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Crisis in the American Family: A Comparative Study*

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There can be little doubt that the American family is in a state of crisis. We can see the results of the weakening family unit in America all around us. Children have lost their awareness of belonging to a group, and even worse, they have stopped *caring* about it. The rate of juvenile delinquency is going higher, and today as much as 50% of all crime in America is committed by people under 18 years old. At least as dangerous to us is the decrease in successful marriages. In America today more than 55% of all marriages end in divorce, and this number is likely to go even higher, as well. Drug and alcohol abuse is also increasing, especially among young people.

We have also seen a significant change in how children are raised in America during the past twenty years. Twenty years ago, in families containing two parents, one parent worked outside the home to make a living, while the other parent stayed home to raise the children. This is no longer true. Because of the increasingly high cost of living in America, it has become an economic necessity for both parents to work outside the home, while children are raised in a daycare system which is not always adequate. Children as young as six months (and in some cases even younger) are placed into the hands of strangers. Opinions vary widely on the effects of daycare on children, from approval to dismay, and it seems that arguments can be made for both sides of the daycare issue. On the one hand, studies show that children who grow up in daycare develop an ability to work with others at an earlier age than those who stay at home. On the other hand, because children in daycare centers must share a single adult with many other children, some daycare workers note that children often react poorly to the lack of attention, resorting to anti-social behavior to gain such attention. This, however, appears to be the exception rather than the rule.

More troubling is the structure of the daycare system itself. Although daycare workers are given training in emergency first-aid, most have little or no training in child psychology or education, and so daycare becomes a place where children can play or watch television, but it is unreasonable to expect daycare workers to take a very personal interest in the education or emotional well-being of the individual children. Rather, it would seem safer to assume that parents themselves are the ones

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who would make the greatest effort to raise intelligent, well-adjusted and secure children. This, of course, is only our own opinion, but we do believe that on the whole children should be raised primarily by their own parents. As we said, opinions vary on this point, but at the very least it is safe to say that the shape of the American family, especially in urban areas, is radically changing.¹

Another change which may be relevant to this discussion is the gradual shift to smaller families in the last generation. Whereas thirty years ago it was not all that uncommon for a family to contain four or more children, within the past twenty years families have increasingly settled upon two children as the ideal number, and today it is quite common for young couples to stop with only one. This is relevant because it reflects a changing economic situation, in which couples find it increasingly difficult to feed, clothe, and most important, to *educate* more than one or two children. In fact, we would predict that within the next twenty years the average family will contain only one child.

The American Divorce Rate and its Roots

It is difficult to say exactly why divorce has become so common in the United States, but certain plausible reasons suggest themselves. In the first place, it should be noted that divorce rates differ from one demographic group to the next; among movie stars the divorce rate is considerably higher than the average – over 65% – and among members of the Los Angeles Police Department the rate is closer to 85%. Among "average" Americans, working and middle class, the rate is naturally much lower. Nevertheless, U.S. divorce rates are still alarmingly high, and to some extent, without looking at specific demographics, we can make some general comments.

Our first suggestion is perhaps a little controversial, but we would suggest that attitudes concerning marriage have changed in America from the middle of the 1960s on. In part this has something to do with the anti-Establishment mood of the times, when many young people grew skeptical about traditional American values, including those which emphasized marriage and the stability of the home. Thus, rather than concerning themselves with the formality of marriage, people formed partnerships which were easily dissolved. This is not to suggest that such people did not eventually get married and have children, but even in such cases the attitudes toward the social value of marriage would seem to suggest the likelihood of an increased divorce rate.

Perhaps an even more likely possibility is that the emphasis on a stable family – once considered essential for survival – has given way in the past few decades to a more self-interested attitude. This is especially evident in our own generation, people between the ages of twenty-five and forty, who seem to consider marriage a matter of convenience, and who place their own personal freedom or happiness above their concern for the well-being of the groups that they form through marriage. In our opinion, this reflects a basic lack of maturity which appears to be increasingly difficult to overcome.

The Roommate Syndrome in Marriage

A simple example will illustrate this point. Anyone who has lived with a roommate in college has surely experienced the tension that inevitably emerges from time to time when two strangers share the same space. In many cases, when problems occur, it is considered preferable to abandon

the partnership and seek another roommate, but in equally many cases roommates find ways of getting along because they realize that the relationship is *temporary*. This is probably why the roommate system seems to work reasonably well.

But marriage is different. Marriage is not supposed to end. In principle, we expect it to last for life, and we are expected to enter into the state of marriage carefully. In fact, part of the Anglican wedding ceremony includes a warning to the couple not to enter marriage carelessly, but with gravity and awareness of the seriousness and responsibility that goes along with it.

To a point, we might note that a kind of spirituality lies behind this statement; Christianity, as well as Buddhism, stresses the importance of an afterlife, and the hardship of the present life, hence those who follow these religions are apt to endure more hardships than those who have no hope in an afterlife, and prefer rather to enjoy themselves in the here and now (*carpe diem* – “seize the day”) by whatever means necessary. Yet the expectation of lifelong marriage is not grounded only in religion, but rather is one of the cornerstones of a stable society. Freud notes that many of our most cherished ideals - particularly those concerning sexual limitations - are rationalized by religious doctrine, but ultimately form a kind of protection against social chaos, for it is in stable human relationships that we find the groundwork for a stable society. This is not always the most healthy course for human beings as individuals, but it is probably the best course for prolonged human survival.

Nevertheless, in America there is a growing trend toward a more self-centered worldview, in part encouraged by parents, teachers, and the mass media, who urge young people to pursue their own happiness. This is, of course, by no means a bad thing, and in general one hopes that all people will seek happiness rather than hardship in their lives. At the same time, there is a fine line between pursuing one's own happiness, and ignoring one's social responsibilities. A similar belief is expressed by Natsume Soseki in his 1915 address at the Gakushuin, “Wakakushi no Kojinshugi,” in which he urges the graduates to be free, but also never to forget their duty. Soseki's message is both political *and* social: when the stability of the State is threatened (Soseki uses war as his example, but the disintegration of the family seems equally suitable), then social duty must come first.

But this sentiment appears to be in some doubt in the present time. If we are truly expected to pursue our own happiness, then it must seem logical to abandon a difficult marriage. In previous ages the concern for a stable society – for survival itself – must have outweighed our instinct to protect our individual happiness, and thus those who found married life intolerable preferred to find some means of fixing the marriage, rather than abandoning it. Today more marriages are abandoned than saved, partly because divorce is easy, and at last socially acceptable, but also because it often seems preferable to the personal compromises that must accompany saving any marriage.

Related to this is a recent trend toward mobility which we see emerging in American society. Whereas several generations ago families tended to live in the same place, again preferring stability to the risks of moving around, Americans today express an urge to experience many different things, to move around, not to “waste” their lives. Hence, there are those who find the stability of marriage *confining*, rather than desirable. Family in this scheme is often seen as simply *one stage* in life, rather than as a final goal in itself.

The Results of a Divorce-Ridden Society

If the causes of divorce in America are difficult to determine, its results are all too evident. Children in America increasingly grow up in complex family units consisting of peculiar combinations. A child may be raised by a birth-parent and a step-parent, a single parent, same-sex parents, or even by older siblings. Again, this is not necessarily a bad thing, and many diverse kinds of family units do work. But one must be concerned at times about the self-identity of a child who grows up with parents, step-parents, adopted parents, and all the extended families that attach to these groups. Can such children be certain that they are loved? Can they be certain about which role models to follow? Can they even be certain who they are? This kind of identity crisis is not necessarily new, but today it seems to exist on an unprecedented scale. We are aware from statistics that the majority of juvenile crimes in America are committed by children who come from broken homes. It seems to us that, even more than AIDS, the epidemic of divorce may ultimately prove to be the most fatal illness in the history of the United States.

The Crisis of Consumer-Capitalist Society

It widespread divorce is the first major crisis for the American family, then surely the second is the rise in cost of living that forces parents out of the house, away from their children, and into the work force. It is a problem which is probably more severe in the single-parent home, but increasingly we see that economic hardship is having a negative effect on single-parent and traditional homes alike.

As we noted earlier, families in the United States have been growing smaller over the past several decades. This is primarily because the cost of living has gone up during that time, and it is no longer possible to maintain a family comfortably on one income. Of course, this has not always been the case. From the 1950s through the middle of the 1970s, it was still possible to support a family of even five or six people on a single income, thus leaving at least one parent in the home to raise the children. By the early 1980s, however, with the onset of a series of economic recessions and rising inflation, it became increasingly difficult to support a family on one income, and gradually the second parent was forced out of the home and into the work force. Today, it is almost impossible for working or middle class families to survive without two incomes.

Some might believe that this is an unprecedented time of hardship for American families, but if one looks at the history of the United States and Europe, one sees a similar situation emerging nearly two hundred years ago from the Industrial Revolution. For instance, according to one study, it was still possible in 1775 for a craftsman to support a wife and four children – six people in all – on a single income. With the spread of steam-powered heavy industrial equipment in the early 1800s, however, wages for workers dropped, and by 1825 every member of that family of six – women and children, too – had to work full time, up to 10 hours a day, just to survive. During the next eighty or ninety years, countless families in America, Europe, and Great Britain starved to death; children died of disease, malnutrition, exhaustion, and industrial accidents, while working for almost nothing. It was out of this situation that the Child Labor Laws were passed, as well as laws creating a minimum wage, the forty-hour work-week, and so forth.

In addition to the loss of family members through death, the impossible conditions of the

Industrial Revolution also forced many families apart, as individual members went away in search of better jobs and better lives. In many cases children were given away, because their parents had no way to care for them. Thus, while one often hears the argument that the worst of conditions bring families together, to work together for a common goal, I would argue that in at least as many cases families could not withstand the economic pressures of the times, and came apart.

Consumer Capitalism and “Conspicuous Consumption”

To blame the Industrial Revolution for the terrible economic situation of the nineteenth century is easy enough, but what can we say about the present time? What has caused the economic hardships that lead to our present crisis in the American family?

I believe that the answer lies in the development of high-level consumer capitalism, sometimes understood as “conspicuous consumption.” The history of this period, beginning in the post-World War II era, is well known. Following the end of the war, when the American industrial system was running at peak efficiency, “necessity goods” were gradually supplemented with luxury goods. In the early days after the war such goods were mainly labor-saving devices such as washing machines and electric vacuums. In time, most middle class families were able to buy these goods.

More important, however, was the invention and spread of entertainment goods, such as the television in 1953. More or less coincident with the appearance of television came the mass-advertising industry, which encouraged middle class consumers to consume luxury items which were not truly necessary for survival, but which enhanced the quality of life. These included washing machines, phonographs, refrigerators, automobiles, and so forth. The strategy was to exploit the concept of “conspicuous consumption,” in which consumers were encouraged to “keep up” with their neighbors, to own better homes, automobiles, and goods than others of their class. Of course, a similar advertising strategy was used in Japan in the early 1960s, again coincident with the spread of television.

But, in our opinion, the most drastic developments in the consumer capitalist society have taken place in more recent years. Since 1980, prices of consumer luxury goods – especially electronics – have come *down*, while quality and diversity has gone *up*. In other words, a television today can do things that televisions twenty years ago could not do, and it is cheaper (relative to income) to purchase one today than it was twenty years ago. The same trend has occurred with video tape recorders (VCRs), and especially with personal computers.

Because of the relative drop in price of such goods, consumption has increased in the past twenty years. Whereas a family in the 1960s was content with a small home, a single car, and one television, today most families feel the need for a larger home, two cars, and a television (with or without a VCR) in every major room in the house.

We see three major reasons why this change has taken place: first, because we have grown used to the degree of affluence in which we live, and we naturally seek to *increase*, rather than *decrease* the visible signs of our wealth; second, because the advertising industry has gone to great lengths to offer new products, and new uses for old products; and third, because with the decrease in the prices of goods, we now find it *possible* to own several televisions, VCRs, cars, and so forth.

But within this system there is a catch: luxury items which we are encouraged to buy are very expensive to repair, and most are now designed to wear out within a few years. This means that as

consumers we feel compelled to replace broken items, either with the same or better quality, and this is very expensive. At the same time, many goods – especially electronics – are developing so rapidly that we can no longer keep up with them, though we are encouraged to try. Anyone who has bought a computer understands this: within a few months of buying a computer, a newer and better model comes out, and we are encouraged either to buy the newer model, or to upgrade our older model to the same level as the new one. This is how luxury industries make money, and by the same argument, how modern consumers find themselves in difficult economic times.

All of these factors combine to drive working and middle class Americans to spend far more of their income than they can afford on luxury items, and as a result, most families find themselves struggling to maintain the kind of lifestyle which the mass media urges them to seek. The result is that even "traditional" families – those with both parents – find two incomes necessary, and thus their children end up in daycare centers, separated from both parents. When we combine this situation with the 55% divorce rate in the United States, we can see that the chances of a child being raised primarily by even *one* of his or her parents is very small.

Comparisons with Japan

It is interesting to compare the situation we have just described with that of Japanese society. We are no expert in the field of Japanese social studies, so our comments and tentative conclusions are no more than conjecture at this point, but it strikes us that while Japan does not suffer from the same kind of divorce rate that we see in the United States, it *does* operate under a system of high level consumer capitalism, and equally important, now faces an economic recession which has continued for nearly nine years.

If we compare the development of Japan's economy since the end of World War II with that of the United States, certain interesting similarities emerge. First, we might note that in Japan, as well as in the U.S., television was accompanied by a media blitz of advertising, though in Japan's case the advertising was expressed in terms of a kind of *akogare* (longing) for things American, particularly as seen in American television shows, which were broadcast more than Japanese shows in the early days of Japanese television. Nevertheless, the result was a similar creation of a desire for luxury goods, and of a sense of competition with one's neighbors to own the best goods.

Today this continues, but in the face of the 1990s recession, Japanese consumers find it increasingly difficult to keep up with the rapid pace of their consumer-capitalist system. The need for sufficient income has always forced Japanese fathers to work extremely long hours, so much so that they almost never see their children. But in more recent years Japanese mothers, on whom their children have always been able to rely completely, are also being forced to go back to work, leaving their children in a vacuum similar to that in the United States.

In one respect this is a much more serious crisis than that seen in America, because the bond between Japanese mothers and their children, described by Takeo Doi as "amae," has always been especially strong and important. If that bond is eliminated, as parental bonds have been eliminated in the United States, then Japanese society may be headed for some very difficult changes indeed.

In a more positive vein, one notes that the divorce rate in Japan, while going up somewhat, is still somewhere around ten percent, and thus not likely to lead to widespread broken homes in the United States. Also in Japan's favor is the relative homogeneity of its society, which may provide

some sense of collective identity, even when the family is no longer able to ensure a sense of specific, family identity. But this is by no means certain, and it should be remembered that traditionally Japanese derive a greater sense of well-being from their specific group identities – family, school, neighborhood organizations, etc. – than from their identity as “Japanese.”

Conclusions: What Is to Be Done?

The pictures we have drawn of family life in consumer-capitalist societies is not an especially happy one, yet it is also not without hope. Several means of improving the situation suggest themselves. First and foremost, American attitudes must change concerning marriage, whether by enhancing our sense of spiritualism, or simply by impressing upon young people (preferably by example) the importance of a stable society, based on a stable home life. At the very least we must become more aware that children deserve to grow up with *both* of their parents, and as parents we must be prepared to take greater responsibility for our children's welfare.

Second, in order to create closer bonds between parents and their children, we should seek ways in which work and child care can be combined. Several companies in the United States have already begun to operate on-site day-care units, permitting parents to spend lunch and break times with their children, and a number of Japanese companies – especially those that employ mainly women – are also using this system to give mothers more time with their children. Another system that seems to work is the cooperative day-care, in which parents who live in the same neighborhood take turns watching one another's children. Still one more idea is to work in shifts, one parent working during the daytime, the other in the evening. (This is the system many use in their own home.)

Finally, and this may be the most difficult of all, there must be some attempt in both Japanese and American societies to overcome the consumer-capitalist model, to shift our focus from consuming goods, to that of living well. This, too, is a kind of spiritual attitude which has been fading. We do not suggest that we should reject the demands of our economy, but we do believe that we should understand the consumption of luxury goods as a means of enhancing our lives, rather than the final goal of our lives.

If these three goals can be met, then we feel there is reason for optimism that the American family will recover from its present crisis, and that the Japanese family will avoid many of the mistakes that have been made in the U.S.. However, if matters continue on their present course indefinitely, then we feel only uneasiness toward the future of family in both cultures.

1 The hypotheses presented in this paper are primarily directed toward the state of the *urban* family; we recognize the riskiness of applying such hypotheses to other family settings – those in rural areas, special ethnic or religious enclaves, etc.

アメリカの「家族危機」に関する若干の考察

アメリカの家族（ここでは都会に住む一般的・平均的な家族を想定）が危機的状況にあると言われて久しい。アメリカ人の最近の一般的な傾向として安定した結婚が減少し、離婚（初婚における）の増大が顕著となっている。再婚や再再婚，同性結婚などによる多様な家族形態が生み出されている一方で，家族自体の規模も縮小し，子育てにも大きな変化が見られる。少年非行や犯罪も増え，今やアメリカの全犯罪の50パーセント以上が18歳以下の若年層によって引き起こされている。

近年のアメリカの高い離婚率とその原因は何かと考える時，1960年代中旬に当時の若者達の間で見られた反体制的な考え方にその遠因を求めることができる。また，かつて必然と見なされていた安定した家族に関する考え方がこの2～30年でミーイズムに代表される極めて自己中心的な個人主義的な考え方に取って代わられた。今一つの傾向にアメリカ特有の社会的移動性がある。人々は多くの異なった経験を好み，自分の人生を無為に過ごさないためと言わんばかりに，あちこちと移動し，安定した結婚生活も窮屈で自己を拘束するものとする人が多くなっている。離婚や複雑な家族形態によって強い影響を受けるのは，先ず子供達であり，彼らは生みの親，義理の親，片親（シングル・ペアレント），同性結婚の親，あるいは年長の兄や姉などによって育てられる。こうした多様な親達に育てられた子供達のセルフ・アイデンティティはどうなるのか，気になるところだ。

離婚の増加がアメリカ社会にとって主要な危機だとすれば，第二の危機は生活費の高騰である。アメリカの家族が過去数十年以来，小規模になってきたが，その大きな原因は生活費が高騰し，父親による一つの収入では家族を適切な状態で維持するのがもはや不可能になったからであり，母親が仕事で家を空ける機会が増え，中には6カ月あるいはそれ以下の赤ん坊をデイケアセンターないし見知らぬ人の手に委ねることも稀ではない。さらに，現在のアメリカの家庭に経済的試練をもたらしたのは，“conspicuous consumption”として理解される高レベルの消費中心の資本主義システムである。日本ではまだアメリカほど離婚率も高くなく，その弊害は少ないが，消費中心の資本主義システムは確実に浸透して来ている。

この状況を改善するには，先ず第一にアメリカ人はかつてその生活の一部であった精神主義を取り戻し，安定した家庭生活に基づく安定した社会の重要性を認識し，結婚についての考え方を変えること，次に親子間の絆を強めるために，仕事と子育てが両立できる方法を真剣に模索すること，そして消費中心のライフスタイルを反省し生活の質を問うべきだろう。今のままの状況が今後，際限なく続くのであれば，アメリカの家族の未来は，依然として暗いままであり続けるだろう。