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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a view of democratically rationalized repression as a framework within which to discuss Brigitte Berger and Peter L. Berger's recent anti-feminist, bourgeois apologetic: The War over the Family: Capturing the Middle Ground. The Bergers' book is presented as an example of intellectual violence, a ruthless attempt to legitimate continuing patriarchal dominance through perverted appeals to "democracy" and democratic principles of fairness and consensus.

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We have entered a new era of repression and violence, an era marked by intellectual as well as physical brutality. Our society has always known physical coercion, and we are no longer ignorant of the damage wrought by emotional violence. We are a people haunted and brutalized by explosions of riot, wife beating, rape, child abuse, murder, terrorism, poverty, starvation, prejudice. As sociologists we grieve, but are not surprised, when our studies continuously show the victims to be disproportionately women, children, people of color, the aged, the disabled, the poor, the dispossessed, the nonconformist. Historically, these violent acts have enjoyed few overt apologists within sociology. But times have changed, as the song goes, and there are now men and women of all seasons, intellectual chameleons, ready to rationalize victimization in the name of democracy, ready to claim sensitivity and understanding while ignoring the empirical world, ready to claim intellectual integrity while misrepresenting views with which they disagree--in short, ready to do anything that sells in the shifting currents now pushed by chill totalitarian winds. This is the new and frightening face of intellectual violence.

This brings me, with grave disappointment, to Brigitte Berger and Peter L. Berger's recent apologetic for bourgeois society: The War over the Family: Capturing the Middle Ground. (1) Here we have Exhibit "A", a disgusting dissolution of intellectual morality in "defense" of repression, prejudice, and patriarchy. The Bergers not only expect us to swallow this garbage in the name of democracy, but we are also supposed to believe that because the Bergers use all the right catchwords, all the right caveats, that they have been fair, that they have themselves been "democratic" in brewing their "conclusions". This, culturally and intellectually, is the most destructive aspect of their book. The Bergers have sold out the principles of democracy to legitimate the New Totalitarianism. The Bergers have perverted democracy in a single-minded, damn the torpedoes, never-mind-the-facts attempt to rationalize a deeply troubled, seriously coercive, and incredibly repressive social institution. In words of unmistakable praise, they "defend" this well-known locale of broken dreams and broken bones, of abused children, of arrogant racism and intolerance, of materialist consumerism and dangerous jingoism. Yes, the Bergers eagerly present us with their enthusiastic endorsement of a repressive, patriarchal social structure: The American Bourgeois Family.

The Bergers' methodological techniques and ultimate purpose depend on various appeals to and use of "democratic" imagery and rhetoric. This imagery, however, must be carefully examined and we must be alert for its possible use to "defend" or rationalize repression and coercion. A democratically rationalized repressive social structure is one composed of institutional

patterns wherein the rhetoric of freedom and participation is employed to legitimate the reality of repression and exclusion. When authoritarian power structures are under pressure, this form of legitimation is frequently attempted and is especially effective when "democracy" is a deeply honored value but not a widespread practice. More often than not, rhetorical claims to "democracy" are sufficient to curtail criticism and maintain the authoritarian status quo. (2) With this said, the Bergers' "defense" of the bourgeois family can be placed in sharper analytical perspective.

The Bergers' apology for the bourgeois family first ties the survival of this particular family form to the very survival of democracy in U.S. society. If one values democracy, one must value the bourgeois family, ipso facto. The Bergers offer, unexamined, the proposition that U.S. society is a democracy in practice (albeit a practice which could be improved--the Bergers are never ones to forget a traditional liberal caveat). This liberal proposition is necessary to make possible their proposed linkage between family and democracy. However, the documented role of power elites in controlling and manipulating the profits, shape, and direction of U.S. society nowhere receives appropriate attention from the Bergers. That the economy is run by power elites who marry for money and who are so loving to their children that they pack their male heirs off to authoritarian boarding schools and military academies is not just glossed over, it is not discussed. Champions of this in situ "democracy", the Bergers say nothing about class, inheritance, and social monopoly; realities that even a brief review of the Social Register reveals.

The Bergers assert that socialization in the bourgeois family instills the values that make a democracy possible. Yet, they do not mention, let alone confront, the fact that the bourgeois family is anything but a democracy itself. The authoritarian, classist, racist patriarchy that is the bourgeois family is never discussed. We are to believe that lovers of democracy will nonetheless emerge from this social cauldron of repression, guilt, privilege, and prejudice. Even if this did happen, the Bergers' argument rests ultimately on the logic that the end justifies the means. In short, they wind up saying in effect nothing more than this: the ideal bourgeois family, in theory as well as practice, must be maintained at all costs lest our "democracy" escape us.

The Bergers' implicit political agenda becomes all too clear. It is not really freedom, self-reliance, and democracy which are at stake, but the maintenance of patriarchal authority. If the bourgeois family comes under attack, so do the patriarchal institutions of commerce, industry, law, education, war, religion, politics, language, etc. And if these come under serious scrutiny, can full-fledged revolt be far behind against classism, sexism, racism, familism, homophobia, able-bodyism, ageism, warmongering and capitalism (each of which U.S. patriarchy directly supports)? The Bergers have correctly identified the bourgeois family as a key social institution, but they have failed to analyze its kingpin position in an interlocking network of repressive, patriarchal, anti-democratic social patterns. Their incessant, unreflexive drive to "defend" this unholy alliance which will bring sympathetic readers of Invitation to Sociology,

The Social Construction of Reality, Pyramids of Sacrifice, The Homeless Mind, and Sociology: A Biographical Approach first to disbelief and anger, finally to sadness and pity.

The premise of the book, reflected in its subtitle: Capturing the Middle Ground, is that the Bergers are the voices of reason, of consensus, of pluralist, democratic probity. To argue this, however, the Bergers must create polar positions between which they can then fit "in the middle". No doubt they had great "fun" doing this. It allows them the opportunity to slam just about everyone who has ever championed abortion, women's rights, feminism, lesbianism, pacifism, Marxism, zero-population growth, and disarmament or been critical of rampant technology, militarism, patriotism, nuclear power plants, and familism. Peter Berger's "Excursus" essays, in which some of the most vituperative diatribes are found, lie sandwiched between the other chapters of the book. An interesting format, one has the distinct impression of attending a cocktail party given by a more eloquent (and hence more despicable) version of Spiro Agnew.

The language is insolent, arrogant, and misrepresents the serious, deeply held beliefs of many good people. But we aren't supposed to notice! This is a key maneuver in using democratic rhetoric, giving the appearance of "fairness" because the Bergers also throw a few darts at the radical right. Unfortunately, this ploy will "work" on uncritical students, especially patriarchal males, not to mention the conservative right (which won't like its own portrait but will be jumping for joy to have sociological legitimation for debunking feminists and lesbians).

Here is the formula for "democratic" rhetoric: Berger is only being fair when he trivializes feminist language as "femspeak" because he also pokes fun at the "goshtalk" of fundamentalists. But neither move is fair, neither move exhibits the Bergers' professed commitment to "mediation", to their express commitment to the principle that:

There is a very important point where our values as human beings and our theoretical assumptions as sociologists come together--and that is the conviction that, in any assessment of a social phenomenon, one must take with utmost respect the values of those who participate in that phenomenon. (p. 140).

Sound advice--it is a shame they did not follow it.

This is a book which claims to explicate feminist thought and goals, but which makes no reference whatsoever to the concept of "patriarchy". To have followed their own advice, to have steeped themselves in the experiences of battered wives and abused children, would have resulted in a much different book, a book in which the oppression of women and the genuine hurt generated by the bourgeois family would have been treated with respect, sensitivity, and analytical acuity. No, the Bergers required a scapegoat and the unhappy victim is an irresponsible caricature of feminism. There are a few half-serious pot shots at the fundamentalists, but all-in-all the conservatives and the pro-life groups come off pretty well. Let's be fair, they do have a point, the Bergers argue. Not so feminism, portrayed here as the nexus of a constellation of beliefs that opens the gates to totalitarian destruction and social decadence.

What then is this "middle ground" that the Bergers have so objectively, so democratically outlined? The following passages provide a thumbnail sketch of their assumptions and conclusions.

- (1) To marry and to have children thus is and remains one of the great risk-taking ventures of human life." (p. 134).
- (2) One destabilizing development, which originates in (mostly economic) tensions within the family but then creates powerful outside forces, is the much larger participation of mothers in the labor force. ... This change has meant, quite simply, that even very young children have come to have less intensive interaction with their mothers. Neither is there any indication that in this new situation fathers are able and willing to take over this function. (p. 154).
- (3) To be sure, an intact democratic society can survive any number of individuals or subcultures of an anti-bourgeois character; indeed, such tolerance of deviance and nonconformity has been the pride of democracy. However, when such anti-bourgeois values and life-styles become widespread, and when they gain the status of respectability in elite milieus of the society, the matter ceases to be innocuous. (p. 179).
- (4) For democracy to exist, there must be self-reliant and independent-minded individuals capable of making use of the institutional provisions for freedom and capable of resisting the manifold social pressures toward conformity." (p. 170).
- (5) The family, and specifically the bourgeois family, is the necessary social context for the emergence of autonomous individuals who are the empirical foundation of political democracy. (p. 172).
- (6) A society that puts a premium on individual responsibility, as any democracy must, will have to be particularly mindful of the institutions that nurture this personal trait. (p. 174).

- (7) The family alone, in the absence of a religious world view giving ultimate legitimacy to moral actions, cannot reestablish the civil virtues presupposed by a democratic polity. (p. 177).
- (8) We do know enough about the biological constitution of homo sapiens to be able to say that in many areas of behavior it acts as a tendency, rather than a compelling determinant--and there seems little doubt about a tendency toward the centrality of the father-mother-child triad. (pp. 188-9).
- (9) The family, and no other conceivable structure, is the basic institution of society. ... The prestige of the family must therefore be restored. (p. 204).
- (10) Public policy must not allow itself to be captured by groups who would want their anti-family positions legitimated if not outrightly enforced by government. (205).
- (11) Our hope is that many <women> will come to understand that life is more than a career and that this "more" is above all to be found in the family. (p. 205).

The so-called neo-conservative movement (is there really something "new" about conservative, patriarchal repression?) is thus provided with legitimation for its political agenda: glorification of the conjugal nuclear, heterosexual family; encouragement for jingoistic values; celebration of men at the workplace and women in the home; justification for religious imperialism in the guise of supporting the family. In what way is this a middle ground? It is no such thing; it is a rightist, patriarchal platform masquerading as centrist only because the feminist perspective has been scapegoated as far left nonsense. All this in the name of fairness, balance, mediation, democratic consensus.

Throughout their book the Bergers bombard the reader with bits of wisdom which they then forsake. There are two on which they should be called, loudly and immediately:

- (1) We may not know what the best way of raising children is, but we do know that arrangements imposing fear, loneliness, and a sense of worthlessness in children violates our fundamental experience of being human. (p.192).
- (2) It is reckless to gamble with the moral heritage of an entire civilization. It is immoral to risk the happiness of children. (p. 193).

If you read this book, you will quickly see the empty rhetoric behind these words. You will see the spectre of the Bergers' snobbish, elite school intellectual violence unleashed on defenseless women and children. As feminists, we must make these wisdoms more than empty platitudes. We must not tolerate their perversion by the Bergers. No longer can we stand still for a patriarchal world that imposes fear, loneliness, degradation, defeat, or physical brutality on children, women, or men. This has been the long slow lesson of our civilization and it is indeed reckless to gamble with this heritage for which such a dear price in human suffering has been paid. Indeed, it is immoral to risk the health, happiness, and future of the world's children. This is why we support improved day care centers, food subsidies, good schools, safe housing, aid-to-dependent children, social security, income redistribution, shelters for battered women, health clinics, school lunches, enforced payment of child support, stiff penalties for rape, wife and child abuse; this is why we urge pro-choice as a legitimate option, why we oppose militarism and

nuclear armaments, why we object to toxic waste in our land and water, why we insist on equal pay for equal work, why we fight sexism and homophobia in our schools and communities. This, finally, is why we seek the emancipation of all oppressed peoples everywhere. But the Bergers do not understand this, for them there is no immediate and reasonable linkage between the family, on the one hand, and issues of abortion, environment, emancipation, disarmament, and meaningful social equity, on the other.

That the bourgeois family has produced concerned men and women who vow never to inflict the punishing torment of patriarchal violence on the children of this world is no great surprise. What better lesson could have been learned? This is our family heritage and through it we breathe new life and promise into an otherwise defeated and violent future. Our future is a nutant, emancipatory vision struggling with a growing voice against enormous odds, against the awesome power of interlocking patriarchal institutions. It is a future with no room for the physical, emotional, and intellectual violence of the present. Sadly, it is a future the Bergers have lost the capacity to imagine, appreciate, or fight for.

Notes

(1) Brigitte Berger and Peter L. Berger, The War over the Family: Capturing the Middle Ground. Garden City: Anchor Books, 1984.

(2) An extended discussion on this theme is found in: M.R. Hill, "Tenure and the Intellectual Newspeak of 1984: Linguistic Legitimation in a Democratically Rationalized Repressive Social Structure," paper presented at the meetings of the Midwest Sociological Society, Chicago, 1984.