

Introduction: Family Politics

Adrian Daub
Stanford University

Michael Thomas Taylor
Reed College

THE EXCLUSION OF THE FAMILY FROM PROPER POLITICS goes back to the very origins of Western political theory. In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates infamously proposed abolishing private households and family relations among the Guardians of childbearing age, in order to breed and rear better citizen-soldiers bound by familial ties of affection and duty to the body politic.¹ Less radically, perhaps, Aristotle's *Politics* found in the *oikos* a form of community or common life enabling men to act freely and live well as citizens of the polis. The household's proper nature, however, was a private sphere of privation, as Hannah Arendt most influentially underscored, where menial, commercial, and creaturely concerns of reproduction and sustainability outweighed lofty political considerations.²

For a vision of what happened if the family were allowed to dominate politics, Athenians looked to kingdoms like Sparta or Macedon. Thucydides, the general and historian of the Peloponnesian Wars, presented the dynasty as a wanton disequilibrium of the natural political order, by which one family imposed its power through a state of exception.³ These theorists taught a long-lasting lesson: family and politics were not supposed to have anything to do with each other, and if they did, it was a sign of a malfunctioning polity. Families constituted threats to peace and justice, and separating families from politics meant distinguishing legitimate from illegitimate uses of power—inwardly over citizens and dependents, and outwardly against enemies of the state.

¹ Plato, *The Republic*, 457c–d.

² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 58.

³ Thucydides: *The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 282.



How this view squared with modes of governance based crucially on a family, namely a ruling family, remained fraught for millennia afterward. Many medieval and early-modern Aristotelians understood the *politeia* to describe essentially a hereditary kingship, and the *polis* Aristotle describes to be an extension of family structures. Robert Filmer, for example, took Aristotle to be arguing that the basis of political power lies within the family, that the divine right of kings is transmitted by a kind of dynastic process from the paterfamilias to the king, and that “the power of government did originally arise from the right of fatherhood.”⁴ More astute readers, such as Thomas Hobbes, excoriated Aristotle as a republican, among other things, precisely because he sidelined the family from politics. These differences over interpreting Aristotle nevertheless betray basic agreement about the patriarchal nature of power that, in the course of the Protestant Reformation, increasingly widened tensions between the church, the state, and the family. Historians of German Protestantism, in particular, have traced how the growing insistence on the autonomy of fathers’ domestic authority weakened the formal and informal alliances through which these instances of authority enforced civic order, while at the same time more firmly cementing and protecting the power men wielded over women.⁵

Such a clear historical narrative is largely a consequence of contemporary political perspectives: the history of family politics is taken to underwrite distinctions between the public and the private, the political and the social, or the sacred and the mundane. The history of family politics offers insight into the most ancient and durable foundation of power, the power of men over women. And in sharpening questions about the limits, origins, and legitimacy of power, the history of family politics set the stage for democratic political theory. Yet almost without exception, contemporary political theory views such ancient or early-modern histories as prehistories for the revolutionary break of the eighteenth century—the pivot toward the sentimental nuclear family effected most visibly and influentially by Rousseau. As “the oldest of all societies, and the only natural one,” the family in Rousseau’s imagination transformed self-preservation and natural inequality into voluntary duties of love and obedience.⁶

But Rousseau presented this “first model of political societies” precisely in contradistinction to a social contract among men who are equal by rights of law.⁷ As Susan Moller Okin has pointed out, the “sentimental” family resurrected the old Aristotelian opposition while inverting its value judgments: now the family was a place of respite, a rock in the churning waves of public, political life. In the wake of Rousseau, Okin argued, political theory once again tended to assert “that the family operated on entirely different principles from those of the outside world.”⁸ Family was no longer held to be *too base* for “true” politics; it was now understood as *too good* for it. The rules and abstractions of civil society did violence and damage to the unity and wholeness of the family unit. But like other critics from the feminist tradition, Okin made this point in order to unmask the ideologies of power hiding within the protection of the private, domestic sphere.

⁴ Sir Robert Filmer, *Patriarcha and Other Political Works* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1949), 79.

⁵ See Joel F. Harrington, *Reordering Marriage and Society in Reformation Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Isabel V. Hull, *Sexuality, State, and Civil Society in Germany, 1700–1815* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996); Lyndal Roper, *The Holy Household: Women and Morals in Reformation Augsburg* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

⁶ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Maurice Cranston (New York: Penguin, 1968), 50.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Susan Moller Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 285.

Writing a decade after Okin, Carole Pateman definitively refocused this tradition by arguing that a tacit “sexual contract” within marriage subtended classical fictions of social contract theory, and that the “depoliticization” of the family in liberal political theory coincided with a shift from patriarchal to fraternal political power.⁹ And for all of Foucault’s differences from traditional political theorists, to consider a very different example, his work shared some fundamental presuppositions with liberal and feminist critics, most notably that any analysis of politics requires first an analysis of power. With an eye toward the population politics and eugenics of industrialized states, Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* (1976) singled out the family “as an agency of control and a point of sexual saturation”¹⁰—and hence a crucial node for systems of economic class, nationality, citizenship, and race. The family for Foucault is one of the primary sites where politics becomes biopolitics.

Social historians have made clear that the realities of political and social power never exactly coincided with these theories or even the legal regimes they underpinned. The realities of family politics since the eighteenth century produced unpredictable results—at times challenging long-standing prejudice or opening up unexpected opportunities for autonomy and empowerment.¹¹ Views of the family as natural or sacred, prior to social meaning or order, challenged existing political structures but also supported new figures of the nation as a family. Legal, philosophical theories of marriage engendered strong conceptions of autonomy and equality as well as sexual power. Moreover, religious traditions that had themselves underpinned revolutionary, secular, liberal paradigms remained among the most powerful currents of nineteenth- and twentieth-century politics.

The Christian belief that all men and women are children of God gave support to conceptions of democracy and human rights. Yet newly founded religious communities that continued ancient Christian tradition in radically heterodox understandings of kinship or sexuality tested the tolerance and willingness to limit—or employ—violence on the part of mainstream social majorities. The violent rebirth of the American republic in the Civil War was not only a war between brothers, to give one example, a trope that animated many openly racist antebellum attempts at political reconciliation. It was also a war over “domestic relations,” a term that applied both to family law and to laws governing slavery.¹² The Republican platform of 1856, the founding document of a fledgling party written at the brink of a civil war, loudly harangued against the “twin relics of barbarism—Polygamy, and Slavery.” The target of this attack—the Mormons who had settled in Salt Lake City after two decades of violent persecution—is but one example from a long Christian history of heterodox family politics (others from nineteenth-century America include the Oneida colony and the Shakers) that disrupted or disregarded mundane political power.

In sum, family politics have motivated political utopias as well as power politics; they have informed bourgeois liberalism and romantic political fantasies of all stripes. At least from the eighteenth century onward, distinguishing families from “premodern” forms of kinship (be they

⁹ Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 3.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage, 1990), 220.

¹¹ See, e.g., Suzanne Desan, *The Family on Trial in Revolutionary France* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004); Hendrik Hartog, *Man and Wife in America: A History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

¹² See Nancy Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

households or dynastic alliances, patriarchies or matriarchies, a psychoanalytic or anthropological “allegory for the origins of culture”¹³ also meant confronting the politics of modern sexualities and intimacies, bourgeois dynasties, and queer genealogies. As much as the terms have shifted in the last hundred years, today’s political controversies over same-sex marriage continue an old tradition of conflicts that are focused on the family and yet touch upon the foundations of democracy. And although same-sex marriage is easily the most visible such conflict, it is far from the only one: witness debates over the extent of the welfare state and state-sponsored education, tensions between liberal presuppositions of political equality and the inequalities of socioeconomic reality, and the purchase of religion in a secular public sphere. In figuring the distinctions between public and private at the foundation of Western political theory, in promising integrity while provoking fears of crisis and disorder, and as a primary locus of political action and conflict, the family has always marked conditions that transcend and precede politics.

The contributions to this Forum all proceed from the intuition that the political nature of the family was not a discovery of the late eighteenth century and did not emerge simply as a reaction to the sentimentalization of the nuclear family. In other words, political thinkers and actors (albeit those not generally included in the PoliSci 101 canon) had various and creative ways of construing the way in which the family was either the target of political action or its wellspring. And they all deal with thinkers who nevertheless reject the inverse intuition: that rather than being qualitatively distinct, the two are structurally analogous or simply extensions of each other—a thesis that united thinkers as disparate as Filmer, Maistre, and Engels.

A survey of recent work in political theory suggests that contemporary discussions tend to ignore or quickly dismiss this intuition, while also solidifying the ideological assumptions around which the modern history of family politics has always operated. Scott Yenor’s recent book *Family Politics*, for instance, traces a history of political theory that is strikingly familiar in its canonical genealogies. The line Yenor follows descends from John Locke through Rousseau and Hegel, who occupies the conceptual fulcrum of the book, to then diverge as strands of Marxist and positive sociology, as a tradition of liberal manifestos for limiting government in defense of the family, and overtly sexual but otherwise disparate traditions of psychoanalysis, postwar feminism, or sexual liberation that prove susceptible to essentialist, universalist assumptions about human culture or the body.¹⁴ Loosely following Hegel while drawing inspiration from Pope John Paul II, Yenor defends communal values of love and responsibility as “unique goods” revealing crucial limits to “autonomy and independence.” And yet in another, unwitting echo of Hegel, Yenor builds his case on notions that (if the history of family politics has taught us anything) demand critical attention: notions of “sex” or what is “sexual,” of husband and wife as joined in “one flesh” to become an indivisible whole of previously fragmented selves, and of marriage as intrinsically bound up with parenthood or “family life.” More crucially, this lack of critical reflection on the foundation of these family values forestalls any sustained, serious engagement with definitions of what is political.

The tensions evident in Yenor’s book are systematic, however representative or not the shortcomings of his approach. Scholarship on the family in political and moral philosophy published

¹³ Judith Butler, “Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?,” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 13, no. 1 (2002): 37.

¹⁴ Scott Yenor, *Family Politics: The Idea of Marriage in Modern Political Thought* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011).

within the past ten years reflects the horns of a dilemma. It often suggests that families can serve politics as a tool for achieving liberal aims of diversity or plurality, of rectifying discrimination or furthering justice, equality, and fairness, while nevertheless remaining reticent to breach liberal limits to state power or assert “thick” accounts of human subjectivity. Or it takes recourse to religious or communal concepts of transcendence without addressing long-standing liberal objections to their legitimacy within a secular public sphere. David Archard’s “liberal defense” of the family, for instance, denies to adults any “rights” to choose their kin but declares the family to be “irreplaceable” because it best enables the care of dependent children.¹⁵ Parents appear here as the best worst alternative to “communal-rearing practices,” while the unavoidable dependencies of intimate relations receive scant attention. Linda McClain explores with rare theoretical clarity the thorny conundrums that reproduction, education, gender inequality, and the public recognition of intimacy pose to liberal democracy, to then propose a “liberal feminism” that would employ the family as a “formative process of shaping their members to be capable, responsible people and good citizens.”¹⁶ Maxine Eichner’s *The Supportive State* more directly tackles the implications of Rawlsian liberalism for the family. She argues that publicly fostering families will further what she calls the “social good” of care, and that this approach provides a much-needed corrective to liberal political theory by confronting dependency as an unavoidable fact of human life. Yet one effect of Eichner’s carefully argued conclusion that “supporting family privacy . . . requires state action to help ensure that strong families have strong capabilities, rather than simply requiring that the state leave families to themselves,” is to provoke new questions about what distinguishes a family from other forms of intimate association or kinship.¹⁷ Meanwhile, conservatives assert religious values, such as a divine human potential to procreate or binary gender difference,¹⁸ or natural values, such as a “biological connection,”¹⁹ as the foundation of a family’s public value. Reading this scholarship side by side makes it tempting to conclude that family politics is an arena in which philosophers—even more so than politicians—delight in talking past each other.

The contributions to this issue do not trace out a grand narrative, and it would be foolhardy for the editors to impose one. But what does unite them is that they complicate existing narratives, each pointing to moments at the margins of the canon where we can detect the faint stirrings of historical developments usually associated with much later periods—moments when our modern discomfort with the gendered categories of political theory is anticipated in surprising ways. Joanne Wright explores a specific kind of courtly private sphere and protofeminist critiques thereof. Carolina Armenteros similarly outlines an aristocratic protofeminism in France and explores its critique of *amour-passion* in the wake of Rousseau. Michael Thomas Taylor, indirectly taking on Okin’s thesis, turns to Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* to locate arguments for queer family and politics.

¹⁵ David Archard, *The Family: A Liberal Defense* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 117.

¹⁶ Linda C. McClain, *The Place of Families: Fostering Capacity, Equality, and Responsibility* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 10.

¹⁷ Maxine Eichner, *The Supportive State: Families, Government, and America’s Political Ideals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 142.

¹⁸ See, e.g., *Deus Caritas Est* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005), the first encyclical published by Pope Benedict XVI; or Sherif Gergis, Ryan T. Anderson, and Robert P. George, *What Is Marriage? Man and Woman: A Defense* (New York: Encounter Books, 2013).

¹⁹ Brenda Almond, *The Fragmenting Family* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 199–200.

Daisy Delogu's article explores discourses of gender and their role in the creation of a French national identity at the turn of the fifteenth century. It was an era during which the pressing issue of the Valois succession coincided with the emergence of the sense of the nation as a family. The problems posed by Salic law (that is to say, the exclusion of women from the dynastic line) and by opposing claims by the Plantagenet line thrust family politics into the historical spotlight; but at the same time they were only the backdrop before which national consciousness, and the sense of the nation as a kind of political family, could emerge. Jean Gerson and Jean de Montreuil were instrumental in theorizing and in many respects shaping these family politics and in the event ended up creating the parameters of an emergent national identity.

As Joanne Wright's contribution to this Forum makes clear, however, aristocratic political thought did not simply negate the division between the privacy of the family, on the one hand, and the public, on the other. Jürgen Habermas argued that the opposition between private and public sphere did not emerge as a potent political category until the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie. But Wright shows that women political thinkers of the seventeenth century very clearly operated with some version of that opposition—women like Maria de Zayas, Mary Astell, and the Duchess of Mazarin rebelled against what they described as a penal form of the family, between the lines associating it with autocratic forms of governance. Decades before Mary Wollstonecraft's famous excoriation of men who would "force all women, by denying them civil and political rights, to remain immured in their families groping in the dark," Zayas hit upon the same metaphor, and the same critique of feminine confinement, albeit within an economy of prestige rather than of propriety and property.

Carolina Armenteros builds upon her recent work on an alternative early feminism that has hitherto been ignored, largely because it comes from a politically unsavory corner. Her protagonists are monarchists, heavily invested in the divine right of kings and are altogether hostile to modern liberalism and its heroes. Whereas women like Wollstonecraft tended to link women's virtue to the modern liberal project, such that political revolution would lead to an improvement of women's situation, aristocratic women such as Antoinette Legroing de la Maisonneuve, Stéphanie-Félicité de Genlis, and Constance de Maistre made the same link with the opposite intent. They sought to critique, Armenteros writes, "the enshrinement of passionate love within marriage in the process of devising what was at first an aristocratic, and later a monarchist, feminist ideal."

Where Wright and Armenteros focus on texts outside the canon of either literature or political philosophy, Michael Thomas Taylor locates a subversive streak in a text that is as canonical as they get. G. W. F. Hegel's *Foundations of the Philosophy of Right* (1821) presents an account of the family that appears to be firmly in the "sentimentalist" mold denounced by Okin: the family is held together by timeless powers of love, but the paterfamilias represents it in the more "universal" public sphere of civil society. Taylor suggests that Hegel's placement of marriage between love and autonomous consent produces an unexpectedly queer definition of sexual difference as ethically constitutive for freely chosen kinship. He reconstructs the difficulties of Hegel's theory as evidence for understanding marriage as a socially transformative institution that is ethical in furthering critical reflection with the potential to alter the conditions of political freedom.

Together, these contributions foreground moments in which political thought and practice push beyond oppositions that have traditionally been taken to dominate political theory—oppositions between the personal and the political or the public and the private, between

ostensibly natural sexual differences, or between social definitions of belonging and exclusion. Without doubt, eighteenth-century conceptions of the sentimental family mark a hinge or threshold of modernity. They set an enduring framework in which modern paradigms of family politics crystallized. But the wider view taken by the contributions to this issue also gives strong reasons why this framework has long proved incapable of explaining its own presuppositions, consequences, or dilemmas. [A](#)