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The Influence of the Home in Social Dynamics

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I

I have been asked to talk about a very sensitive and complex issue: *The influence of the home in social Dynamics*. I will start off with the question with which the organisers begin their presentation of my speech: How is the home, and specifically the work at home, a crucial factor in the way society works and develops?

The question, in my view, contains a paradox. It supposes, in fact, quite rightly, that the Home, the work at home, represents a “crucial factor” for the life of society. I would say that the large majority of men and women in our western world would fully agree with this. Any yet – here is the paradox – our public policies do not seem to reflect this fact. Work at home is considered to be a work of secondary importance. Everyone, like it or not, is beginning to realise that a large part of the resources of a community, including “civic” resources, depend upon the Family, upon the Home; and yet we consider work at home simply as if it were a question of cooking, cleaning, washing the dishes and making the beds. Not to mention the dominant culture, which tends increasingly to consider the Home, the Family, as an eminently “private” matter. And yet, as you well know, here at the “Home Renaissance Foundation”, a great deal more is at stake. Upon it depends the way in which the whole of society “works and develops”. In other words, it is important to recognise the “social subjectivity” of the family – i.e. the fact that the family represents, yes, a private sphere, but also the place where a society elaborates its *ethos*, its fundamental values, the values that are essential for ensuring an ordered civic life. I am thinking, for example, as I will examine later, about trust, respect, a sense of responsibility and common good. But recognising this would lead to radical changes for the “subjectivism” which dominates our culture and the conception of our systems of welfare. This is the reason why it is preferred to allow the paradox to remain or, at least, why there is a failure to resolve it.

With a certain spirit of provocation, I would say that our public disinterest in work at home, in the importance that a patient construction of satisfactory family relationships has upon social relationships in general, is almost reminiscent of the Greek world where, in effect, the *oikos*, the family, the domestic economy, was no more than a place for the servants and the women, the place where the *polis* was limited to reproducing its citizens and providing what was necessary for their survival. But real life, the really human life, took place outside the home; it was what went on in the *agorà* and in the academy: the political and philosophical centres.

Curiously, what has been happening over these last thirty-forty years is rather reminiscent of the low respect the Greeks had for family life. The way in which women enter the world of employment, almost as if they can achieve true “self-realisation” only by leaving the walls of the home, denotes a dramatic tension between family life and social life. The so-called “middle-class family” which has emerged from modern processes of industrialisation, the family based on the rigid distinction of roles between man and woman – one required to work outside the home to provide for material necessities and the other confined to the home to look after the house and children – this family, while creating an unjustifiable imbalance between men and women, nevertheless recognised the social and symbolic importance of work at home, especially insofar as the education of children. And yet, as soon as work outside the home seems destined to become the true means of self-fulfilment for both men and women, we find that there is no more time for work at home. Family life and the job world become almost two conflicting environments; where there is one, there seems to be no more room for the other. To the detriment,

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obviously, of work at home and the children, but also with serious disadvantages for both society and family relationships. Here we think, on the one hand, of the population crisis (perhaps the most dramatic problem in Europe today) and, on the other hand, of the growing dissatisfaction on the part of many men and women who would like to bring more children into the world, but decide not to do so for fear of having insufficient time to look after them.

I will not talk at length about the countless studies, past and present, into this worrying and complex phenomenon. I will merely observe that it is necessary to start off from this very point for a new consideration of the family, in terms of work as well as social life in general, which is capable above all of recognising their interdependence. In other words, we must carry out some sort of major reconciliation between family and work, between family time and work time, with an awareness (as is stated in the presentation of my speech) that the life and work of the family are reflected in the life and work of society. And so I now reach the question I have been given.

II

The great challenges we face – from bioethics to biopolitics, from problems of population to those of immigration, from the crisis in traditional educational institutions to problems among the younger generations and the reform of our welfare systems – all seem to focus on the family. Whatever issue, whether of anthropological, social, political, ethical or even theological relevance, must necessarily take into account the institution of the family, demonstrating its undoubted centrality both in the life of the individual as well as that of society. Despite this, a certain dominant culture today seems to have great difficulty in recognising this centrality, apparently wanting even to remove it, reducing the family to something eminently “private” and subjecting it to a series of attacks which give rise to considerable concern.

From being the primary factor in the life of society, the family seems to have become, in effect, simply one factor, no longer of particular importance, in the life of the individual. The increase in the number of divorces, the reduction in the number of marriages, the increase in the number of single people and unmarried couples, the reduction in the number of children and medically assisted reproduction are some of the many signs of a profound socio-cultural change, one of whose main conditions of possibility, resulting from the modern culture, is the “movement towards individuality”, as Simmel described it. Like most historical changes, this is a process which has obviously brought both good and bad, producing negative repercussions, as I have already indicated, but also having many positive aspects. The end of women’s subjection to men, the development of family relationships which are more clearly marked by reciprocal responsibility and reciprocal respect, a greater awareness of the responsibility involved in bringing children into the world and in their education – these are just some examples of factors which have had a positive effect. It is therefore quite wrong to interpret the modern process towards individuality purely in terms of progress or purely in terms of decline. As I have already indicated, it is a question of being able to see both sides. In philosophical terms, it is ultimately a question of deciding whether we are facing a process where human reason and freedom have to be interpreted in an individualistic and relativistic sense, with the risk of it backfiring on man himself, or in a sense which, recognising reality as their measure and limit, protects them from dangerous inhuman excesses. And it is precisely at this level, for reasons which I shall explain, that the great socio-cultural relevance of the family emerges as a “point of intersection between public and private”, even as a primary factor – let’s admit it – in the life of society, as a relationship of fundamental importance, as a means of safeguarding the many benefits which have accompanied the development of modern awareness in terms of personal independence, freedom and dignity.

But, it will be asked, what kind of family are we talking about? Is it not true that there now exist many types of family, recognized and encouraged by the official documents produced by the United Nations Organisation, by the European Community and by the legal systems of many countries? In effect, this is true. But if we look at

concrete reality, we notice that, especially today, this reality does not entirely match up with the cultural categories which have inspired these documents. In fact, not only do we find that, alongside the growing pluralisation of family forms, there is an undoubted persistence of what we shall call the “traditional” family set-up; but more importantly, it seems that there are now no practical equivalents to certain social functions carried out by the “traditional family” and those functions are increasingly important for the development of a civilised society worthy of that name.

At this point it has to be recognised, in effect, that the term “traditional family” contains within it a substantial ambiguity, due to the fact that the adjective “traditional” refers to the past, to the by-gone family, to a type of family which in many respects no longer exists: the so-called “extended” family with many children, grandparents who lived under the same roof, rigid separation of roles, a more or less clear subordination of the woman, fairly linear intergenerational relationships, generally pre-determined social roles, carried out on a sort of automatic basis. But if what Levi Strauss stated is true, namely that the more or less permanent, socially approved union, of a man, a woman and their children is a universal phenomenon, present in all and every type of society (Levi Strass 1967), then the adjective “traditional” could also refer to what constitutes a sort of constituent element of the family, a permanent relationship immune to the wear and tear of time, and essential to enable us to continue talking about the family; something therefore which, while depending upon the *choice* of the individual, is such *by nature*: something whose possibilities are for this reason endless; a “social relationship” which, in the various historical forms that it assumes, involves more or less every aspect of human existence – biological, psychological, economical, social, legal, political, religious – and which for this reason is capable of adapting to all changes, even of the most radical kind.

Apart from the many transformations which have taken place to the family, especially in recent years, in terms of structure as well as roles, aside from the widely proclaimed pluralisation of family forms as a characteristic and liberating feature of society today, I believe that it is still possible, indeed necessary, to establish criteria capable of distinguishing the family – what we can still call the “traditional family”, provided that the term is not misunderstood – from other forms of social grouping. Following Levi Strauss and without wishing in any way to bring into question the legitimacy of other forms of cohabitation, this criterion, in very general terms, could be formulated as follows: a true family exists only where there is at least one heterosexual couple whose cohabitation is ratified by a public pact of a religious or civil kind, or a parent-child relationship.

III

In what follows, I will try to show that this kind of family today represents a public resource, a social and individual asset of inestimable value.

I am obviously well aware that modernisation has transferred many responsibilities from social institutions (including the family) to individuals, and that it is individuals who represent the fundamental point of reference in terms of the risks and opportunities of our society. But this individualistic organisation of life does not respond to people’s relational needs, especially the needs of those who have to look after families, and in particular children. Contrary to what is claimed by current variegated forms of individualism, “no man is an island”. The nature of man is relational, and the most natural form of relationship is the family. The family encapsulates the human being’s anthropological significance. Failure to take into account this “relational” or “familial” nature produces an individual who is abstract, hypothetical, de-naturalized – an individual who in reality does not exist. Liberal culture and institutions must therefore be revitalised in order to highlight the importance of the family, showing that the family truly represents the primary and fundamental factor of society. In any event, a pluralistic and liberal society cannot survive on contractual relationships alone. Contracts certainly signify independence and freedom; the same can be

said about laws, the legitimacy of which is no longer determined from on high, as happened in the past, but from free discussion and agreement between those concerned. Nevertheless, it cannot be forgotten that, in order for discussion and contractual agreements to take place, society has to be infused with a particular spirit, consisting of trust, a sense of the common good, tolerance, responsibility, mutual understanding. This spirit cannot be produced contractually, but only through that slow process of socialisation which begins in the family itself and then continues in the school and in all other institutions and social relationships. In this sense, despite the difficulties that it faces, the family is certainly an important training ground, where children can learn from an early age how to relate with others, how to deal with conflict, with differing interests and points of view, allowing children, from the very beginning, to understand the need for tolerance, the need for agreement, so that we feel unity and love, a sense of living in a world which, despite all its problems, has the appearance of home, a home for everyone. *It is in the family that the relational nature of mankind emerges*, in other words the fact that others are an essential and fundamental part of our personal being and our freedom. In other ways, no man is an island.

Among the reasons why the family is considered to be an important public asset are its capacity to produce *trust, trust in the world and in life*.

In a memorable passage in her book *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt writes: "The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, "natural" ruin is ultimately the fact of birth, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. It is, in other words, the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born. Only the full experience of this capacity can bestow upon human affairs faith and hope, those two essential characteristics of human existence which Greek antiquity ignored altogether. [...] It is this faith in and hope for the world that found perhaps its most glorious and most succinct expression in the few words with which the gospels announced their 'glad tidings': 'A child has been born to us.'" (Arendt 1958).

Every child who is born is a sign of hope, of faith with regard to world and life; it is the sign that, despite the decrepitude that inevitably pervades our individual and social reality, something new is always possible, and with it, the freedom, the opportunity of beginning something which otherwise would never begin. But if this is true, then it is necessary to recognise that the so-called "demographic winter" is much more than a social problem; it is instead a genuine symbolic tragedy which is destined to reflect negatively upon a whole range of aspects of society. By this I mean that our birth-rates are close to zero, the reversal of the so-called demographic pyramid (many grandparents, few grandchildren, rather than many grandchildren and few grandparents) is having and will certainly continue to have dangerous social effects (which I will consider later), but their most profound significance is another: they demonstrate above all the dangerous lethargy which is gradually taking over our hearts, the widespread indifference towards renewal and freedom, our ill-concealed, worrying complicity with death.

If it is true that today we live in a complex society, in a society where almost all of the automatic assumptions of the past have been destroyed, including that of marriage and bringing children into the world, the gain in terms of freedom and capacity to choose increasingly personalised lifestyles must not be paid in terms of lack of interest in life, since this paradoxically numbs our freedom; it renders us increasingly individualistic, increasingly alone and therefore increasingly exposed to the risk of exploitation. If yesterday our freedom suffered from an excess of social ties, today it suffers from an excessive lack of them and people are finding it more and more difficult to construct satisfactory relationships with themselves and with others.

Here emerges, once again, what is certainly one of the most important social functions of the family with children and of the work which has to be done within the family with children: the capacity to promote in society *the sense of the relationship with others and, consequently, the sense of common good*.

Today, as is well known, there are frequent references to a society which is gradually losing the sense of its own tradition as well as faith in the future. The younger generations in particular seem to find it difficult to feel a sense of being “generated” and, in turn, a capacity to “generate”. Whatever might be the reasons for this incapacity, which are certainly connected with the individualism, narcissism and fragmentation that pervade our society, one thing is certain: the family is capable of representing a special place for safeguarding the sense of the generational chain. Quite simply, it could be said that it is difficult for someone living in isolation to feel part of a shared story. The practice of living with others, of sharing a home, objects and emotions, strengthens both the relationship with the local community as well as the capacity for emancipation as an independent individual. The independent identity of every person depends in fact on the capacity for personal expression, for each person to express their own story through being a part of other stories. In the very fine and profound words of Alasdair MacIntyre, we could also say that the narrative of anyone’s life is part of a series of interconnected stories (MacIntyre 1984), without which our stories would be autistic, non-stories, therefore transient, disconnected stories of no importance. Our individualistic era seems to have lost sight of their meaning, but the interminable genealogies of certain pages of the Bible were there to provide a clear indication of the generational chain along which our identities are rooted. Forgetting this chain doesn’t make us more independent or more free; and our young people are well aware of it. They have often been brought up in a context which is historically (and therefore ethically) neutral, often without brothers or sisters, with parents who themselves feel lost and, like their children, are desperately searching for roots. I believe that it is also for this reason that today we are once again beginning to feel a certain need everywhere for family; and the family with children, indeed with many children, from being a sign of cultural backwardness, is becoming a sort of status symbol in the collective imagination.

As soon as the family strengthens intergenerational links, it performs a further very important social function: *it safeguards a community’s tradition*. After a long period of suspicion and hostility, the concept of tradition is rightly regaining a certain prestige within western culture. We are beginning to realise that it has little or nothing to do with so-called “traditionalism” and much to do, instead, with memory, identity and hope for the future of a community. In a very fine passage, dating back to the 1930s, the Portuguese writer Fernando Pessoa noted that he belonged “to a generation which has lost all its respect for the past and all belief and hope in the future” and that therefore he experienced “the present with the hunger and anxiety of one who has no other home” (Pessoa, 2002). It must be recognised however that with the growth of this “anxiety”, there has also been a new growing awareness; an awareness, thanks to which we feel the need to reconnect our own home with that of our parents and with that of our children and grandchildren. In this way, together with the importance of the “generational link”, we also regain a new sense of our individual reality. The family relationship recalls both memory (grandparents) and future (grandchildren). And this is where the true sense of tradition lies. This is certainly not expressed, as some suggest, in the often narcissistic nostalgia of the past, but rather in the awareness that the horizon in our life doesn’t end with our own self. History does not end with us; it precedes us and survives us: this is what tradition means. We are not worlds unto ourselves, closed in upon ourselves, but open worlds, communities, which also constantly embody us, an “us” which includes in a certain sense those who have gone before us, as well as those to come.

If what I have said above has any plausibility, it is not in fact paradoxical that a society which is ageing, like ours, finds it difficult to safeguard its sense of tradition. This tradition is a link with the past, but in a living rather than a “traditionalistic” sense, with a vitality that is above all a projection towards the future. Young societies are those which can make true use of their traditions; ageing societies wear them out and, in the end, kill them off.

Let us take as an example our democratic traditions. No one until now would have ever dreamed of seeing a nexus between democracy and demography; and yet it is precisely the birth rate which is revealing another important and perhaps unexpected social role of the family with children: *the support which families with children offer for the continuation of normal democratic dialogue*. The Catholic Church has indeed been saying for a long

time that behind the problem of birth rates which are too low in the West (and too high in the poorer countries of the world) lies a cultural catastrophe of immense proportions but, so far at least, it certainly cannot be said that world public opinion has given it any credit on this point. If anything, the opposite has happened: there has been (and still is) a unilateral attempt to exploit the so-called “demographic bomb” argument, exclusively for the purpose of ensuring that the governments of so-called developing countries give prime importance to “population control” at domestic and international level, often without any regard for human dignity. Think of the many attacks inflicted on the family in western countries, of the increasing difficulties, especially for young people, when it comes to bringing children into the world; but think also of the sterilisation campaigns conducted in India by Indira Gandhi in 1977, of those conducted in the 1970s in Ceaușescu’s Romania, or the population policies of the current Chinese government, or the fact that aid from rich nations to developing countries has often been made conditional upon drastic measures for population reduction. Everything seems to have militated against life. Today, however, especially in the West, we see the explosion – if I can put it this way – of the other aspect of the “bomb”, in other words the drop in the birth rate.

This explosion doesn’t, at present, seem to be producing much noise; if we are worried about it, this is primarily for the economic consequences it brings. For example: who will pay our pensions? Will the children of our immigrants be sufficient? But the economic aspect is only one part of the problem. The consequences at political level are, in my view, far more alarming. In an ageing society, in fact, the more conservative forces inevitably tend to dominate and, in the long-term, the conflict between the great majority of the population (the elderly) and the ever decreasing number of young people could become explosive. In the end, even now, safeguarding pensions is considered far more important than creating new job opportunities; I have already said something about lack of interest in the family, which is indeed penalised when bringing children into the world; added to this are the priorities which our public policies allow to those who are, as they say, already “inside” without worrying too much about those who remain “outside”, most of whom are young people, and I think that the picture is then sufficiently clear as to the danger that the falling birth rate could have on the liberal democratic culture and institutions. In order to function fairly, a democracy needs a balanced demographic structure. The demographic winter could also become the winter of democracy. Here too we see the powerful and unexpected emergence of the great social value of children and of the family which brings them into the world and cares for them. This confirms, as I suggested at the beginning, that the family, and the educational role it plays, represent one of the principal “social assets” of our civilisation.

IV

On a more strictly cultural level, all of this means that the moment has arrived to leave behind the “ethical neutrality” which has characterised our liberal democratic culture over the past decades. As Charles Taylor has shown (1992), we have gradually seen the principle of equal dignity of all people before the law transformed into a recognition of personal individuality, in other words personal “difference” in whatever form that might be, into the growing indifference towards any idea of “good” which might be described as “shared”, any “common good” which is to be encouraged. This is the explanation behind the modern drift towards individualism as well as the phenomenon of the pluralised forms of family (for some people even a woman with a dog is a family). But if all of this extends the space of freedom for some individuals, it is by no means certain that it ensures a more liberal society; in the long-run it compromises the regulations and social institutions which are essential for its support. And this, I believe, should worry us.

The liberal state, in itself, cannot obviously be a “moral state”; it cannot think of carrying out any “good” against the wish of its citizens; but nor can it be morally neutral, so that one lifestyle is more or less the same as another. In this case, in fact, perhaps without wishing to do so, it would end up promoting forms of life which are

only “hypothetical”, “indifferent”, “contingent”, which are, in turn, not capable of promoting those virtues (as I described above) that are essential for the state and for society to remain pluralistic, liberal and respectful of personal independence.

Ulrich Beck claims that our society, “precisely because it is individualised”, can no longer be guided by spiritual or moral norms which are not in themselves individualistic (Beck 1994). And so be it. But, without questioning the right of every individual to de-codify from themselves, if I can put it that way, all that circulates around them in terms of moral and spiritual values, the problem remains as to whether this search for a “new individualistic form of morality” can truly absolve a parent or society from presenting certain models, certain lifestyles, rather than others, undertaking and working to ensure that their children assimilate them. Obviously the answer to this question can only be one: neither the family, nor society, can avoid pursuing certain preferential choices, even if they wanted to. The truth is that even when they say they want to be neutral, in fact they end up holding up indifference as a model. But this certainly doesn’t strengthen the *ethos* of a liberal and democratic civilisation. Suffice it to observe the growing malaise among young people and the “normality” which forms the background in their lives. The stories in films, television or advertising, through which our society portrays itself, go in effect towards a sort of aesthetic of exception (and dissolution); political institutions tend to follow the same line; socio-educational institutions seem increasingly unable to “teach” and increasingly orientated towards accepting the endless numbers of “exceptions” which now surround us. There is, in short, a prevailing idea of “normality” which, being indifferent to everything, seeks to engulf everything, and is in danger of succeeding. In this respect, however, we also begin to see how difficult it is, especially for young people, to succeed in that “inner search” which is so dear to us. As I have already partly suggested, empirical studies tell us that many young people seem not to exist as a “generation”; they have no sense of belonging to something or someone; they have no feeling of “upbringing”, nor do they feel they have anything significant to pass on. They are, one might say, rootless and without a future.

I feel able, therefore, to end with a fairly obvious conclusion: if it is true that the human being must be the centre and heart of every society, if it is also true that the family constitutes the special environment in which this person grows and develops his or her individual and social potential, then it is necessary to ensure that the work carried out by the family in that respect is recognised and also promoted socially. The family cannot be left alone in this immense task. Public policies and civic society must be more decisive in supporting the work carried out at home (Belardinelli 2009). Mankind, as I said at the beginning, is an essentially “familial” being and this means that only a healthy family enables society to reproduce the fundamental conditions for its liberality and therefore for its positive individualisation.

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