Family Matters: The Sexual Revolution in American Politics

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Date : February 18, 2013

Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012).

After reading Robert Self's ambitious new book, it is almost impossible to imagine a satisfying history of the last half-century of American politics that does not place gender, sexuality, and the family at the center of analysis. Self's story begins at the dawn of the Kennedy Administration and ends with John Kerry's 2004 presidential defeat but focuses primarily on the period between the mid-1960s and the mid-1980s, when radicals, liberals, and conservatives contested and transformed the meaning of family. The central trope of *All in the Family* is a shift in the reigning paradigm of American politics from "breadwinner liberalism" to "breadwinner conservatism." Breadwinner liberalism, the organizing principle of the New Deal welfare state, promoted households headed by male breadwinners supporting dependent wives and children. Government policies—from Social Security to the tax code to military benefits to labor and employment regulations—shored up this family wage model of household political economy.

By the late 1960s, breadwinner liberalism was under siege from the left. Feminists challenged the idealization of domesticity and the primacy of homemaking and motherhood over gainful employment for women. Anti-war activists questioned the equation of bellicose masculinity with patriotic citizenship. The gay rights and gay liberation movements mobilized against cultural and political norms that violently repressed and pathologized homosexuality. These movements succeeded in unseating breadwinner liberalism, Self writes. But ideological fragmentation, economic scarcity, and vehement opposition prevented them from inventing a replacement. Instead, in the second half of the 1970s and into the 1980s, breadwinner conservatism filled the vacuum, fueled by antifeminism, anti-statism, homophobia, and the displacements of de-industrialization. This new breadwinner ideal—even less consonant with lived reality than it had been in the 1950s and 1960s—celebrated unfettered capitalism, denigrated government, and combated the uncertainties of post-industrial life with the unwavering conviction that not only countercultural permissiveness but liberal economic policies threatened social order. Abortion rights, feminism, the Equal Rights Amendment, the "homosexual agenda," and "secular humanism" joined busing, affirmative action, and anti-war protesters as targets of rage and antipathy.

Breadwinner conservatism is the key to understanding the otherwise puzzling coalition between so-called economic and cultural conservatives in the modern Republican Party, Self argues. "What's the matter with Kansas" is not that affluent Sun Belt conservatives duped working-class religious voters into voting their consciences rather than their pocketbooks. Instead, a shared view that a capacious role for the government undermined America's fiscal solvency and its moral fabric united these seemingly disparate interests. Breadwinner conservatives, Self stresses, saw government overreach everywhere, including in seemingly libertarian trends such as the liberalization of abortion laws.

The end result, according to Self, was that although progressive social movements succeeded in winning "negative liberties" such as the decriminalization of birth control, abortion, and sodomy, and prohibitions on overt discrimination based on race and sex, they fell short of obtaining the "positive rights" necessary to make those freedoms meaningful to many Americans. Increasing income and

wealth inequality rendered new liberties fully accessible only to a privileged few. From Nixon's veto of universal child care legislation and the denial of public funds for reproductive health care to Clinton's embrace of welfare reform, neoliberalism triumphed.

All in the Family weaves together secondary literature and primary sources in a seamless account that builds on and adds to the work of other historians of the period. Scholars such as Alice Kessler-Harris, Nancy MacLean, and Marissa Chappell have observed the similarities between the liberal family wage consensus of the 1960s and the conservative gender ideology that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. Others, including legal historian Anders Walker, have documented how ostensibly race-neutral policies concerning personal and family morality maintained racial hierarchy when overt appeals to white supremacy became politically untenable. Among other things, Self provides a compelling account of internal social movement struggle, foregrounding tensions between radicalism and respectability, assimilation and transformation that were common across the black freedom, feminist, and gay movements. The result is an elegantly written synthesis that is more than the sum of its parts.

Social movements are the stars of Self's narrative, with law playing an important supporting role. Law frequently appears as a double-edged sword in his account. The grounding of reproductive rights in the constitutional right to privacy rather than in equal protection for women or the poor is a key example of the limitations of negative liberty. Title VII granted women "market liberty" but failed to provide supports—such as generous paid family leave and affordable, high-quality child care—that would enable women (and men) to flourish both at work and at home. Resort to law often meant uncomfortable political alliances and compromises. The anti-rape movement succeeded in part because of its appeal to law-and-order conservatives as well as feminists. The quest for anti-pornography laws similarly produced strange bedfellows as well as divisions among liberals and feminists.

Self's application of Isaiah Berlin's distinction between positive and negative rights is illuminating, although like any dichotomy, imperfect. At times Self appears to use "positive rights" as a stand-in for government involvement, regardless of who bears the cost. For instance, he refers to women in same-sex relationships claiming custody of their children from different-sex marriages as seeking positive rights, and indeed they did invoke the power of the state to vindicate their parental prerogatives. But like child support enforcement, which (in contrast to lesbian custody rights) attracted allies across the political spectrum during this period, custody rights do not strain the public fisc. At other times, Self emphasizes the distinction between liberty and equality: whereas liberty requires government to step back, equality commands government intervention. But equality comes in more or less expensive guises. Substantive equality usually requires a greater redistribution of resources than formal equality. Moreover, it matters who is paying. Employment discrimination laws often shift costs to private employers, or, more controversially, to other employees. In contrast, a robust social safety net financed by taxpayers, nationalized universal health care provision, and other unachieved progressive reforms socialize the costs of dependency. It is this distinction, between privatizing and socializing the costs of caring for individuals and families, which arguably correlates best with the success or failure of reform attempts since 1970.

Nancy Fraser's distinction between the "politics of recognition" and the "politics of redistribution" may also be useful here, especially in light of current debates over same-sex marriage. Marriage equality, as Self recognizes, implicates both negative liberties and positive rights—not merely the legal imprimatur of a marriage license but many material benefits as well. In theory, marriage equality could mean not only the triumph of gender egalitarianism but the leading edge of greater acceptance and social supports for all family structures—dealing a final death blow to breadwinner liberalism *and* conservatism. But like many of the successful reforms Self describes, marriage equality does not necessarily advance the politics of redistribution. Notwithstanding its associated public and private benefits, a principal goal of marriage is to privatize dependency, to render a robust welfare state

unnecessary. As marriage increasingly correlates with higher levels of education and income, the unmarried generally, and single mothers in particular, are left with no (second) breadwinner and no state support. If marriage continues to become the province of the privileged, marriage rights for same-sex couples may join the other “negative rights” that Self laments are the primary legacy of late twentieth-century social movement struggle.

Cite as: Serena Mayeri, *Family Matters: The Sexual Revolution in American Politics*, JOTWELL (February 18, 2013) (reviewing Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012)), https://legalhist.jotwell.com/family-matters-the-sexual-revolution-in-american-politics/.