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Paola Di Nicola

**Family: plural noun. Loving, growing and living
in Third Millennium families**

by *Francesca Setiffi*

The central theme of this book is change in family relationships. From the relational dynamics of the 70s in which "the family is a strong unit of two people who choose each other and choose to live together principally from affection and mutual trust rather than for material advantage" (Di Nicola, 2008, p.26), we have moved to a new way of understanding the family. For young people, indeed, it no longer represents the supreme form of enduring relationship but rather a rapport of a transitory nature. Negotiation now generates the rules within the family. In a social climate of uncertainty and vulnerability, the roles are no longer culturally pre-established; they are subject to ongoing re-negotiation. This is especially due to the fact that women are no longer wives only but are also workers and have thus gained financial independence. Therefore, the emotional relationship requires careful 'maintenance' day after day to ensure its continuity. The rules of living together become more subjective and are based on the will of the family members to stick to a shared project of mutual care and concern, quite apart from the bonds of interdependence taken for granted in their lives.

As the foetus draws life nourishment from the mother, so the family is affected by the social changes around it; we might call it a "risk society" in which the social foundations undergo continuous changes and individual behaviour is regulated by taking nothing for granted.

In this context, separation and divorce are no longer seen as only a problem but are seen as the results of changes within and out with the family nucleus. If we move from a logic of productive work to one of reproductive work we arrive at the theme of interfamilial relations in society as a whole; the development of paternal and maternal identity and the

delicate task of the woman to conciliate between work governed by the law of supply and demand and work based on a monopoly system - the care for and upbringing of children.

As the author points out, the literature devoted to the mother figure is more extensive and detailed than that dedicated to the identity of the father and to the figure of *pater familias*.

Studies of women tend to emphasise their changing role within family relationships. One thinks of the split between sexuality and reproduction and of the increasing education of women, often producing better results and qualifications compared to men. As Di Nicola maintains "the man loses his marital authority", (*idem*, p.49) in a gradual process which, since the 70s, has diminished his power.

Along with the split between sexuality and reproduction and the fall in the birth rate, one can observe how parenthood has become a subjective option. Nowadays, indeed, it is a choice made by the couple alone based on the wishes which earlier had spurred the two individuals to marry and later leads them to have a child. Engendering offspring is more and more a process of individual self fulfilment in which the roles of mother and father can differ from those in a traditional family. In short, generating children is no longer only a response to cultural imperatives but springs from 'the hearts and bodies' of the couple.

We are therefore, no longer considering the family as a 'tree' which represents the interconnecting relations but rather a 'nuclear family' with fewer members. There are marked changes in both the number of children in the family and in the quality of the relationships. Honour and respect seem to belong to a bygone age; instead, "a system of completely asymmetric expectations has taken root quite different from that of the past. Parents expect nothing other from their children except to be loved [...], the children expect to be accepted, loved, protected and helped to grow up for what they are independently from what they actually do and will do" (*idem*, p.67). The timespan in which the crucial life experiences occur, those always considered as an entry to adult life - finishing university, a stable relationship, a permanent job - has expanded.

We speak of the 'affective family' as of the 'evolved' result of two phases of the individualisation process; the individualisation of family relationships [...] and, following this, the individualisation in family relationships" (*idem*, p.75). In the first case, the family detaches itself from the influence of relatives and from the community background while in the

second case the individual dissolves the bonds with family seen as an entity standing above his or her personal interest (outside his/her personal aspirations). The emancipation acquired by the individual is not reflected however, in a balanced distribution of power between the married couple. According to Di Nicola, such disparity emerges most clearly precisely at times of marital conflict and stress caused by separation and divorce which bring about a redefinition of the social positions of the man and the woman.

What about the families of 'the others'? It is quite common for immigrants, once established economically, to be joined by their families. In the new country the family appears to be a nucleus of integration and of developing relationships. Therefore, the family becomes the organism through which one integrates into the Italian socio-cultural context or which separates one from it, giving rise to self-contained enclaves which are respectively open and or closed. Besides the challenge of the second generation, it is striking that an increasing number of immigrants in Italy, mostly women, find work as au pairs, home helps and nannies in the sector of care relationships. Integration policies have been at the centre of political debate for many years. Integration 'on the ground' has already begun with the immigrants being entrusted with the care of our nearest and dearest in their declining years.

Alongside the role of the family as a lever between culture of origin and the new culture we must remember its "historical" role as fulcrum of the reciprocal networks of exchange and assistance which bind the older generation and the younger: in short, both the parental help given to children no longer at home and, vice versa, the support and help given by children to their own parents. The changes in family structure and in family relationships has, however, brought about evident alterations in the daily work of caring. Smaller families together with the increasing role of women in the work-place have led to an increase in 'care burden' per individual in response to an increasing need due to longer life expectancy. Thus, women already in employment often find themselves having to look after not only their children but also their own aged parents who are no longer self sufficient.

If we look at the job of caring within the theoretical framework of the welfare state intended in its double sense as welfare mix and welfare societal, we notice the influence of public policy on the deterioration or enhancement of care relations. In the welfare mix model the citizen must be in a position to choose between competing service providers, which

provider to engage. Such freedom of choice however is restricted by the client's purchasing power: "the task of caring as an alternative to a non-existent public service or to an unaffordable private service, rather than being an element of integration and social cohesion becomes an element of social exclusion: rather than a resource it becomes an encumbrance.» (*idem*, p.129) Also in the societal welfare model a variety of care systems is presupposed but the supply of some services is reserved exclusively for the public sector outwith the logic linked to economic productivity. Only this logic emphasises the enhancement of the task of caring, removing it from whatever makes it an obligation, and ends up by locating it inside a "system of interdependence controlled by reciprocal dependence acknowledged as a basic need of identity and belonging» (*ibidem*).

In conclusion, should we be speaking of the family or of families? The argument family *vs* families arises, according to Di Nicola, in the modern period within a broad process of "immunisation" of social bonds and relationships so that the distinction between plural and singular can be traced to a three-part analysis: cultural, political and ideological. From a cultural point of view, the family is considered as 'pure unit of affections' leaving intentionally to the second level the contractual link which sanctions most Italian families even today. From a political perspective the left-right distinction yields two ways of perceiving the family. For the right the traditional family model must be preserved distinct from alternative forms of cohabitation whereas, on the contrary, the left aims to make all forms of cohabitation equal to the traditional family model. For both, from an ideological perspective, the models to pursue are intended to bring the greatest happiness to those involved in the bond. Retaining as criterion of analysis the network of family relationships, one can observe in Italy as in Europe, various family forms: on the one hand, couples with or without children and singles living alone who, although living the form of the relationship in a personalised manner, from an institutional point of view, fall into the group of non-conventional families, on the other hand, single parent families, re-united families, *de facto* families and same sex couples (gay and lesbian) in which the pluralisation is not centred on the way of living the family relationships (personalisation) but on the creation of a new model of family relationship. Beyond the political, cultural and ideological dimensions, the family remains, in the past as in the present, a "producer and reproducer of social bonds even within the variety of forms it has always assumed, it being decidedly a plural noun.» (*idem*, p.183).

Book Review

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