principal," and a typesetter's error in reproducing ratios from a table (157).

The book does, however, leave the reader hungry for more. Coverage of the transitional period of 1964 to 1982 is frustratingly brief. The detailed analysis of policy players and debates, which characterized Carlson's treatment of previous eras, is missing for the seventies and beyond. Perhaps that is material for a separate book—one to be eagerly anticipated.

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The Theory of the Individual in Economics: Identity and Value

John B. Davis

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This is an interesting and challenging book. It raises a central but insufficiently discussed question: What explains individuality, and how is it shaped? Economic personalists usually investigate how persons structure economics and society but rarely do they explicitly theorize about individual/personal identity. (For Davis, Professor of History and Philosophy of Economics at the University of Amsterdam, individualism and personalism are, in fact, synonymous.) Even more interestingly perhaps, the book also highlights crucial "blind-spots" in the dominant academic "discourse."

Another of Davis's objectives is to show (1) how a given definition of the individual—the dominant Lockean concept of individuality, which constitutes the foundation of neoclassical theory—results in the destruction of the very notion of individuality, while (2) paradoxically, the alternative tradition of sociological/holistic identity leads to a fruitful discussion of both modern individuality and its place in society and economics. Davis thus inserts his theoretic research into an interpretation of the intellectual history of the twentieth century.