

From a Father-Dominated, through a Brother-Dominated, to a Mother-Dominated Society: on changing values in Modern Western culture

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I de seneste hundrede år har vores kultur bevæget sig fra faderstyring til moderstyring, med hensyn til de grundværdier, der udtrykkes i samfundets vigtigste institutioner (familien, staten). Det indebærer at myndighed og forpligtelse er afløst af omsorg og terapi som institutionernes dominerende udtryksformer overfor den enkelte. Hvad giver det af muligheder for at fastholde en (normativ) kultur for fremtiden?

Det 19. århundredes samfund og familie var klart domineret af faderen. Det var i sin tendens et faderautoritært samfund, hvor hovedvægten lagdes på traditionelt faderlige værdier: Pligtfølelse, arbejdsomhed, behovsudsættelse, kald, æresfølelse, sublimering, distance osv. I familien tilegnede barnet sig disse værdier i opvæksten, på en sådan måde at det senere i livet ikke kunne sætte sig ud over dem uden med det største ubehag.

Denne situation forandrede sig i det 20. århundrede, først og fremmest på grund af første verdenskrig, som blandt mange andre ting førte til at den ophøjede faderfigur blev trukket ned fra piedestalen. I krigen "døde Gud" og i det efterfølgende generationsopgør blev fadergenerationen i fred almindelighed anset for at være ophav til krigen - men det var sønnerne, der var blevet slået ihjel iden.

I mellemkrigstiden forsøgte man derefter at skabe et samfund, der ikke først og fremmest var baseret på faderautoriteten. Der fandt en eksperimenteren sted med, hvad man bredt kunne kalde for broderskabsideologier: kommunisme, fascisme, nazisme, socialdemokrati. Det viste sig imidlertid at det ikke var så let at skille sig af med den autoritære fader, som i mellemkrigstiden "gik igen" i mere eller mindre perverteret form - som fører (Hitler, Stalin, men også Stauning). De mest radikale af disse ideologier brændte ud i og efter anden verdenskrig, eller førte videre til det velfærdssamfund, vi kender idag.

Faderens rolle i familien svækkedes også op igennem århundredet, indtil den efterhånden blev helt sekundær i forhold til moderens. Faderen var enten fysisk fraværende (et stærkt stigende antal familie består kun af moder og børn), psykisk fraværende, eller forsøger at spille rollen som en sekundær moder.

Dette har ført til et bestemt sæt af samfundsmæssige problemer, der dybest set har at gøre med at faderen ikke spiller den rolle i børns bevidsthed, som han traditionelt har gjort. Dette er i forelæsningsen søgt illustreret ved et uddrag af et interview med den franske forfatter og psykoanalytiker Julia Kristeva, der problematiserer den situation, hvor faderen mangler i familien som den der adskiller moder og børn - klipper navlestrengen over, i videre forstand. Når faderen ikke er der til dette, må velfærdsstatens institutioner spille rollen som den, der adskiller, og iøvrigt støtter moderen i processen. Velfærdsstaten får i dén henseende en dobbeltfunktion som både moder (støttende den moder, der har vanskeligt ved at leve op til sin moderrolle) og fader (agerende for den fraværende fader).

Det er forelæsningsens pointe at de værdier, som staten afspejler i denne dobbeltfunktion, snarere er de moderlige (omsorg, trøst, "terapi", deltagelse, evaluering) end de faderlige (arbejde, pligt, kald,

autoritet, hierarki, sublimering, behovsudsættelse, målsøgen), hvorved disse sidste har en klar tendens til at glide ud af kulturen til fordel for de første.

Dette passer med andre tendenser i tiden: tendensen til at den indrestyrede socialkarakter afløses af den andenstyrede (David Riesman), og tendensen til at den traditionelle vestlige "skyldkultur" afløses af en "offerkultur". Hvor en skyldkultur er karakteriseret ved at den enkelte per definition hele tiden skylder fællesskabet noget, og derfor må "betale af", er offerkulturen modsat: her skylder fællesskabet (samfundet) den enkelte alt. Her er den enkelte nemlig defineret som offer, eller potentielt offer, og som sådant skyldfri. Gennem en forestilling om rettigheder stiller individet sig i centrum af tingene og forventer at blive retfærdiggjort. Den individuelle rettighed er grænseløs: det er retten til at blive lykkelig(gjort).

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INTRODUCTION



This discussion deals with changes in the basic values of European society, taking place in the 19th and 20th century: changes that might be described as the title indicates. In the 19th century, European society was based throughout on paternal authority. Paternal authority suffered a severe blow because of the First World War, after which various egalitarian ("brother") ideologies became vigorously pursued instead (Communism, Fascism, Social-Democracy). The more extreme among them burnt themselves out by or in the second half of the century, others were institutionalised in an egalitarian welfare state. By the end of the 20th century, the welfare state, at least in the North-Western part of Europe, expresses more and more "maternal values" when dealing with its citizens: stressing care, comfort and therapy over the "paternal values" of authority, duty and responsibility, that was expressed by the 19th and early 20th century state.

So we are not really speaking here about gender history; if anything, we are examining cultural history, defining culture, not as in 'high culture' vs. 'popular culture', but as, essentially, the normative integration of the individuals of any given society.

In the words of the great sociologist, Max Weber, man is seen as an animal connected to society by a web of meaning that he himself has spun. In a well-known reading of this statement by the anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, this web becomes more or less identical with culture, and our interpretation of it the key to *Verstehen*.

NOMOS

However, in order to try to circumvent the many ambiguities of the concept of culture, let us turn to the much less used concept of *nomos* instead. There are two ways of approach-

ing it. One is sociological, by way of another great sociologist, Emile Durkheim, whose concept *anomie* (a-nomos), meaning normlessness and valuelessness, simply is turned into a positive counterpart, *nomos*, by the social-psychologist Peter L. Berger. The other way is historical, and found by going back to pre-classical Greek texts, from Hesiod to Plato, where *nomos* simply was the law.

Either way, *nomos* represents the vast bulk of traditions, rituals, habits, conventions, norms, rules and regulations that makes up the values, drives and restraints of a given society. *Nomos* has also been called “the great inherited conglomerate”.

Nomos is the way society meets the individual, the way society confronts the individual as reality. It is the image of society that all its individuals carry around with them in the head, and in earlier, more simple societies, the commonness of this image was what kept society together. At best, this internal *nomos* corresponds with an external one, manifesting itself in the main institutions of society. *Nomos* has a subjective side, and an objective one.

Nomos is the essence of *normative integration* which is distinct from the *structural integration* that is dominant in more developed societies. Here society is kept together not entirely by the image of it that people carry in their heads, but by the state machinery, by bureaucratic and technological measures.

NOMIC AND ANOMIC PERIODS OF HISTORY

Nomos is the “shield against the horror of existence”, as Peter Berger put it. On a collective, as well as an individual level. It happens, however, that individuals get ‘out of tune’ with society, thereby becoming anomic. Classical Greek myths and tragedies are full of individuals like that. *Hubris* may be seen as a kind of *anomie*, for which the punishment is *nemesis*, the revenge of the gods, and the revenge of the community.

But whole societies may become anomic, too. Norms wear down, traditions that may have taken centuries to establish themselves, fall apart. So, society enters into an anomic period. This is a period of individualism and anxiety, but also of exploration and creativity - the Renaissance is a typically anomic period, as was Athens in the 4th century B.C. After an anomic period, very often the lid of *nomos*, of collective morality, is put back on. The Reformation (or Counter-Reformation) follows the Renaissance.

It is a much repeated pattern in history. It is the breathing of culture. During the anomic phases, many new forms (technological, social, religious forms) and new values are created through improvisation and experiment, and the viable of these forms and values are subsequently integrated into the *nomos* of the new nomic society. Catastrophic events may be instrumental in these cultural changes. The Black Death (1347-50) is quite as essential for understanding the transition from a Medieval to a Renaissance outlook, as the First World War is for understanding the transitions to a Modern one.

THE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY

Contemplated from some height, the 19th and 20th century correspond to each other as a

conomic to an anomic age. When you look closer, of course, a more complex pattern develops.

Although the 19th Century was the century of great changes in Western Europe – industrialization, urbanization and colonization, to name but the greatest — politically and culturally it may be seen as a very conservative period. In that respect it begins with the Restoration and ends with Victorianism, going through phases of re-traditionalisation and re-christianisation along the way.

The manifest tightening of the Western nomos hinges to a wide extent on the *authority of the father*. It is a father-dominated nomos, based on a cultural intersection of fathers – the fathers in families, in schools, in business, in the political world, in the church, the fathers of the land, the father of the country – and God the Father. This string of fathers made father-authority – and the culture that was based on it – seem extremely powerful, almost non-eradicable.

By the late 20th century, however, it had almost gone. Western (European) culture can hardly be seen as a father-dominated culture anymore, and the main event to bring a change in that situation was the First World War (1914-18). In it, 9 million died, but it is not the number in itself; it is the way they died made that made the First World War a tremendous break, a *cultural catastrophe* of enormous dimensions.

To understand this, one has to understand the main trend of the age that preceded it. The 19th century had all the makings of a golden age, in which Western Europe managed to break the code for eternal prosperity, among other things harnessing steam for productive purposes: industrialization. It was the age of colonizing the rest of the world, whereby securing important resources for industrial production, raw materials and labour, plus (in the longer run) a global market for the commodities.

European Civilized Man – in other words: *bonus pater familias* – had accomplished all this. This individual of culture naturally acquired very high opinions of himself, not to say that he was somewhat inflated by his own importance. Although there had been problems along the way (dealing with the workers, the women, the national minorities etc.), it seemed he could do no wrong.

THE FIRST WORLD WAR

And then this war had come along that nobody really wanted, or needed, and which developed in quite another direction than expected. When war was declared, everybody was imagining a war of cavalry, a quick war with a lot of swift movements through the continent, and with a lot of *élan*, as the French called it – a campaign ending up in either Berlin or Paris after a few months. Instead, they had had a war of attrition, a trench-war with a frontline that did not move much, but which proved to be absolutely deadly.

This is definitely not the place for an investigation of the many aspects of this war. Suffice it to say that it was the first undeniable example of “technology turning against man”. George Orwell put it bluntly: “The War of 1914-18 ... succeeded in debunking both Science, Progress and civilized man. Progress had finally ended in the biggest massacre in

history, Science was something that created bombing planes and poison gas, civilized man, as it turned out, was ready to behave worse than any savage when the pinch came.”

Orwell was not one to underestimate the impact of an event like this. He saw crucial events as being instrumental in bringing cultural change about: “Every now and again something happens (...) and the whole spirit and tempo of life changes, and people acquire a new outlook which reflects itself in their political behaviour, their manners, their architecture, their literature and everything else.”

“... And everything else”. A very comprehensive way of putting it. Another way of summing up the impact of the war was that it was the “death of God.” “God died” several times through history – as when Friedrich Nietzsche formulated the well-known dictum in the 1870s – but probably the war made the “death of God” real to the public, generally. At least “the whole spirit and tempo of life changed”, making the 1920s an altogether different scenario from what the 1910s had been.

With God, the father went. War seemed to separate the generations, the generation-gap widened, putting especially the fathers and the sons on different sides. The 1920s and 1930s became the age of “the lost generation”. Nine million young men had died in the war, even more millions had survived in a terrible condition, eventually manifesting themselves in art and literature as victims of a catastrophe. The generation of the fathers were pointed out as the perpetrators; the fathers – German, French or British – had started the war, through pride and senseless arrogance (or so it seemed afterwards), and the sons got themselves killed in it.

A UTOPIAN BROTHER-SOCIETY

When it came to the efforts of rebuilding the *nomos* after the war, this new condition was integrated in it. The Western European political project had changed. Now, the project became to create a “Land fit for heroes”, as the British prime minister, David Lloyd George, formulated it. The object of this policy was the veterans, specifically, and the young, generally. To an extent it was political rhetoric – the post-war period became the age of mass-politics, the result of what the German foreign minister, Walther Rathenau, had called the “vertical migration of the masses.”

Not all rhetoric, though. After the war there seemed to be a general will to create a more egalitarian, hopefully more just society. Ultimately, this had a lot to do with the war-experience, the front-soldiers learning how to survive in No-Mans Land by depending on each other. Only there was not much real agreement about how this new society should be organized. The dominant mass-ideologies of the 1920s and 1930s were communism, fascism/nazism and social-democracy — in the absence of the traditional God, assuming the character of belief-systems.

All of them egalitarian, although in different ways, the more extreme of them came to demonstrate a marked tendency towards organizing themselves around a leader, a dictator. It was the debunked authoritarian father creeping in through the backdoor, in a perverse shape.

The more extreme of these ideologies all more or less burned out in the Second World War, after which the dominant political programme of Western Europe was to create a welfare state, in the framework of a liberalistic economy. This project was based on the hope that technological progress would redeem everybody - that technology and market-economy would be able to secure the affluence, while the welfare state took care of the redistribution of income between rich and poor. The great leap forward for this system was the sixties, and after the fall of the Soviet Union in the beginning of the 1990s it went global.

THE FAMILY

Through the anomic ordeals of first half of the 20th century, a period where so many essential values and traditional institutions were being questioned and brought down, the nuclear family continued to be a cultural goal of the many. It is in fact amazing to see how people in the modernized, individualized consumer-society still work hard to maintain families, although they would probably have easier and more affluent lives by being single. The explanations of this seem to be cultural, and biological.

Anyway, the fact remains that as an institution the family is severely undermined. The divorce-rates are soaring sky-high in most Western European societies (the will to build families seems to manifest itself in Chamberlain's defeatist motto: Try, try and try again). It is difficult for a modern, self-seeking, somewhat narcissistic person to stay married when the going gets rough...

Also, though seemingly supporting the nuclear family, the presence of the welfare state actually seems to weaken it. Along the way the state stepped in and took on a lot of the traditional tasks of the family: daily child-care, care of the old and the sick etc. - freeing the father and mother of these obligations so that they might work longer on the labour-market, enabling them to consume more. But at the same time the loss of the obligations deprived the family of authority over the individual, primarily over the children, but to a certain extent over the parents, too. An individual sense of duty, obligation and responsibility was weakened.

Here, the change in the traditional role of the father becomes crucial.

THE ABSENT FATHER

Gradually, after the First World War, the father has lost authority in the family. To put it polemically, he is either 1) physically not there (the number of single mothers has been rising rapidly since the 1960s), 2) marginal in the family for other reasons, or 3) slowly becoming like a second mother, doing what mothers do.

This, of course, has had a profound influence on the family situation, on the sort of children that are raised, and, finally, on the kind of society created. The French philosopher and psychoanalyst, Julia Kristeva, addressed the problem of the paternal role in an interview she gave in 1996. In this interview, the interviewer, Elaine Hoffman Baruch, asks:

There are two rather well known books in the United States right now; one by Dorothy Dinnerstein, called The Mermaid and the Minotaur, and the other by Nancy Chodorow, called The Reproduction of Mothering. Their thesis is that the exaltation and the degradation of women stem from the fact that mothers rear children, and that if fathers or men were to have equal responsibility for the rearing of infants all our sexual malaise would be eliminated, all the problems having to do with women's inaccessibility to culture would be ended. How do you feel about this idea?

If there is a sort of rage against mothers [Kristeva answers], it is not because they take care of the child but because they carry it in their bodies. And that is something that men, even if they handle the diapers, can't do. I think it is here that a certain desire is rooted, a certain negative desire, a certain rejection of the maternal function – a fascinated rejection. Moreover, the fact that men do the same work as women with regard to the education of children or their early upbringing will certainly change things in the psychic functioning of children, but I don't know if it will do so in the way foreseen by these feminists. In fact, it will decimate the paternal function. I mean that it will render ambiguous the paternal role. Up to the present, in the division of sexual roles, the mother takes care of the child, the father is farther away. The father represents the symbolic moment of separation.

And you feel that that should be retained?

If we do what they call for, that is, if the fathers are always present, if fathers become mothers, one may well ask oneself who will play the role of separators.

Couldn't they both be? Couldn't both sexes be both nurturers and differentiators somehow?

I would like to think so, but it would be very difficult. What seems more likely is that many borderline children will be produced, and it will become necessary to find a third party, that is to say, the school, all those medical sectors of the different “psy's”: psychoanalysts, psychiatrists, psychotherapists, who will play the paternal role. The number of helping institutions for early childhood, for schoolchildren, that are forming now in our society is extraordinary, and one may well ask oneself what their function is. These people, of course, replace the failed mother, as it is remarked only too often, but it is above all to replace the nonexistent father: to play the role of the separator, of someone who comforts the mother in order to permit her to take her role in hand. The question is what must be done in order to allow children to develop so they will accede to the various elements of human culture. And I think that what interferes with that access is the underestimation of the paternal function.

Nancy Chodorow, whom I mentioned before, would say that the function of the father has nothing to do with his sex, and that someone female could play the same role of separator.

Yes, certainly; that's why I say “a third party”, who could be the woman psychotherapist to whom one can bring the child.

(Guberman R.M. (ed.), *Julia Kristeva Interviews*, pp. 118-19)

What Kristeva is talking about here very well covers the current function of a Northern European (“universalist”) type of welfare state vis-à-vis the single, or “semi-single”, mothers. In this respect the Northern European type of state probably differs from a Southern European type of welfare state, to judge that from the fact that while the birth rate is going

up in the North, it is going down in the South, the apparent explanation for this being that while in the South single mothers cannot expect to be taken care of by the state, and therefore abstain from motherhood unless they are very sure they have a husband, in the North singleness is not a prohibitive economic problem. As Kristeva suggests, the state will go in and play the role of provider and, in due time, as separator of the children from the mother.

On the level of culture, however, this does not at all mean that it is the values that we connect with the traditional role of the father, that will be put into play. According to the current domination of “therapeutic” values in the welfare systems, the welfare state institutions will in all likelihood act more in accordance with the motherly values. But what are the values that we traditionally connect with the role of the mother and the role of the father, respectively?

The mother role is of course connected with everything thinkable in the direction of care and comfort, instant (oral) gratification and complete involvement. A motherly culture is a breast-sucking culture, stressing participation and evaluation, the process, not the goal. The implications may be a mix of tendency to infantilization, consumerism, welfare state, permissive parents, school, community, and also things like creativity, sensuality, image/fame, (consumer-)anxiety, insecurity.

The father role, becoming perceptible to the child only at a later stage, stress values like authority, duty, work-ethic (vocation), ascetism, goal-direction, (anal) postponement of gratification, *per aspera ad astra*, distance and sublimation, leading towards the authoritative (authoritarian) state, hierarchy and class. In fact the content of the “role of separator”, that Kristeva was talking about in the interview above.

These almost antagonistic paternal and maternal values to a large extent match the inner-directed social character and the other-directed social character, respectively, as defined by the American social psychologist, David Riesman, in his book *The Lonely Crowd*. The inner-directed type being the dominant feature of the 19th century - vertically directed, by authoritative parents and teachers, education based on strict rules and norms, whereby the values you learn as a young child, often through harsh measures, stay with you through life. According to Riesman, they work as a gyroscope, keeping you steady in all kinds of weather.

Since the First World War, the other-directed type has gradually become the dominant social character, as the *nomos* disintegrates. The other-directed child is horizontally aware, it does not primarily get its values and norms from parents, or teachers, or tradition, so much as from a peer group and/or the media. No values are so basic as to be for life, values change, goals change, only the method of attaining them remains the same: through a kind of radar. For these reasons, the other-directed individual has a great (narcissistic) need for confirmation, attention and feed-back.

This leads to the conclusion that, as the traditional role of the father is substantially weakened, a very significant part of Western culture tends to wither away which means that the values here characterized as paternal slip out of the culture. A large part of the values that have traditionally been connected with the father centres around a sense of duty and obligation towards the community, surrounding the individual, but other-directed society

is not organized around an individual sense of *duty*, as much as around an individual sense of *rights*.

The consequence of this probably is an augmented feeling of freedom on the part of the individual, but it does not stop there. It will also lead to further individualization, a growing feeling of anomie and of victimization on the part of the individual.

(Christian) Western culture used to be basically a guilt culture, but is now rapidly becoming a culture of victims. The consequences of this are substantial. In a guilt culture the individual is indebted to community – in the victim culture, it is the other way around: the community always owes to the individual (defined as a flagrant or potential victim) because the victim is always per definition (his/her own definition) completely free of guilt. So, where in a guilt culture the community is strengthened by the efforts of the individuals to “pay back” to community, in the victim culture it is continuously being weakened by having to subsidize the individual “right-owners”.

To turn this around – were there a will to do so – would mean to try to reintroduce the most important of the fatherly values back into the culture, albeit in another way (assuming that nobody would really invite the authoritarian father figure back).



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