Soulmates, Paradoxes, and the Significance of the Family for American Political Economy

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In June of 2009 one of the most prominent conservative governors in the United States disappeared without notice. Where he went—and what he later said about it—illustrate a profound cultural shift in public and private attitudes regarding marriage. This shift, documented and explored by leading American sociologists, confronts a popular misconception about marriage, namely, that romantic, individualized conceptions of marriage have strengthened marriage. Analogously, significant work by social scientists on how children are faring in the "post-marriage" culture, and trends in the self-reported happiness of men and women, also present paradoxically in light of accepted myths about marriage and family in America.

In this paper I will do three things. First, I will present three key sets of findings that challenge common misconceptions about the family in America. Second, in light of these findings and appealing to recent demographic work, I will argue that the real "fault-lines" in American society are "familial" and not political, raising questions about the dynamic relationship between patterns of marriage and family formation on the one hand, and political ideology on the other. Finally, I will argue that new evidence on economic mobility uncovered by the *Equality of Opportunity Project* in 2014 supports the provocative thesis, advanced earlier by Nobel-laureate Robert Fogel, that the family contributes "spiritual" capital necessary for economic success, without which egalitarian goals are worthless.

I begin with the story of Governor Mark Sanford. Sanford was elected to lead South Carolina in 2002; a fiscal conservative, he was elected to a second term in 2006. He became famous in that second term for rejecting a portion of Federal stimulus money earmarked for his state in 2009. In 2010 a Democratic watchdog group named him one of the 11 worst governors in the U.S., while the libertarian Cato Institute ranked him the best governor in America. Sanford was considered a rising star of the Republican Party. He once stated: "It is my personal view that the largest proclamation of one's faith ought to be in how one lives his life."[1]

But this rising star completely disappeared from June 18 to June 24 in 2009. Neither his family, staff, nor law enforcement officials knew where he was. Eventually he was discovered arriving in Atlanta on a flight from Argentina, where he had been on a tryst with a woman he later admitted to meeting in 2001, and to dating since 2008. The press went wild. In an emotional public interview, Sanford, wiping a tear from his eye, admitted that he had hurt his wife, his children, all his supporters, and the state of South Carolina, but that he would die "knowing that he had met his *soulmate*." It was an epic non-apology. I am sorry, he had said, but it was all worth it.

How does the term *soulmate* make its way into a national, public statement by a sitting U.S. governor, especially as a partial justification for an adulterous affair? Soulmate terminology is shorthand for a mode of romantic association in which the value of the association is established by contemporaneous feelings of emotional satisfaction, mutual attraction, and personal fulfillment. *Soulmate* is meant to capture what is experienced in "falling in love" or "being in love." Now being in love is not a new thing. What is new is the wide-scale adoption of the soulmate paradigm—emotional satisfaction and mutual attraction—as the universal shared conception of marriage. A corollary of the soulmate paradigm of marriage is that the value of the marriage at any point in time is measured in terms of emotional satisfaction, mutual attraction, and personal fulfillment. Hence, if a particular spouse no longer seems to be a

1. Sean D. Hamill, "South Carolina to Offer Cross on Car Plates," *The New York Times,* June 6, 2008, Web.

soulmate, one might be forgiven for seeking a soulmate somewhere else. On such a view, marriage is fundamentally a romantic-individualized institution that can be shaped to match personal tastes and preferences. While it is easy to see what is distasteful in such a characterization of marriage, the fact is that most Americans buy into the soulmate paradigm in some form or another.

The scholarship on the subject, however, is not so blithe about soulmate marriage. Andrew Cherlin, leading sociologist of marriage at Johns Hopkins University, argues that the twentieth century has been the locus of a great shift in thinking about marriage, from a predominantly institutional model in the early twentieth century, to the soulmate model of marriage present in full force by the early 1970s.[2] The institutional model emphasized permanence, fidelity, and distinct roles for men and women in marriage. The soulmate model instead conceives of marriage largely as an instrument of emotional and romantic satisfaction. Although Cherlin himself would want to say that the new understanding of "love" as the fundamental and even defining basis for marriage seems to be a good development, he demonstrates that the shift appears to introduce a crack in the foundation of marriage that marriage perhaps cannot sustain—placing in jeopardy all the goods that should arise from that institution. In a stunning passage he writes: "… no one seemed to consider the possibility that once emotional [and sexual] satisfaction became a central focus [of marriage], it might be difficult to limit it to marriage."[3]

On Cherlin's account, the shift in thinking about marriage occurred around the mid-century, in the 1950s-1960s. Prior to the shift—and this can be documented by examining self-reports of mate preferences over the century—people looked for character-related qualities in prospective marriage partners. After the shift, people instead reported qualities related to a sense of "being a good match," including "mutual attraction" as the primary desired feature in a marriage partner.[4] But although qualities of fine character are likely to sustain, and be sustained by, a

2. Andrew Cherlin, *Marriage-Go-Round* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 90-91.

3. *Ibid*., 84.

4. Buss *et al*., "A Half Century of Mate Preferences: The Cultural Evolution of Values," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 63 (2001): 499-500.

marriage, qualities of mutual attraction are likely to change and fluctuate. To wit, in the midst of the messy, post-affair divorce, Governor Sanford announced on Facebook that he and his Argentine soulmate were calling it quits.[5]

Cherlin's point is that when "being in love" became the focus of marriage and the shared conception for its goodness, people began to think that the "being in love" is what they were up to in the first place, rather than the marriage itself. (One thinks of St. Augustine's famous remark, criticizing himself as a young man, "I was not in love, but in love with love."[6]) So people felt increasingly justified in looking for other paths to "being in love," since traditional marriage is less well suited to the maintenance of constant emotional highs than dating, courtship, and other temporary associations. The institution which ties a single man and woman together for life is not the arrangement one would devise if looking to produce permanent sentiments of infatuation, emotional highs, and the general sensation of being "in love."

Hence Cherlin's "it might be difficult to limit it to marriage." Institutional marriage, he argues, was replaced with the practice of "serial monogamy"—strings of monogamous sexual unions, many preceding marriage, and many coming after marriage, like Governor Sanford's. These serial unions seem to constitute a pursuit of "being in love," instead of a pursuit of traditional goods of marriage, such as loyalty, fidelity, stability, and the procreation and education of children. It is not hard to see, then, why the soulmate paradigm for marriage arrives contemporaneously with the era of rising divorce and unprecedented family instability.

Beyond academia, problems with the soulmate model have been raised in the *Huffington Post*, *Slate*, and other non-conservative sources.[7] There is a growing consensus that something about how we do marriage

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5. Jim Rutenberg, "Mark Sanford's Breakup Post Caught His Fiancée Off Guard," *New York Times,* September 13, 2014, Web.

6. Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions of Saint Augustine* (New York: Doubleday, 1960): 35.

7. Kristina Tsipouras, "Don't Marry Your Soulmate." *Huffington Post,* June 2, 2015, Web; Christine Gross-Loh, "The First Lesson of Marriage 101: There are no Soulmates; A Course at Northwestern University Teaches Students about what Makes a Healthy Relationship," *The Atlantic,* February 12, 2014, Web; Melissa Dahl, "The Case Against 'Soulmates,'" *New York Magazine,* July 30, 2014, Web.

is not working for Americans, but no real resolve to uncover what it was we used to do, nor any discussion about whether we could go back if we wanted to do so. I have intentionally, for lack of space, left out Cherlin's description of the earlier models of marriage, and I have also not wanted to say how marriage ought to be conceived. For now, the point is merely this: the soulmate model of marriage appears to be undermining marriage. If this is true, *it is undermining all personal and social goods that depend upon marriage*.

So if marriage is undergoing a transformation, what does social science tell us about children in the era of the soulmate marriage? Much has been made about recent research by Mark Regnerus, Paul Sullins, and my co-authors Joe Price and Doug Allen, who have examined outcomes for children who grow up in "non-traditional" homes and family arrangements, such as same-sex parenting scenarios.[8] This research has tended to find reduced likelihood of flourishing for children raised outside of traditional families. At the same time, this research has been ill received in many quarters, with letters of protest, accusations of bigotry, and more.

But all of this has been grossly misplaced. This is because we had good reason long before their work to suspect that children would not fare well in non-traditional arrangements. Consider the work of academic psychologist-therapist Judith Wallerstein, who conducted the only 25-year follow-up study of adult children of divorced parents.[9] The 131 children in Wallerstein's study entered her research sample in 1971, and were drawn from "families in which the parents had recently separated and filed for divorce in Marin County, California."[10] Families were studied intensively near the time of the separation, and parents and children

8. Mark Regnerus "How Different Are the Adult Children of Parents Who Have Same-Sex Relationships? Findings From the New Family Structures Study," *Social Science Research* 41 (2012) 752-70; Donald Paul Sullins, "Emotional Problems among Children with Same-Sex Parents: Difference by Definition," *British Journal of Education, Society and Behavioural Science* 7.2 (2015): 99-120; Douglas W. Allen, Catherine Pakaluk, and Joseph Price, "Nontraditional Families and Childhood Progress Through School: A Comment on Rosenfeld," *Demography* 50 (2013): 955-61.

9. Wallerstein, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce* (New York: Hyperion, 2000).

10. Wallerstein, 317.

were re-interviewed at 18-month, 5-year, and 10-year intervals post-separation. Some parents eventually reconciled; most did not. Ultimately, Wallerstein completed a landmark 25-year follow-up, in which she aimed to discover "how divorce continues to shape the lives of young people after they reach *full adulthood*."[11]

The results of the study surprised everyone, including Wallerstein herself. She summarizes her findings by describing two "cherished myths" about divorce that appear inconsistent with the evidence.[12] The first myth is that "if parents are happier the children will be happier, too."[13] She finds, in contradiction—and consistent with hundreds of short-term and cross-sectional studies—that "children in postdivorce families do not, on the whole, look happier, healthier, or more well-adjusted *even if one or both parents are happier*."[14] She argues that the source of the myth is that

> most adults cannot fathom a child's world view and how children think. The problem is, they think they do. Indeed many adults trapped in unhappy marriages would be surprised to learn that their children are relatively content. They don't care if mom and dad sleep in different beds as long as the family is together.[15]

The second myth that Wallerstein refutes is the idea that "divorce is a temporary crisis that exerts its most harmful effects on parents and children at time of the breakup."[16] In reality, she finds, while there is anger and upheaval at the time of the crisis, "it's the many years of living in a post-divorce or remarried family" that seem to weigh most heavily—"feeling sad, lonely and angry during [all of] childhood."[17] Children of divorce try to make sense out of who they are when the relationship that produced them doesn't make any sense. This takes an immense emotional and

11. *Ibid.,* xxv.

12. *Ibid*., xxix.

13. *Ibid*.

14. *Ibid*. Emphasis added.

15. *Ibid*.

16. *Ibid*., xxx.

17. *Ibid*., xxxi.

psychological toll; it's exhausting, depressing, and burdening. And this bears itself out long into the adult lives of children of divorce. Wallerstein sums it up this way: "children identify not only with their mother and father as separate individuals but with the relationship between them."[18]

Here, then, is a remarkable paradox: no era previous to our own has invested so much into the well-being of children, so much that Nobel-laureate economist Gary Becker surmised that this alone could be the reason for falling birth rates[19]; and yet, at the same time, children have never faced a higher likelihood of growing up without their two natural parents.[20] If Wallerstein is right, simple, old-fashioned divorce is the primary marriage crisis, not same-sex marriage, and how a civilized society handles itself in this regard says a lot about the well-being and happiness of its children.

Finally, we might ask, how are women and men faring *overall* in the era of soulmate marriage? The answer here constitutes a third and final paradox. In a highly touted 2009 study, Harvard-trained economists Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers examined self-reports of happiness by gender across a wide number of micro-level datasets.[21] They found that since 1970 there has been a marked decline in women's overall self-reported happiness; more than this, there has been a subtle reversal in the so-called happiness gap. Whereas in 1970 women reported being slightly more happy than men, now men report being slightly more happy than women. This is not to say, however, that the era has provided gains in male happiness: on average, male happiness stayed about the same or declined slightly. The reversal in the relative happiness gap obtains from the fact that women's happiness seems to have declined more than men's. Which is to say, while we have shown that children are not faring well in the soulmate era, neither are men and women faring much better. They call this finding "The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness."

18. *Ibid*., xxxv.

19. Gary Becker, "An Economic Analysis of Fertility," *Demographic and Economic Change in Developed Countries* (1960): 211.

20. "Family Structure," Child Trends, December 2015, Web.

21. Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, "The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness," *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy* 1.2 (2009), 190–225.

There are several scholars working to understand the trend, and no definitive explanation to date. However, as Stevenson and Wolfers point out, there are three logical possibilities to explain the nature of the trends in self-reported happiness by gender: first, an aggregate change affecting women more than men; second, a change in the way that people understand the question about happiness; and third, a change in reference point for women. For technical reasons related to the nature of survey work in question, Stevenson and Wolfers dismiss the second and third options as unlikely. And in the first category, "an aggregate change affecting women more than men," they point out that the most obvious change of this nature is the cluster of things that belong to the so-called "women's movement."

And herein lies the paradox, since Americans generally believe that the women's movement made women better off. Whatever sense we make out of this in the end, it is a good reminder that not all change is good change, and that we have not always lived as we do now. Authentic human flourishing ought to be the mark and the measure of social progress.

American sociologist Charles Murray pointed out in his best-selling 2012 book *Coming Apart* that marriage rates in America are down since 1960, but not equally so across socio-economic groups. The marriage rate is down 11% since 1960 for upper-middle class Americans; but among working class Americans, it is down a stunning 36%. Indeed, less than half of working class Americans are married today.[22]

Looking only at patterns among white Americans, Murray goes on to identify many other major differences between higher and lower economic groups in key areas, such as religiosity, values, habits, and recreational choices. He concludes that America has never been more divided than it is today, and that these divisions correlate highly with patterns of family formation. While there have always been rich and poor in America, he argues, in the past the rich and poor worked and formed families in the same ways. Not so today.

Murray's work is particularly compelling taken together with demographic work by Ron Lesthaeghe, Dick Van De Kaa, Johan Surkyn, and

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22. Statistic provides a cross sectional percentage of a category of Americans who are married. Charles Murray, *Coming Apart* (New York: Random House, 2012): 158-9.

colleagues who identified a cluster of demographic behaviors emerging since 1960 and statistically associated with the decline in marriage rates, including delayed marriage, cohabitation, delayed childbearing, divorce, and low lifetime fertility.[23] So pronounced were these trends, they argued, that they might even constitute a distinct demographic phase in the overall demographic history of the West. They call this phase the "second demographic transition":

> The idea of the distinctness of the [second demographic transition] stems directly from Philippe Ariès's analysis of the history of childhood (1962) and, as Dick van de Kaa and I have repeatedly pointed out, from his 1980 Bad Homburg paper on the two successive and distinct motivations for parenthood. During the [first demographic transition], the decline in fertility was "unleashed by an enormous sentimental and financial investment in the child" (*i.e.*, the "king child era" to use Ariès's term), whereas the motivation during the [second demographic transition] is adult self realization within the role or life style as a parent or more complete and fulfilled adult.[24]

It is hard not to notice the striking similarity between the concept of children as a mode of self-fulfillment, and marriage as a mode of self-fulfillment—the soulmate paradigm.

In earlier work, these same scholars examined trends in "second transition" behaviors by state and county in the U.S., looking at the correlation with voting patterns in the 2000 and 2004 elections.[25] What they found was remarkable. The spatial correlation between voting for Bush and the "second transition" behaviors varied between $r = -0.7$ to $r = -0.9$, depending on the factor. That is to say, those districts with *less traditional family behaviors* were *less likely to vote for Bush*, and this relationship was

23. Ron Lesthaeghe, "The Unfolding Story of the Second Demographic Transition," *Population and Development Review* 36.2 (June 2010): 211-51; Ron Lesthaeghe and Johan Surkyn, "When History Moves On: The Foundations and Diffusion of a Second Demographic Transition" in *International Family Change: Ideational Perspectives*, eds. Rukmalie Jayakody, Arland Thornton, and William Axinn (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2008), 81-118.

24. Lesthaeghe and Surkyn, 83.

25. Ron J. Lesthaeghe and Lisa Neidert, "The Second Demographic Transition in the United States: Exception or Textbook Example?" *Population and Development Review* 32.4 (2006): 669-98.

statistically very high. The authors believed that "the very strong negative correlation found here between the [second demographic transition] dimension and the percentage votes for Bush is *to our knowledge one of the highest spatial correlations between demographic and voting behavior on record*."[26]

A keen observer would next ask whether these associations are merely correlative, with little causal weight. On this point the authors made a number of statistical tests, introducing a variety of control variables to reduce the correlation. They report:

> The outcome of these tests is that the [zero order] correlation between the [demographic] variables and the voting for Bush cannot be considered as spurious or as the mere outcome of the operation of the common causal determinants used here. The control variables simply fail to reduce the [zero order] correlation coefficients to a significant extent to warrant such a conclusion. And since the demographic picture was unfolding well before the 2000 and 2004 elections, this leaves us with no alternative other than temporarily accepting the hypothesis that the spatial pattern of the [second demographic transition] in the US was a non-redundant co-determinant of the red, purple and blue voting outcomes at the level of states.[27]

The authors go on to confirm these facts at the level of individual counties. The evidence suggests that the further a state or county had retreated from traditional patterns of family formation (the more divorce, the more cohabitation, the fewer children) the more likely it was to vote for a politically liberal candidate. Further, since these demographic patterns existed and were established long before the elections themselves, we should interpret the causality as running from familial behavior to political behavior. It would appear, therefore, that American society is not divided along political lines. The fault lines in American society are primarily familial.

What conclusions may be drawn from this are not entirely clear, but on a first pass we might say that this empirical evidence confirms the

26. *Ibid*., 16. Emphasis added.

27. *Ibid*., 21.

idea, often in Catholic social thought, that the "family is the basic cell of society."[28] On both the left and the right, we tend to believe that our political ideals arise from pure first principles. I do not dispute this; however, it is worth asking how it is that we come to find certain first principles more compelling than others. At the same time, we might ask why it is that some public debates never reach resolution through reasoned dialogue. Is the family, perhaps, the source of those "reasons of the heart" of which, Pascal said, "reason knows nothing"?[29]

From December of 2013 to January of 2014, close observers of President Obama's rhetoric noticed a shift on the question of economic mobility in the United States. On December 4, 2013, Obama *three times* asserted that economic mobility was "declining."[30] By January 28, 2014, in the President's State of the Union Address, he instead claimed, "upward mobility has stalled."[31] What intervened to cause such a shift was the release of initial findings from the *Equality of Opportunity Project*, the work of economist Raj Chetty and colleagues, a groundbreaking study of income mobility in the United States funded by the Russell Sage Foundation.[32] Chetty and his team discovered that the rate of upward mobility was not, in fact, declining, as some expected. It was not even "stalled" as President Obama claimed in the State of the Union.

Using income data on all U.S. children born between 1980-82, the economists instead showed that the overall rate of upward economic mobility in the United States has been relatively constant. However, upward mobility is not randomly distributed across demographic and socio-economic groups. There are five factors highly correlated with mobility: income inequality, segregation, school quality, social capital, and family structure. Most relevant to this discussion is the following

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28. Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici,* Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Vocation of and the Mission of the lay Faithful in the Church and in the World, December 30, 1988, Web.

29. Blaise Pascal, *Pensee* (New York: Penguin, 1995), 127.

30. President Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President on Economic Mobility," The White House, December 4, 2013, Web.

31. Glenn Kessler, "Fact Checking the 2014 State of the Union Address," *The Washington Post,* January 28, 2014, Web.

32. Raj Chetty *et al.*, "Where is the Land of Opportunity? The Geography of Intergenerational Mobility in the United States," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 129.4 (2014): 1553-1623.

finding:

> The strongest predictors of upward mobility are measures of family structure, such as the fraction of single parents in the area. As with race, parents' marital status does not matter purely through its effects at the individual level. Children of married parents also have higher rates of upward mobility if they live in communities with fewer single parents.[33]

I would like to argue that the proper context for understanding these results is the work of Nobel Laureate economist Robert Fogel, who earlier advanced the thesis that access to productive enterprise depends more today upon intangible "spiritual" capital than in the past, when economic growth and channels of production depended more on physical capital. Fogel defines "spiritual capital" as the human virtues or habits that contribute to the capacity for work and self-realization through productive behavior. He argues that it is not *primarily* vague market forces or structural injustices that alienate people from their capacity to succeed. Rather, on Fogel's account the lack of certain virtues distances people from making use of the gifts of their own talents.[34] And since virtues and habits are born in the family, access to productive society and pathways to economic mobility are dependent upon what happens in the family. Putting the work of Chetty and Fogel together, we get the possibility of formulating a conclusion in the following form: the natural family is a precondition for the great egalitarian project central to the American Dream.

This conclusion runs afoul of a particularly pernicious historical myth about the family. The myth says that the family itself is a major source of inequality, if not *the* source of inequality. Marxist-socialist revolutionaries of all stripes, as well as the greatest political philosophers, have worried about the consequence of inequalities that arise from the "lottery of birth." Many have proposed programs of social engineering aimed at removing the advantages that come from family name or property, and

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33. Chetty *et al.*, 1557.

34. Robert William Fogel, *The Fourth Great Awakening and the Future of Egalitarianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 3-4.

those that might arise from education in the home. Wealthy families and highly educated families have been looked upon with suspicion, as a source of real discord in society. Upon examination, it is certainly true that these socialist and quasi-socialist philosophies aim at a kind of equality: everyone gets the same start in life; nobody starts ahead. But this kind of equality is achieved of course by a "leveling down," by removing the advantages of some in order to even the playing field.

But Fogel's and I think Chetty's findings seem to support a different view of the relationship between the family and society. On this view, the modern economy and social structures are naturally productive for those who participate. Yet there are personal prerequisites, or preconditions, that can affect one's ability to participate. Society might therefore rightly strive to eliminate inequalities in such preconditions, so that all members of society might access the engines of economic mobility. Instead of removing the advantages of some, the goal would be to protect and provide the preconditions for all, so that all have a chance to move up. We can think of this kind of equality as a "leveling up," which implies a keenness of insuring that each child in society has what is needed to run the race.

Some such prerequisites would involve material capital—for example, good health, a basic education, and nutrition enough to support growth and development. Western Christian democracies have, for the most part, sought to achieve this sort of "leveling up" through a variety of welfare programs, state education, and public health services. But Fogel's and Chetty's work suggests that other preconditions appear to be generated with statistical regularity within the natural family—and *only* within the natural family. These include intangible attributes of character, psychology, and personal disposition. And, as Fogel points out, unlike material inequalities, this "spiritual capital" cannot be redistributed.

What is it that families generate (or preserve) in us that makes mobility and economic success so much more likely? What is it in our families that informs and shapes our political behaviors? Why is it that individualized conceptions of marriage and childbearing have taken hold with such intensity, even while self-reports of happiness are declining? These and related questions form the basis for a number of new research projects on the horizon: such projects will be vital to shaping sensible family policy in the short term, and to helping to restore the flourishing of our nation in the long term.

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