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The future of the elephant-bird

Nancy Folbre

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Abstract:

Social scientist Kingsley Davis underestimated the potential of collective efforts to modify patriarchal authority relations in his Jul 1937 article on declining birth rates, the future of the family, fertility behavior and related public policies. A theoretical framework between production and reproduction concerns should be integrated with a moral concept of what the family could and should become. Social scientists are urged to appreciate and take responsibility for the transformation of authority relations between men and women, parents and children, rich and poor, old and young.

Full Text:

In his 1937 article, Kingsley Davis described the demise of the family economy with prescient grace and a memorable turn of phrase: "[T]he declining birth-rate," he wrote, "has resulted from a ripening incongruity between our reproductive system (the family) and the rest of modern social organization. . . ." (1) Something about the phrase "ripening incongruity" reminds me of a famous children's book by Dr. Seuss, a writer of the same generation as Kingsley Davis who was also concerned about the future. (2)

In Horton Hatches the Egg, a mother bird who is tired of sitting on her nest asks Horton the elephant to give her a break. Although initially skeptical, he agrees, carefully props up the nest tree so that it will hold his weight, and delicately settles into position. The mother bird flies south for an extended vacation, and Horton remains loyal to his task despite suffering many indignities, including capture by a group of hunters who sell him and his nest to a circus.

An elephant sitting on an egg is something people will pay money to see. But well-tended eggs eventually hatch, and just as this climactic event is taking place, the mother bird happens to fly past the circus and remembers what she had left behind. She is ready to claim the emerging chick as her own, but lo and behold, the baby bird has elephant ears and a tiny trunk, and loves no one but Horton. The circus owners are so amazed that they return both animals to the wild where they live happily ever after. The ripened incongruity, an elephant-bird, saves the day.

One could interpret this story as a kind of antifeminist tale. After all, the mother bird selfishly went off on vacation and abandoned her nest. On the other hand, she did make arrangements (very successful ones, it seems) for the care of her egg. The real lessons of the story are positive ones: Family values are flexible and can be practiced in surprising ways. Caregivers can be rewarded by

receiving care in return. Kingsley Davis would be rightfully skeptical, but in my opinion he needs a dose of Dr. Seuss. And vice versa.

In this essay, I argue that we should combine a theoretical analysis of the changing relationship between production and reproduction with a moral vision of what we think the family could and should become. Davis contributed enormously to our theoretical analysis, but in his preoccupation with technological change he underestimated the potential of collective efforts to modify patriarchal authority relations. He also put too much emphasis on demographic change, narrowly defined. The biggest problem facing the family economy is not fertility decline but rather the weakening of social obligations toward children and other dependents.

In my own theoretical framework I have focused on the transformation of authority relations between men and women, parents and children, old and young, rich and poor.(3) The better we understand this transformation, the more we need to take responsibility for it. That is why I have urged social scientists to address an essentially normative question: How should we collectively enforce our obligations to dependents? I agree with Kingsley Davis when he says we need to "invent a new system of reproductive institutions."(4) As Dr. Seuss might put it, we need to make sure that Hortons will help hatch the eggs.

Materialist functionalism

Davis's perspective on the evolution of reproductive institutions has helped shape theories of the demographic transition to lower fertility rates. The rural family was once a site of both production and reproduction. Technological change and the concomitant intensification of the division of labor relocated production outside the family. Mothers and children could no longer contribute very much to family income, and childrearing itself came to be seen as an activity that reduced economic welfare, rather than enhancing it. Davis projected this picture of the past into the future, predicting that families would continue to lose all but their "affectional" functions, which would not be sufficient to hold them together.

This theory can be categorized as materialist functionalism. It is "functionalist" in the sense that it assumes that social institutions like the family evolve because they are efficient - they fulfill a necessary function. As technological change modifies the environment, it alters the costs and benefits of social institutions, and they either adapt or disappear. It is "materialist" in the sense that it emphasizes the economic costs and benefits of institutions, and holds that purely "affectional" or "ideological" functions are less important than economic ones. Davis did not invent this theory. He was clearly influenced by the author he cites extensively in his article, W. F. Ogburn, who had, in turn, been influenced by Karl Marx.

Nor does this theory capture all of Davis's contributions to the topic of reproductive institutions. Certainly, the disagreements within materialist functionalism were extensive, and the 1937 essay stands out as a particularly provocative piece, because Davis predicts that the family will not adapt in the infinitely flexible way that Ogburn (and later, Talcott Parsons) believed it would. Unlike most of

his peers, he entertained the possibility that egalitarian family systems might simply fail. Davis was also less conventional than most of his contemporaries in frank analysis of the "sex role revolution" and his early advocacy of efforts to reduce the conflicts between paid work and childcare.(5)

But the limits of materialist functionalism help explain the inadequacies of Davis's theory of reproductive institutions. Functionalist approaches in sociology, like neoclassical economic approaches in economics, generally overlook the importance of distributional conflict.(6) Social institutions are almost always more efficient for some than for others, and they are generally reinforced by hierarchical systems of authority. The traditional rural family was held together by political as well as economic forces. The male head of household generally exercised tremendous authority over his wife and his children, which enabled him to appropriate some of the benefits of reproductive labor. The expansion of a capitalist labor market was accompanied by a reconfiguration of such patriarchal relationships within the family. Technological change, however important, was mediated by changes in social relations that had an equally significant effect upon the costs of reproduction.

Distributional conflict

Consideration of the role of patriarchal institutions can be added onto the traditional functionalist analysis to provide a more sophisticated theory of demographic change. In my view, this was John Caldwell's stellar contribution in *Theory of Fertility Decline*, which emphasized the ways economic development weakened the power of parents over their adult children and modified traditional intergenerational income flows.(7) I sought to build upon Caldwell by developing a more explicitly feminist analysis of the way in which patriarchal power allowed fathers to distribute many of the costs of childrearing to mothers. Women's entrance into paid employment reduced fertility not only by increasing the opportunity cost of mothers' time, but also by increasing women's bargaining power inside and outside the home.(8)

But while the structure of relationships between parents and children and men and women plays a particularly important role in defining the family, other relationships that lie outside the scope of patriarchal power are equally important. Structures of constraint based on nation, race, and class affect the organization of social reproduction. As many of the traditional functions of the family, such as childcare, education, care of the sick, and care of the elderly, have been transferred to the public sector, distributional struggles have become far more complex.(9) A clear example is the Social Security system developed in the United States, which socialized an important function of the patriarchal family by imposing a tax on working-age adults to support the older generation. Because the level of retirement benefits is determined by individual or spousal earning history, with no regard for efforts to actually raise the next generation of workers, Social Security effectively redistributes resources from parents to nonparents.(10) Somebody else is raising the kids who will support me in my old age.

One can also interpret debates over globalization in light of the distribution of the costs of social reproduction between employers and workers, a fundamental determinant of labor costs. Like

fathers in the traditional patriarchal family, capitalist employers once had a strong incentive to invest in the younger generation of workers in their country, because they had little access to any other sources of labor. During periods of rapid industrialization in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, employers were often strong supporters of public investments in education and social welfare.

Today, however, we live in a global economy, in which companies can relocate to countries that have already taxed themselves to provide highly skilled and well-socialized workers. If and when these countries try to increase the amount they can charge for the labor power they provide, either by raising taxes or by supporting workers' demands for higher pay, companies can simply move on. Thus, efforts to increase investments in education and social welfare are met by the objection that the higher taxes these require will lower "competitiveness." Meanwhile, developing countries whose most highly educated and skilled workers successfully immigrate to the United States, Canada, and Europe are perfectly analogous to farmers who watched their children leave home and move to the big cities. Both "reproducers" can only hope for some remittances from the "producers" who have left home.

I think that Davis would share my conclusion that something dysfunctional is happening here. He observed that the incentives to invest in families were being undermined by increasing labor mobility. I am generalizing his point by observing that the reproductive efforts of communities and nation-states are being undermined by increasing capital mobility.

Commitments to children

The possible effects, as well as causes, of transformed family life are at issue. Davis predicted that modern industrial societies would fail to reproduce themselves and thus would be overrun by less egalitarian, more fertile societies. This distinctly ethnocentric anxiety has been a recurrent theme of efforts to promote greater public support for childrearing ever since Eleanor Rathbone invoked it as a justification for English family allowances in 1917.⁽¹¹⁾ This anxiety is misplaced. Declining fertility has enormously positive consequences for our standards of living and our ecological health.

The size of the next generation of our citizens is far less important to our collective economic welfare than the quality of the care we provide for them. We cannot take this quality as a given. The traditional patriarchal family did not merely enforce high fertility. It also enforced a relatively high level of parental investment in and commitment to offspring. Fathers and mothers enjoyed some economic benefits from childrearing, and women had few alternatives but to specialize in motherhood. The same forces that have created new incentives to reduce fertility have also reduced incentives to devote time and energy to children already born. Furthermore, many social changes set into motion by the process of economic development have led to a cultural devaluation of nonmarket work, including childcare.

An emphasis on changing economic incentives does not imply that parents' behavior can be reduced to pecuniary concerns. Most people derive great intrinsic pleasure from the process of raising

children, and they commit themselves to caring for dependents and paying for a social safety net for their society as a whole despite the significant costs of doing so. But we should not assume parental altruism is a natural, exogenously given sentiment that is immune to historical change.(12) Rather, we should think of altruism as a strong but contingent predisposition that requires social and cultural reinforcement, and examine the forces that tempt individuals to default upon their responsibilities to members of their families and their communities.

The best evidence that we are witnessing an increased "default rate" that could be associated with a weakening of parental altruism is the twentieth-century rise in the percentage of families maintained by mothers alone. In the United States and Latin America, in particular, this transformation of family structure has been accompanied by an alarming rise in the percentage of children subjected to poverty.(13) This is only one of the many indicators that lead me to conclude that our reproductive "problem" is not low fertility, but inadequate levels of paternal and social commitment to the next generation. The consequences are a waste of human capital as well as a violation of principles of equal opportunity for children.

Davis's account of the impact of modernization is consistent with my argument that it can weaken norms of familial altruism. I believe, however, that Davis underestimated the importance of this effect because he accepted the individual pursuit of self-interest as a prescriptive principle for human behavior. There is an irony here that resembles the Heisenberg principle in physics, which stipulates that efforts to measure the exact location of a subatomic particle inevitably affect its location. In his 1937 article, Davis observed that the calculation of individual costs and benefits undermined the integrity of the family unit. By describing this as a natural, inevitable process, he helped weaken the very social norms whose evolution he was observing. He traced modernization from a distinctly modernist point of view.

The claim that individuals should pursue their own self-interest, regardless of the impact on others, is most famously associated with Adam Smith. But Smith assumed that men were naturally benevolent, especially toward members of their own families.(14) Malthus, Marshall, and all the other founders of neoclassical economic theory agreed, laying a foundation for Gary Becker's formalization of the claim that altruism is to the family as self-interest is to the market.(15) Once this claim is challenged, confidence in the individual pursuit of self-interest is inevitably shaken. If self-interest becomes selfishness, particularly in the family, it can no longer be described as a positive force. It seems quite likely that unconditional advocacy of the pursuit of self-interest undermines the values and norms that encourage individuals to take responsibility for the care of others, including their own children.

Originally confined to the male world of the market, the precepts of liberal individualism have gradually been extended to the female sphere of the family, partly as a result of feminist efforts to contest a normative double standard that held women more accountable than men for maintaining the moral order. Turnabout is fair play. The competitive structure of a global capitalist economy makes it much easier to overturn old forms of social obligation than to establish new ones.(16)

Rewarding care

Davis encouraged us to redesign our reproductive institutions. I believe that our task is to find ways of rewarding care for others - especially for children - without penalizing women. We should design a combination of mutually reinforcing economic incentives and cultural norms that can strengthen our natural tendencies toward altruism. We should develop and enforce strong, egalitarian, and democratic obligations of care for one another. We should promote forms of economic growth that foster the development of human capabilities, rather than the expansion of marketbased gross domestic product. Otherwise, we may find ourselves heading toward the condition Thomas Hobbes called the War of All Against All, the story William Golding told in *Lord of the Flies*.

Let's return to *Horton Hatches the Egg*. At the beginning of the story, the father was simply absent. He probably left both because he had better opportunities elsewhere (a change in relative prices) and because he liked the new philosophy that he should pursue his own self-interest (a change in norms). The mother bird has fewer opportunities away from the nest. Furthermore, she has been told all her life that if she is not a responsible mother she is not a decent bird. But things change, and she soon figures out that if she does not invoke a "what's good for the gander is good for the goose" strategy, she will be stuck on the nest for good.

Some poignant dimensions of this situation are described in Arlie Hochschild's recent book, *The Time Bind*.⁽¹⁷⁾ Mothers with a career in paid employment may not reduce their work hours or spend more time with their children for fear that they will be seen as less committed than the men with whom they are competing at the office. Fathers may want to avoid being stigmatized as caregivers. Both spouses may fear that if they reduce their hours of paid employment, their partner will be under less pressure to take on a share of housekeeping and childcare responsibilities. The result is what economists call a coordination problem that results in a suboptimal outcome. Even if neither parent literally defects, both may supply less care to their own children than they would prefer if they could agree to a binding commitment.

But neither will agree to a binding commitment as long as they each conclude they will be individually better off if they defect. Social reproduction is a costly process that, in the short run, puts competitors at a disadvantage. Men would prefer women to pay the costs. Nonparents would prefer parents to pay. Employers would prefer workers to pay, and so on. If distributional conflict prevents us from finding a collective solution to this coordination problem, the likely outcome is clear. The less powerful groups will end up paying for most of the costs, even though they have the fewest resources to invest in the next generation. The least powerful group, of course, is children themselves.

Davis was skeptical of public policies such as family allowances, because they had not significantly increased birth rates. From my point of view, this is in fact their greatest success. The relatively egalitarian public subsidies for childrearing put into effect by countries such as Sweden and France have formally "revalorized" family work and substantially reduced poverty among mothers and children without encouraging high fertility. Unfortunately, even if these policies survive the intensified

global competition that threatens our economic landscape, they remain sadly inadequate. They continue to reward market work much more generously than caring work. And they rely on large, bureaucratic institutions financed by taxpayers rather than on any genuine revitalization of families and communities.

I would prefer a policy that focuses on training more Hortons. By taking turns, everyone could enjoy time spent sitting on the nest. I can imagine a society in which everyone has some direct responsibilities for the care of others, both within their own family and without. Unfortunately, Dr. Seuss never explained where Horton came from. We are the ones who will have to figure out how to bring him to life.

Notes

1 Kingsley Davis, "Reproductive institutions and the pressure for population," *Sociological Review* 29 (1937): 289-306. The quotation is from page 290. The article is reprinted in the Archives section of this issue of PDR.

2 Theodor Seuss Geisel [Dr. Seuss (pseud.)], *Horton Hatches the Egg* (New York: Random House, 1940).

3 Nancy Folbre, *Who Pays for the Kids? Gender and the Structures of Constraint* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

4 Davis, "Reproductive institutions," cited in note 1, p. 305.

5 Kingsley Davis, "Wives and work: The sex role revolution and its consequences," *Population and Development Review* 10, no. 3 (1984): 397-417.

6 For more discussion of institutional economics and distributional conflict see Nancy Folbre, "Engendering economics: New perspectives on women, work, and demographic change," in *Proceedings of the Annual World Bank Conference on Development Economics* (Washington, D.C.: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 1995), pp. 127-153.

7 John C. Caldwell, *Theory of Fertility Decline* (New York: Academic Press, 1982).

8 Nancy Folbre, "Of patriarchy born: The political economy of fertility decisions," *Feminist Studies* 9, no. 2 (1983): 261-284.

9 Folbre, *Who Pays for the Kids?*, cited in note 3.

10 Nancy Folbre, "Children as public goods," *American Economic Review*, 84, no. 2 (1994): 86-90.

11 Eleanor Rathbone, "The remuneration of women's services," *The Economic Journal* XXVII (March 1917): 54-68; *The Disinherited Family* (London: Edward Arnold and Company, 1924).

12 Gary S. Becker, *A Treatise on the Family* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

13 Folbre, *Who Pays for the Kids?*, cited in note 3.

14 See Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (London: G. Bell and Sons, Ltd., 1911), and the discussion in Nancy Folbre and Heidi Hartmann, "The rhetoric of self interest and the ideology of gender," in *The Consequences of Economic Rhetoric*, ed. Arjo Klamer, Donald McCloskey, and Robert Solow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 184-206.

15 Becker, *A Treatise on the Family*, cited in note 12.

16 Nancy Folbre, "Holding hands at midnight: The paradox of caring labor," *Feminist Economics* 1, no. 1 (1995): 73-92; Nancy Folbre and Thomas Weisskopf, "Did father know best? Families, markets, and the supply of caring labor," in *Economics, Values, and Organization*, ed. Avner Ben-Ner and Louis Putterman (New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

17 Arlie Russell Hochschild: *The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997).