THE UNIVERSITY of NORTH CAROLINA at CHAPEL HILL

The Family in Political Thought

SCLL 145 - Fall 2025 (and later)
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Course Information

Credit Hours: 3

Pre or Co-Requisites: none

Target Audience: undergraduates

Meeting Pattern: TBD

Instructional Format: in person

Classroom or Location: TBD

Instructor Information

Name: Rita Koganzon

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Office Location: TBD

Office Hours: TBD

Course Content

Course Description

So many of the flashpoints in our culture wars involve the family, from marriage and sexuality to childrearing, that it seems obviously political. But how so? This course takes up the relationship between politics and the family in the history of western thought, from the ancient Greeks to modern feminists. We will read a variety of sources, including political treatises, literature, diaries, and polemics, to examine why families exist at all (or if they should), what forms they take, and what purposes they fulfill in different regimes. In the process, we will take up ideas about sex, marriage, childrearing, and the meaning and limit of the private sphere.

Course Texts & Materials

Most readings will be available as PDFs on Canvas, though some readings are so long that you may as well purchase them if you're able to do for your own reading convenience. The only one you must acquire in hard copy is Carol Stack *All Our Kin* (Basic Books), because we are reading the entire thing.

Class Expectations

Regular and useful contributions to class discussion (15%)
Five one-page response papers (500-800 words) to the weekly readings (25%)

Final exam (20%)
Final paper of 12-15 pages (40%)

Course Assignments & Assessments

Class Participation and Readings: This is a discussion-based seminar that depends on your active participation, including preparing the reading in advance. Please bring a copy of readings to class with you, as we will reference passages directly in discussion.

Response Papers: Everyone is required to submit **five response papers of 500-800 words**, spread out over the term. There will be a sign-up sheet for response papers circulated during the first week and you will be held to the dates you've signed up for, unless you can convince someone else in the course to switch with you. Papers are due to me by email at 10pm the evening before a class meeting. Response papers should make observations and ask questions about the day's readings, connect them to previous material, offer objections, and generally provide a starting point for discussion. I will send out a sample response paper for the first meeting so you can get an idea of the expectations.

Exam: There will be **a short final exam** consisting of text IDs and four short answer questions, mainly to demonstrate that you've completed the reading.

Paper: There will be **a final paper of 10-12 pages** on a topic of your choosing, addressing a problem or question raised by two or more of the texts on the syllabus. Papers should offer an interpretive argument based on a detailed textual analysis of the works you've chosen. The use of secondary sources is not required or encouraged. You must meet with me by April 10 to discuss your paper topic. Please submit papers to me by email in .doc format so that I can return them to you with comments over email. Late papers will lose two points per day.

Course Schedule

Week 1: The Family as the Regime

Aristophanes, "The Assemblywomen" (390 BCE)

This play is a satire of the family and politics in classical Athens. But what exactly is wrong with the family and the city in the first place, according to the play? What is Praxagora's political vision for Athens, and how does it relate to her conception of the family? What will become of the family once her vision for political reform is implemented? What is Aristophanes' argument about democratic politics in the play?

Week 2: The Premodern European Family: The Church vs. the State

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* (1256), Pt III, chs. 122-125
---. *Summa Theologica*, Supplement, QQ 43, 44, 64
Robert Filmer, *Patriarcha* (approx. 1630), ch. 1
Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651), chs. 17-20

Thomas Aquinas wrote in the late-medieval period. What does his account of marriage suggest about its relationship to politics? Is marriage and the family a free institution, or a coercive one in his account? Is it a private institution or a public one? What is its purpose? Who controls it?

Filmer and Hobbes both wrote during the English Civil War, which was fought in part over the extent of the English monarch's power vis-à-vis Parliament, and in part over the role of the Church and religion. Both Filmer and Hobbes were royalists, or supporters of expansive monarchical power, even absolute monarchical power. How do their accounts

of the family (its origins, purpose, and powers) relate to their understandings of the state, and especially the monarch's power? Are they persuasive? If not, why not? How do they stand in relation to Aquinas' account of the family?

Week 3: The Liberal Family in Theory

John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), I.1, 6-7; II.1-2, 6-8, 14-15
William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765), I.14-16

Locke and Blackstone wrote after the settlement of 1688, which brought an end to the English Civil War by circumscribing the power of the English monarchy and subordinating it to Parliament. Locke's and Blackstone's writings are often taken as the beginning of liberalism, since they interpret the English Constitution as based on principles of limited government and individual right. How is their conception of the family different from that of the absolutists? How is it different from Aquinas? What is the political significance of these differences? What is natural about the family for Locke and Blackstone? Who controls the family in their view?

Week 4: The Liberal Family in Practice

Glueckel of Hameln (1690-1711), bks 1-5
The Diary of Samuel Sewall, excerpts

Although we cannot say that these two accounts are *representative* of European family life in the 17th Century (Glueckel is a Jew in northern Germany, while Sewall lives in the far-flung colony of Massachusetts Bay, for one thing), they are vivid and interesting accounts of really-existing families rather than theoretical or fictional ones. What surprises you about these diaries and how they describe family life and its interactions with politics? What is familiar in these accounts from your own experiences, and what is strange? Have we lost anything worthwhile from this world in the transition to our own?

Week 5: The Romantic Liberal Family

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, Bk V (1763)

Emile is Rousseau's narrative of an ideal natural education for a child. The first four books, which we are not reading, describe the education of a boy named Emile from infancy through puberty, emphasizing how he is to always feel maximally free while his tutor controls his environment behind the scenes. Once he reaches puberty however, he is set on the task of finding a wife, and Bk V describes the education of a girl, Sophie, who is to be his wife. What is Rousseau's argument here about the purpose of marriage, especially in relation to the larger society? What is the role of love in marriage? What sacrifices does marriage require? Are its members free? Is it worth it?

Week 6: The Romantic Family in (Fictional) Practice

Leo Tolstoy, *Family Happiness* (1859)

Tolstoy was significantly influenced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's writings on the family, especially *Emile* and *Julie*, and takes up similar questions about the difficulties of relying on love to sustain a lifelong marital union. What does this novella suggest about mutual love as the foundation of the family? What are the threats to the liberal family from modern society? Can the family overcome these dangers?

Week 7: The Liberal Family Meets the Democratic Family

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1840), I.i.3; II.iii.1-2, 5, 8-13
Pioneer Diaries of L.A. Rudd, A.S. Knight, E.D. Smith (1848-1853)

What passions animate women and family life in democracy, according to Tocqueville? What tensions or contradictions does democracy insert into the family? How do the accounts of going to Oregon from the women of the 1840s and 1850s bear out Tocqueville's descriptions? How do they diverge? What is the relationship between pioneering and the family in these accounts (consider also the family members left behind who were the recipients of these letters) – why

did these families undertake the overland journey, and how did they understand their gains and losses along the way? Was the Oregon journey rational? Would you do it?

Week 8 The Marxist Critique of the Family

Friedrich Engels, *Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845), excerpts
Friedrich Engels, *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884), excerpts

What is wrong with the working-class family and what are Engels's proposed solutions? How, according to Marx, do women lose their "supremacy" over the family in the shift to monogamous marriage? Was life good under the regime of female supremacy? What comes after monogamous marriage, and does it offer a good life? What role does nature play in Engels's argument?

Week 9: The Gilded Age Family

Henry James, *What Maisie Knew* (1897)

James was a sharp chronicler of social life in both turn of the century England and the US, with a special interest in the increasing complexity of private life under industrialization and affluence. What, in particular, is wrong with Maisie's parents that leads to the collapse of her family? Are there any antidotes to her parents' shortcomings offered by James? What is it that Maisie knows? What is James's argument about the family under modern economic and social conditions?

Week 10: Women's Rights: For or Against the Family?

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "The Destructive Male" (1868); "On Marriage and Divorce" (1871)
Jane Addams, "Women and the State" (1911)
Emma Goldman, "Woman Suffrage" (1911)

How do Stanton and Addams understand the relationship between their campaign for women's rights (especially the right to vote) and women's role in the family? What was the political aim of this so-called "first wave" of feminism? How did feminism's aims implicate the traditional American family – did they oppose it, or attempt to reshape it? What is Goldman's criticism of this approach to women's rights? Is she right?

Week 11: Women's Liberation

Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970), ch. 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 10, conclusion

According to Firestone, what are the problems with the family that require its abolition? What is her vision of liberation for women, and how does it implicate children and men?

Week 12: The Black Family: Exception, Alternative, or Norm?

Daniel P. Moynihan, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" (1964) (read text, skim charts)
Bayard Rustin, "Why Don't Negroes..." (1966)
Carol Stack, *All Our Kin* (1974)

Moynihan's report in 1964 came in the middle of the Civil Rights Movement and ignited a decades-long national controversy about African-American culture. What does he argue is the problem with the Black family, whose fault is it, and how should it be addressed? How do Rustin and Stack answer Moynihan's arguments? Do they disagree? What is admirable about family structure that Stack depicts? What sorts of questions does Stack's account overlook? What role can or should the state play in family life, according to Moynihan and Stack?

These arguments were written in the 1960s, but today, the national rate of out-of-wedlock births and single-parent families is 40 percent and 30 percent, respectively. What was then seen as a uniquely Black phenomenon is now a common experience for all Americans. Does that change how we understand these arguments?

Week 13: The Contemporary Family: Dead or Alive?

Christopher Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World* (1977), chs. 1, 5, 8
Arlie Hochschild, *The Second Shift* (1989), chs. 1-2

What is Lasch's objection to the way modern social science has tried to both strengthen and weaken the family? What is mistaken about these goals? Lasch was a hard-to-pin down social critic, something like a Freudian-Marxist-populist. If he admits that the family is a bourgeois institution premised on capitalist exploitation, why does he defend it at all? What is his alternative to the egalitarian-therapeutic approach to the family? Hochschild offers a different view of same problem of the distressed late 20th C. nuclear family in a market society. How does her account of the postwar family's problems differ from Lasch's? What are her proposed solutions?

Week 14: The Family in the Culture Wars

Leon Kass, "The End of Courtship" (1997)
Amia Srinivasan, "Does anyone have the right to sex?" (2018)
Anastasia Berg and Rachel Wiseman, *What Are Children For*? (2024), ch. 1

As we've seen over the past few weeks, many people have argued that the family in the postwar period has been in decline. Not only marriage, but also birthrates have declined all over the globe. Is this a trend worthy of lament or celebration? Can the decline be reversed, and if so, how? By returning to pre-liberal arrangements and assumptions? Or by liberalizing the family even further? The answers to these questions determine the most intimate contours of our lives, but they also animate some of the loudest, most public and aggressive battles of our culture wars. Why does Kass think courtship has declined and what are the implications of this decline? Does Kass agree with Lasch or Hoschchild? Why might a "right to sex" follow from the logic of liberalism? Do we have such a right, according to Srinivasan? How does Srinivasan's response to the irrationality of love differ from Aristophanes'? How do the issues Kass and Srinivasan raise relate to people's desire to have children? Is a declining birthrate a problem? What is the best approach to addressing it?

Week 15: Film screenings and discussion:

Children of the Sun (2007, Israel)
A Separation (2011, Iran)

Reminders:
FINAL EXAM: TBA
PAPER DUE: Friday after last class session