

RESPONSE TO PROFESSOR PANOS D. BARDIS' PAPER

PERSISTENT FAMILY FUNCTIONS AND SOCIAL
HARMONY THROUGH CREATIVE EDUCATION

This paper is an ode to the family and an affirmation of its resilience, persistence and relative indestructibility. The context, for the most part, is the United States of America and the time frame is contemporary.

At the outset the author states his thesis: family functions are so important that, despite various changes throughout history, the basic institution always survives and contributes to social harmony and continuity. An educational philosophy and familial educational programs can be supportive and facilitate such survival. Professor Bardis attempts to sustain this major premise throughout the paper with the marshalling of data and the dismissal of doomsayers who predict the family's demise.

The paper is structured around three main sections - with numerous subsections within each. The author prefaces his argument (Section 1) by defining the family and laying out its various functions. Multiple definitions are offered and an extensive list of its functions are enumerated. The former, however, seemed inconclusive, and the latter incomplete for a clear theoretical framework for the author's argument.

It is in Section 11, titled "Family Change and Persistence", that Professor Bardis takes up the heart of the matter. The family is always changing. But the family also persists, thus contributing to social continuity and harmony. Both must be promoted and facilitated by creative education. In support of his thesis, and his philosophy of gradualism, the author, utilizing a socio-historical approach, sets up his argument, vigorously pursues and interprets data in support of it and attempts to nullify any counter claims.

Our problem, the author argues, lies in misperceptions and misinterpretations. We misperceive the family as in catastrophic decline, and we misinterpret data that seems to indicate and support this assumption. At the root of our false consciousness, according to Professor Bardis, is our historical illiteracy. Our lack of historical perspective leads to a distortion of data on the family and related issues. The appeal is for a sense of proportion in reading sociological data and to keep all in historical perspective.

The first history lesson offered is a comparative study of ancient Rome and 20th century United States. The family survived the "domestic maelstrom" of ancient Rome--where divorce proliferated. In some respects, the author claims, the contemporary family is even healthier--in spite of the sexual deviations of our leaders. Even our "modern domestic typhoons" or problems have been exaggerated: the greed, personal ambition and anti-familism of the 1970's and 1980's; the rise in cohabitation (only 4.1 percent of all U.S. couples); the effectiveness of affirmative action programs and the value of gender, race and ethnic based studies. These

problems were merely a gentle wind, not a destructive typhoon. So, where is the demise of the family? Professor Bardis asks rhetorically. To reinforce and drive home his premise, the author picks, at random, some areas of family which are frequently asserted as indications of the family's demise: attitudes toward virginity, cohabitation, homosexuality, illegitimacy, abortion, divorce, drugs, alcohol and violence. Data in each of these areas are misread and the impression left of a declining family. But, the author re-asserts, there is no approaching catastrophe. The family, phoenix-like, always returns, albeit in modified form, and contributes change and continuity to social life.

In the final section of the paper, the focus of Professor Bardis shifts toward the practical: how to strengthen the family and promote social harmony. The emphasis here is on education as a process of guided creative adjustment of the family household. First, however, this question must be set and examined within philosophical and socioeconomic systems which affect the family positively and negatively. Three are explored: social teleology, capitalism and communism. But what is to be done educationally at this time, the author asks. Three suggestions are offered as a conclusion:

- (1) Declare the family alive and well. It is neither dead nor dying but merely changing. Destroy the myth of decline.
- (2) Stop the violence against women. Resistance is needed to practices that still prevail across the globe where the equality and emancipation of women are violated.

- (3) And, finally, a series of specific educational programs and publications are proposed to guide the family in its perennial work of fostering social continuity and harmony.

In his paper, Professor Bardis demonstrates a flair for the dramatic and poetic. His flair tends to be inflationary and his poetics, I fear, lapses into hyperbole at times.

I have no disagreement with the authors basic premise: the family is not in a demise. Ever since the 17th century in the United States, people have been certain that the family is disintegrating. Ironically, almost the reverse is true. We remain devoted to a strong picture of family life. Family imagery permeates our deepest aspirations, fears, resentments, and hopes. Other social forms have always had difficulty existing in the United States, but the family is the one form that clearly does exist. In spite of profound social changes and cultural upheavals on every level, the family is nearly the only social unit still standing. In fact, the "nuclear" family may be too strong in its effects on children, and it is certainly too strong as a metaphor that envelops many organizations (sports teams, corporations, churches, law firms, etc.). When every social form is perceived as familial, the overuse of the metaphor has unfortunate effects, namely, someone playing daddy and adults being treated like children. Professor Bardis, however, has captured a truth: there is not even a potential competitor to the family on the horizon. This truth, in turn, needs qualification and a context. It is here that Professor Bardis and I differ in our perspectives and where I find the arguments supporting his premise unconvincing. Let me note three areas of concern: (1) His use of statistics, (2) an edenic or utopian view of the family, and, (3) a tendency toward idolatry of the family and its current form.

(1) USE OF STATISTICS

I suppose we find in life what we want to find. Jurgen Habermas reminds us that knowledge and human interests are inextricably bound. Data is in the eye of the beholder. This is the case here. Statistics, related and unrelated to family life, are marshalled, built-up and used as a proof text. Then they are dismissed as inconsequential, and, in fact, as proving the opposite - as in the case of abortion, illegitimacy, divorce, violence, etc. Data is placed at the service of an ideology - an ideology of traditionalism that opposes affirmative action, and gender, race and ethnic studies. Some data is used unfairly - as in the case of linking homosexuality and alcoholism. If we don't like the author's interpretation of the data, it seems, we are bigots or simply ignorant of the "real" facts.

I would propose an alternative interpretation and call for a more realistic assessment. The family is an indispensable social form. But we have made it almost impossible for families to flourish. Contemporary American society puts sustained pressure on families to succumb to an increasingly driven and harsh cultural surround. The hunger for the material, the cultivation of false needs, a cherishing of freedom (rights) to the neglect of social obligations (duty), and the loss of time working-parents have with their children are facts that cannot be ignored. For all our success in modern United States, there is a sense that something has gone terribly awry. Social break-down is everywhere -- manifesting itself in the very data Professor Bardis seems to

dismiss. To marry today is an act of courage, and parenting under modern conditions is hard for two dedicated people to handle well. Families need all the help they can get. We can assist them by accurately naming the context in which they dwell, and patiently re-shaping it toward a more hospitable familial environment.

- (2) My second concern is the edenic or utopian view of the family that emerges from the paper. I sense a romantic, if not nostalgic, remembrance of things past. It is refreshing sometimes, the author claims, to ignore the modern social scientists and return to the "jewels of the immortal giants of the past". In the context of the United States, this beckons us back to the mid-nineteenth century. It was precisely in this period that the values and expectations about family life which many Americans share today become implanted in middle class culture for the first time. The family became a utopian retreat (as Kirk Jeffrey characterized it) or a haven in a heartless world (according to Christopher Lasch). A sharp disjunctive set in between the private world of the family and the larger society. The larger society, symbolized by the city, represented evil, the degraded, the distressed. The individual would find meaning and satisfaction at home and nowhere else. It would be the vehicle of perfectionism. It could actually become a heaven on earth. Our ancestors thus were encouraged to nurse extravagant hopes for the domestic realm. These inflated hopes remain branded in our minds and imaginations to this day. When these hopes fall short reactionary philosophies flourish.

(3) Finally, a word on what I perceive as an idolatrous tendency toward the family and its current social form. The family is affirmed as invincible and miraculously indestructable. No competitors or alternative social forms receive a hospitable hearing. As a corrective response to this silence, I would offer a simple three-step educational process: a) recognition and acceptance of the family as inestimable gift. Affirm the biological unit and the ordinary world into which we are born and must transcend; b) Acknowledge the family is limited. The family cannot do everything nor can it be identified with every social form. The family's limits, in fact, is part of its strength, namely, its focus on the parent-child relationship; and, c) The individual family needs a context of other families and other kinds of groupings. This is a relativizing process. The family for its own health needs complementary structures into which family members can move. Neighborhood groupings, associations, friendships and non-familial forms are not a threat to family life. They may, in fact, offer it an enriching context of interaction. In this respect, our religious traditions affirm the communal character of the family and, at the same time, remind us that the family is not the final community.

Professor Bardis has scripted his ode to the family. The ode can be recited or sung. But it cannot become a hymn of adoration. As our Muslim brothers and sisters testify and proclaim: There is no god but God.

Dr. Kieran Scott