

Government Divides, Families Unite - Pope Leo XIII saw it coming

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The title of Patricia Morgan's new book, *The War Between the State and the Family*, says it all. The British government has engaged in "systematic discrimination against (married) couples in the tax and benefit system." This persuasive book, published by the Institute of Economic Affairs in the UK, provides a cautionary tale about "deconstructing" the family into a mere collection of individuals. In so doing, Patricia Morgan provides an illustration of the principles of Catholic social teaching laid out in Leo's 1891 letter, *Rerum Novarum*.

Morgan argues that the "Neo-Marxist vision" that "interprets human relationships in terms of the distribution of power, and any care and reciprocity operating within and between generations as servitude," is the guiding vision behind many British social policies. An ill-considered idea of women's economic and social freedom contributes to the problem. According to Morgan, "*The assumption is that there are no joint resources and no mutual support because people do not and must not share within families.* Motherhood is now invariably viewed as something women plan and deal with on their own. The references are to jobs, maternity pay and leave, and child care, and never to a relationship with someone else who might share or sustain the costs involved. Marriage is now deemed irrelevant to reproduction."

The subtitle of her book, "How Government Divides and Impoverishes," indicates Morgan's view of the consequences. People could take better care of themselves, working together through the family, than the state can take care of a collection of loosely related individuals.

This brings us to *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Leo XIII's masterful document that kicked off modern Catholic social teaching. Americans are inclined to read this document simply as a defense of private property and the right to form independent trade unions. But thinking carefully about the family reveals a deeper meaning. *Rerum Novarum* is a protest against the tendency of the state to absorb all functions and institutions of society into itself. "It is not right," Leo insists, "for either the citizens or the family to be absorbed by the State; it is proper that the individual and the family should be permitted to retain their freedom of action."

Beginning with the French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century and culminating in the Bolshevik Revolution at the beginning of the twentieth, revolutionary social movements have attempted to give the state complete jurisdiction over every aspect of society. Part of the statist strategy has been to redefine social institutions as mere collections of individuals. *Rerum Novarum* objects: "Although private societies exist within the State and are, as it were, so many parts of it, still it is not within the authority of the State universally and per se to forbid them to exist as such. For man is permitted by a right of nature to form private societies."

While the British government has not gone so far as to forbid marriage, it has significantly hampered the marriage association. Some government officials, Morgan observes, hold that "the treatment of a married couple as a single financial unit ... is to be discouraged, along with any predisposition in favor of the nuclear family." The state is presumed responsible for the support of the children of unmarried parents.

The practical policies that flow from this philosophy are many. Married couples' tax allowances have been eroded. The income support for the poor is structured to benefit unmarried mothers in comparison with married couple households. Public housing benefits are structured to benefit single parents.

Adding to the incentives for family disruption, parents can essentially evict their sixteen year olds, who can then qualify as “unintentionally homeless” and thereby entitled to publicly-financed housing. All these policies add up to “the proportion of lone mothers heading up their own household doubl[ing] between 1974 and 1989 to 73 percent.” The number of children being born to unmarried mothers has increased from 8 percent in 1970 to 42 percent in 2004, and the proportion of one-person households has increased from 14 percent in 1961 to 30 percent by 2004.

Unfortunately for the advocates of radical atomization, government promotion of individualism fails on its own terms: extreme isolation does not make people happy. Fathers are critical to the well-being of children. Living alone is a strong predictor of suicide, especially for men. Most unmarried mothers are heavily dependent on state-provided benefits.

All these tragic outcomes underscore the importance of collaboration and solidarity to the health of individuals and to society. Decomposing society into nothing but a collection of unattached individuals has been destructive of individuals and society alike.

Pope Leo XIII would not be surprised.

Patricia Morgan's book, [The War Between the State and the Family](#), is available from the Institute for Economic Affairs.

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