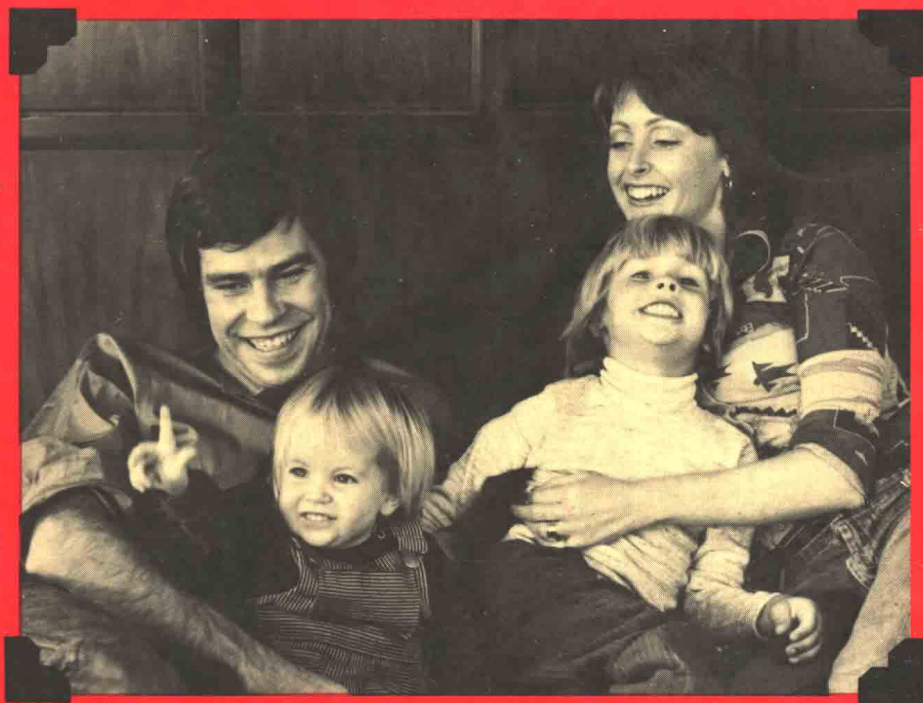


HERE TO STAY



*American Families
in the Twentieth Century*

MARY JO BANE

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HERE
TO STAY
American Families
in the
Twentieth Century

MARY JO BANE

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To my mother
and the memory
of my father

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Acknowledgments

THIS BOOK grew out of a project on "alternative approaches to child rearing" supported by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York to the Center for the Study of Public Policy (CSPP), Cambridge, Massachusetts.

A number of other documents, which complement this one, were produced by the CSPP project. A series of descriptive articles on playgroups, communal arrangements, congenial work settings, day care centers and so on, written primarily by William Ronco, Gail Howrigan, and Andrew Kopkind, illustrate how families cope with the demands of work and child care. Much of the analysis of social policy in the second half of this book grew out of reflection on these examples of families successfully solving their own problems without professional or governmental interference.

Two reviews of the psychological literature by Gail Howrigan provide a more detailed discussion than is contained in this book of what is known about the effects on children of separation and divorce and of working mothers. Two papers, by Gregory Jackson and by Heather Weiss, look in detail at the reasons why mothers go to work. Two memos by Mary Corcoran, on work incentives and economic determinants of family behavior, examine economic correlates of other family decisions. Finally, a paper by William Ronco on changing attitudes toward women provides background data for the discussions of women's status that occur throughout the book. All these papers are available from the Center for the Study of Public Policy.

An anthropological study of two-worker families begun as part of the original Carnegie-CSPP project has now taken on a life of its own. This continuing study, directed by Laura Lein, is described in reports to the National Institute of Education and the National Institute of Mental Health. The findings of Lein's study have informed this book in many ways.

As indicated, the child-rearing project was supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, and my biggest debt of gratitude is to them. Part of the writing of the book was aided by a summer stipend from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

A number of people were of enormous help to me in actually writing the book. Gail Howrigan provided research assistance, and Nancy Lyons gave editorial help. Christopher Jencks and Kenneth I. Winston read several drafts of the entire manuscript and made both substantive and editorial comments that were extremely helpful. Others whose comments helped improve the manuscript include Barbara Brenzel, Mary Corcoran, Robin Dimieri, Carolyn Elliott, Rosabeth Kanter, David Kirp, Mary Shanley, and William Ronco. Janet Lennon was responsible for the typing of the manuscript. Jim Bane was a conscientious and patient proofreader.

Any book on the family is inevitably colored by the family experience of the author. I have tried to stick very closely to data in this book and to draw conclusions only from evidence. I am aware, however, that my conclusions also reflect a basic optimism about family life and a deep conviction that family relationships can be fulfilling and liberating. This bias must be at least partially blamed on my two families: on my mother, late father, and brother; and on my husband. It may have flawed the objectivity of the book, but I nonetheless thank them for it, very profoundly.

Introduction

The family in the Western world has become a mere shadow of what it was. The causes which brought about the decay of the family were partly economic and partly cultural. In its fullest development, it was never very suitable either to urban populations or to seafaring people. . . .

BERTRAND RUSSELL, 1929 ¹

The American family is falling apart.

ITHACA JOURNAL, 1975 ²

OBSERVATIONS that the family is declining are not new. But in our time there is more widespread belief than ever before that the family will finally succumb to the assaults upon it. One alleged villain is the ever-accelerating tempo of modern life, marked by transiency, rapid obsolescence, and impermanence. The lives of Americans are characterized by movement from place to place and by goods designed to be used quickly, thrown away, and replaced. The lack of permanence in material life seems to be carried over into emotional and social life. Several recent commentators have described friendships and marriages as becoming more and more like automobiles, short-lived and replaceable.³ How can the family, which Westerners have long seen and still see as requiring unconditional, permanent bonds between people, survive such assaults?

Even if it can, attacks upon the family may also be coming from another quarter—from the slow but inevitable movement toward sexual equality. Many conservatives and some radical feminists see equality between men and women as incompatible with family life.⁴ Perhaps equal work opportunities for women will destroy any incentives men have to live in and care for families. Perhaps women will reject bearing and raising children in favor of independence and economic success. Perhaps competition for dominance and conflict over task division within marriage will destroy the fabric of affection and concern that makes family life worthwhile. Is the contemporary family in the process of being replaced by peo-

ple living basically alone, coming together only for business or for transient sociability?

The arguments predicting the imminent decline of the family seem to be supported by a good deal of statistical evidence: rising divorce rates, declining fertility rates, rising numbers of women leaving the home for paid work, diminution of the family's productive economic functions, the disappearance of the extended family. Are these statistics not sufficient proof that the family as an institution is reaching the end of its days? Should we not be developing public institutions to replace the family with other forms of living arrangements and other methods of child care? When I began investigating the situation of families and their children in contemporary America, I believed that the answer to both questions was yes.

Yet, as I delved further into the data that describe what Americans do and how they live, I became less sure that the family was in trouble. Surprising stabilities showed up, and surprising evidence of the persistence of commitments to family life. The title of this book changed many times as the work went on. As the final title suggests, I became convinced that the time has not yet come to write obituaries for the American family or to divide up its estate.

I also became convinced that answering my questions about the family—separating myth from reality—was important as well as interesting. Public decisions affecting the family are being made regularly, and public debate about abortion and divorce reform, sexual equality, welfare, taxation, and public services for children and families is both persistent and heated. Questions about specific bills or court decisions cannot be answered by historical and demographic study of American families. However, facts can be used to explore the basic assumptions and values behind particular policies and to describe the effects that policies may have. Assuming that the family is dead or dying may lead to policies that, in their desperate attempt to keep the patient alive, infringe unnecessarily on other cherished values and prove once again that the cure can be worse than the disease. On the other hand, too hasty concern for replacing the “dying” family may in fact bring about its untimely death. Both of these harmful responses can perhaps be avoided by more accurate diagnosis of the family's current condition.

The first part of this book looks at contemporary American families in the perspective of changes during this century. The second part explores some of the policy areas that I believe can be illuminated by the findings of Part I. In describing American families, I look at data on family formation, family dissolution, and living arrangements derived chiefly from

census surveys and polls. There are other kinds of data, of course, that could be looked at as indicators of the state of family life: diaries, child rearing manuals, newspaper reports, portrayals of families in TV situation comedies and commercials. I rely on demographic indicators principally because they give a more accurate picture of what people actually do than reports of what outside observers think they do. For example, historians have noted innumerable discrepancies between personal observations of family size and numerical data on actual households.⁵ One contemporary example illustrates the point: A person relying only on television portrayals of American families would probably conclude that almost no women have paying jobs, while the statistics give a quite different picture.

Quantitative data allow for little psychological interpretation of the sort that has recently become fashionable, but they have the advantage of being reasonably straightforward and trustworthy. Behavioral data provide a good basis for describing what is happening and likely to happen. Readers will, however, have to provide their own explanations for why things are happening the way they are.

Readers should also be aware that neither Part I nor Part II attends to the special needs of special groups—the retarded and physically handicapped, for example—which certainly call for public attention and remedy. Nor does the book deal explicitly with the families of black, Spanish-speaking, and Native Americans. I believe that the general picture of families that emerges from the data applies to most minorities as well as the white majority: lower fertility and higher divorce rates are characteristic of all groups, for example. But ethnic groups do seem to differ in the structure and strength of ties between the nuclear and the expanded family and also in the characteristic roles of men and women. Readers should keep this in mind and realize that the general picture of family life presented here does not necessarily portray accurately all families or all ethnic groups.

Another word of caution: It should not be assumed that families in Western countries have always exhibited the characteristics of North American families. From the colonial period on, North American families seem to have been nuclear in structure, private, and relatively child-centered. In continental Europe, however, the private, child-centered family developed only since the seventeenth century. Before that time, European families were more public and had more permeable boundaries; adults and children lived more fully in the community and less intensely in the home. That earlier family belonged, however, to a quite different time, a time of high death rates, especially high infant mortality rates, and

brutal poverty for the mass of men and women. It was not the jolly extended family of American myth and, unless one looks only at aristocrats, warrants little nostalgia.⁶ At any rate, it is not part of the American past and thus not part of the story of this book.

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PART

I



The Persistence of
Commitment



Chapter One

PARENTS AND CHILDREN

WORRY ABOUT THE FAMILY is mostly worry about the next generation. Falling birthrates, rising divorce rates, increasing numbers of working mothers, and other indicators of the alleged decline of the family would probably seem much less alarming if adults alone were affected by the making and dissolving of families. People are distressed by these trends not because they signal a decline in the quality and richness of adult lives but because they seem to threaten the next generation. If the trends continue, will there be a next generation? Will it turn out all right? Will it be able to maintain and perhaps even improve the world?

These feelings about the importance of generational continuity lie, I suspect, behind the implicit and explicit comparisons that one generation makes with the generations before it. Modern families and modern methods of child rearing are almost always measured against the families of earlier times. The comparison is usually unfavorable to modern families. In contrast, when modern technology and economic institutions are evaluated against earlier times the judgment is far more often made that things are better. In technology, progress is the standard. In social institutions, continuity is the standard, and when change occurs, it is seen as decline rather than advance.

Decline and *advance* are not easily defined terms, of course. What some people see as good child rearing, others may see as stifling repression and yet others as rampant permissiveness. But some agreement probably exists on the basic principles of how a society ought to treat its children: Children should receive secure and continuous care; they should be neither abused nor abandoned. Children should be initiated into adult society with neither undue haste nor unduly long enforced dependency—in other

words, allowed to be children and permitted to become adults. Probably most important, Americans believe that children should be wanted both by their parents and by society.

Arguments that modern families are failing their children usually cite rising divorce rates and the rising proportion of mothers working as evidence that children are less well cared for by their parents now than in the past, that their environments are less secure and less affectionate. In addition, statistics on falling birthrates are sometimes used as evidence that modern Americans want and value children less than earlier generations. But data on parental care, family size, and the ties between generations can be used to make a different argument: that discontinuities in parental care are no greater than they were in the past; and that changes in fertility rates may lead to an environment that, according to generally agreed on criteria, is more beneficial for children.

Demographic Facts and the Age Structure of Society

Intergenerational relationships are profoundly influenced by the age structure of society, since that structure determines how many generations are alive at any one time and what proportion of the population has living ancestors or descendants. The age structure can also influence whether a society "feels" mature and stable or young and vibrant. Certain activities or patterns may seem characteristic of a society because they are characteristic of the largest age group in the population.

A combination of birth and death rates creates the age structure of a society. These two rates also determine the rate of growth of the population, which can in turn affect the density and structure of living arrangements. Birth- and death rates thus define the demographic context within which the relationships between generations must be worked out. As technology provides the basic facts of economic life, demography defines the basic facts of social life.

Today's great-grandparents were born during a period when the population of America was growing at a rapid rate. The European populations from which the American colonists had come had been relatively stable in size, with death rates balancing birthrates over long-term cycles of prosperity followed by epidemics and famines. In the seventeenth-century, death rates began to fall dramatically and steadily, probably because of

general improvements in nutrition and the physical environment.¹ Death rates fell at all ages; not only did mature people live longer, but more infants survived to childhood and more children to maturity. And more women lived to have more children. The result was a rapid population growth that has characterized the United States at least since the U.S. Census began in 1790, and probably much earlier.²

Falling death rates, however, have been partially balanced by falling birthrates.³ In the United States, birthrates have been gradually falling for as long as data have been collected. They probably began to fall about 1800 or possibly earlier, and in the last few years they have fallen below replacement level. If they remain at replacement level, the United States will reach a stable population level about the year 2000.⁴ In the United States, therefore, the rate of natural population growth was probably highest in the early and mid-nineteenth century. Around 1800 the population grew at a rate of almost 3 percent per year. By 1880 it was growing at around 2 percent per year and by 1974, at six-tenths of one percent.⁵

A rapidly growing population is different from a stable population in several ways. One is age structure. Demographers find that the average age of populations that are not growing can range from about twenty-seven years when mortality rates are very high (probably characteristic of pre-industrial Europe) to about thirty-eight years when mortality rates are very low (the United States of the future).⁶ In contrast, a rapidly growing population is young. The median age of the population of the United States shown in Table 1-1 illustrates the point.

As population growth has slowed down, the American population has become gradually older. This aging is perhaps the most important difference between the world of our great-grandparents and our own world, and

TABLE 1-1
*Median Age of the U.S. Population,
1820-1970*

Census Year	Median Age of Population
1820	16.7 years
1850	18.9 years
1880	20.9 years
1910	24.1 years
1940	29.0 years
1970	28.0 years

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract*, Table 25.

contributes to many of the changes that have taken place in family and intergenerational relationships.

It may seem strange that a population becomes younger as death rates fall. As people live longer should the population not become older? The reason it does not is that in all the societies that demographers have studied, death rates are highest both late in life and early in life.⁷ Declines in death rates are usually most dramatic among infants. More infants survive, contributing more children to the population. More women survive to reproductive age and contribute even more children to the population. Thus lower mortality rates result in a younger average age of the population even though average life expectancy at birth rises.

Imagine, for example, a population in which half the babies died at birth and half lived to be 50. The average life expectancy would be 25 years, and the average age of the population would also be 25 years. Now imagine that infant mortality rates fell, so that everyone lived to be 50. The average life expectancy would then be 50. The average age of the population would still be 25, if the population remained stable in size. But if birthrates remained the same as they were when death rates were high, the population would be bound to grow, since more women would live to reproductive age and there would be more babies and children than older people. Thus lower mortality rates would have produced a younger rather than an older population.

Another interesting characteristic of a rapidly growing population, related to its age structure, is that working-age adults comprise a relatively small proportion of the population. Working-age adults (age 15-64) made up 58 percent of the rapidly growing population of the United States in 1880. In contrast, 68 percent of the population of the United States in 1940 was made up of working-age adults.⁸ The nonworkers in a rapidly growing population are almost all children, since the proportion of old people is extremely low. On the other hand, when death rates are low and the population is stable in size, almost half of the nonworkers are over 65.

A third feature of a rapidly growing population is that it must every year induct a relatively large number of young people into adulthood and into the work force. More must start work than retire. This can put a strain on adult society in general and on the economy in particular. If the economy is not growing as rapidly as the population, the problem of what to do with young people can become acute.

Changes in the rate of population growth produce changes in the age structure of a society that are in turn reflected in the problems the society