

recall both Swift and Johnson. *The Republic of Virtue* also brings to mind the words of eighteenth-century English satirist Alexander Pope: “The life of a Wit is a warfare upon

earth.” Paul Lake has fought this good fight, and, in so doing, has reminded us of those unchanging values on which alone a lasting republic of virtue might be built. †

THICKER THAN WATER

Mark G. Malvasi

The Natural Family Where It Belongs: New Agrarian Essays by Allan C. Carlson
(New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2014)

For more than three decades, politicians, clergymen, intellectuals, academics, social psychologists, and others have cautioned, with varying degrees of urgency, that stable families are essential to a healthy society. Differing in their views on such controversial matters as patriarchy, women’s rights, and same-sex unions, nearly all these experts at the same time condemn the soaring divorce rates, the diffusion of single-parent households, and the emergence of a generation of ill-educated and unimaginative, ill-mannered and undisciplined, inattentive, hyperactive, overweight, and generally disagreeable children.

However imperiled American families may be, the debate about their nature and future has by now grown wearisome in its predictability. Each well-rehearsed exchange, no matter how contentious, leaves those who seek guidance and insight feeling as if

they have heard it all before. Refreshing in its intellectual candor, to say nothing of its political audacity, Allan Carlson’s *Natural Family Where It Belongs* has renewed the vitality of an important, but languishing, conversation.

A determined counterrevolutionary, Carlson proposes not only to restore the traditional patriarchal or, as he calls it, the “natural” family, but also to reestablish the household as a center of production. Such aspirations, Carlson understands, require nothing less than the redefinition of private property and the transformation of political economy. The economic revolution that began at the end of the eighteenth century constituted the dynamic element in passage of the United States from an agrarian republic composed largely of independent and self-sufficient farmers to an industrial, capitalist, market society made up of wage laborers, salaried employees, and wealthy entrepreneurs. With the advent of the so-called market revolution, the market itself became an agent of revolutionary change, indeed, from Carlson’s reactionary point of view, the most destructive force in history.

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Carlson thus rejects the conservative vindication of the unregulated marketplace, which he regards as incompatible with the requirements of the natural family. He defines individuals as social beings and views property as part of their social nature. For him, the bonds of marriage and kinship impose responsibilities that supersede all considerations of personal interest or advantage. As individual members of the family and household enter the labor and consumer markets, whether their entrance is voluntary or coerced, they cannot afford to bring all of their relatives with them. Some must be abandoned to fend for themselves if others are to survive.

In addition, Carlson argues that the family depends on the existence of a vigorous community life, which the market, by reducing men and women to shadowy abstractions linked only by the cash nexus, tends to erode. His analysis exposes the logic of a market society, which rests on feverish economic competition; the endless quest for profits; the creation of monstrous business enterprises impervious to local, state, or national control; the widening chasm between rich and poor; and the impoverishment of public life, all carried out in the name of economic progress and individual freedom.

Since the early nineteenth century, the national mantra of the United States has insisted that all, or almost all, Americans are free to take advantage of the economic opportunities that the market has created. This self-congratulatory rhetoric has neglected to point out that most are not free to stand aside from the market itself if they wish to do so. The market revolution broke down the older, more traditional, and more personal ties of family and community, replacing them with newer, depersonalized social relations. In his vindication of the family, Carlson, by contrast, advocates a

political economy in which the ownership of land, or its equivalent, again promises not only an independent livelihood but also, and of greater import, security in youth and old age, a humane solution to the ongoing problems of want and dependence. The natural, as opposed to the market, society, Carlson writes,

views the home and arable land as different-in-kind from other commodities. The most critical of social, political, and economic tasks becomes the appropriate partition, distribution, and use of such property, where ownership is spread as widely as possible, and where freedom of use is conditioned by a responsible stewardship toward future generations. . . . Relative to the world, each household exists as a small collective, organized on the principle of altruism. The members of a household share with each other on the basis of love, without any accounting of individual gain or loss. (xvi, xvii)

The security of family across the generations, and not the economic advancement of individual members, is, for Carlson, the true measure of economic independence, political freedom, and social welfare.

The family thus operates as an intermediary between the state and the individual, removing the need for extensive interference and thereby restraining the powers of government. Carlson mistrusts the state in “its propensity to become an end in itself” (xx), nowhere more so than when it acts in the name of the common good. Invoking the common good enables the state to augment its power and to justify all manner of despotism, violence, and evil. The family must endure its hardships, solve its problems, and care for its own. To do so, the family must

assume something of a public identity if only to safeguard its private and domestic character. “Humans instinctively understand that the strength of their community is dependent, in the end, on the strength of their marriages,” writes Carlson. “If the marital institution weakens—or worse, if it is politicized and subordinated to ideology—then the social pathologies of suicide, crime, abuse, poor health, and crippling dependency surely follow” (vix–xv). The family, Carlson recommends, must adopt a generous sociability.

At the same time, the family must not permit the state to intervene too deeply into its affairs, especially in pursuit of supposedly benevolent ends. The common good of society, as Carlson defines it, is found precisely in the free association of men, women, and children unimpeded by the presence of the state. They bring the private into the public realm, where they are governed by a respect for, and trust in, the experiences, values, and good will of their fellow human beings. Without losing a sense of individuality and disappearing into the undifferentiated mass, it is a common humanity that natural families share with each other as well as with the community.

Carlson offers a harrowing vision of the alternative: an utterly politicized world in which life is hedged in by the proscriptions of the state. To enhance its own power, the state destroys the natural order, asserting its responsibility “to ‘protect’ individuals from the rooted authority of households and communities” (xx). To accomplish its ends, the state takes control of education. The state renders the old, the young, and the infirm dependent on its largess. Adopting policies that benefit some at the expense of others, the state cultivates envy and resentment among its subjects. Its actions extinguish the natural affection that kin and neighbors would,

under other circumstances, feel toward one another.

The disintegration of the traditional community, in Carlson’s view, originated in the social and economic changes that the Second World War effected. The crisis of the natural family emerged a few decades later, during the 1960s, with the rise of “equity feminism.” The Second World War “marked the great divide in American social history” (34). People abandoned the land and moved to cities to work in defense plants. Carlson measures the decline of rural life by noting that the farm population fell from 30.5 million persons in 1940 to 23 million in 1950 to a mere 7.5 million by 1970 (33). Rural Americans ceased to care for the land and each other. Farms and fields disappeared beneath an overgrowth of weeds and brush. Houses stood empty and unpainted, falling into disrepair and ruin. In time, people lost even the memory of their former way of life.

Equity feminism incited a different kind of conflict. It placed not nature but human nature in jeopardy. To engineer “strict gender equality,” the advocates of equity feminism sought to obliterate gender differences and to produce “a new human type: the androgynous being” (18). The madness of equity feminist thought, according to Carlson, is that it ignores the reality that “women *are* different from men” (17), and that they are not interchangeable. The natural family that Carlson extols nurtures and profits from these differences; “the union” that results is “greater or stronger than the sum of its parts” (18). Like the liberal political philosophy that sustains it, feminism, which, Carlson shows, found its earliest proponents among members of the Republican Party, isolates individuals, the more easily to dominate them.

These atomized individuals, enslaved both to the modern corporation and the Leviathan state, are the products of advanced

capitalism. Invoking the critique of Joseph Schumpeter's *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, published in 1942, Carlson acknowledges the stunning performance of the capitalist economy in generating profits. At the same time, he agrees with Schumpeter that, paradoxically, the capitalist system is committing suicide by undermining the very social and political equilibrium that afforded such remarkable economic growth and prosperity in the first place.

Unlike most conservative adversaries of the welfare system, Carlson recognizes that capitalism and the welfare state arose together, each assuming "functions from the ever-diminishing family household." (5) In several essays on dissenting thinkers, especially Hillarie Belloc and Wilhelm Roepke, Carlson rightly insists that the welfare state is, in fact, the preeminent capitalist solution to the inequities that the corporate and consumer economies have themselves produced. It constitutes a feeble, and often unjust, effort to quiet apprehensions that the market alone cannot provide all Americans and their families with the opportunity for a decent life, and deprives many of the ability to fashion one.

Carlson is at his most original, and most hopeful, in his discussion of the renewal of neighborhoods, the revival of patriarchy, and the return of the family farm. Beginning in the nineteenth century, the industrial revolution "severed the workplace from the home" (105). Since then, all efforts to reconstruct home, family, and community have originated as responses to the upheavals that industrialization left in its wake. Carlson identifies a "common weakness" in each of these proposals, from the rise of suburbs in the nineteenth century to the socialist collectivism of the 1930s, from the post-war New Urbanism to the cohousing communities of today:

all accept as a given the radical separation of work and home introduced by industrialization. Each approach looks for ways to reassemble family homes shorn of productive functions. All accept and accommodate industrialism, rather than challenge it; all accept the weakened, non-productive family as a given.

The focus, Carlson declares, ought rather to lie "in the opportunity to undo the industrial revolution at least in certain ways, . . . to the benefit of the natural family" (115). To that end, he proposes the reintegration of home, school, and work. Technologies such as the personal computer, the cell phone, and the Internet will now sustain such an undertaking, and the elimination of artificial barriers such as "stifling professional rules; zoning laws; and restrictive housing covenants" (116) will make possible a "true homecoming" for American families.

Illusory though it may be, Carlson offers an alluring vision, or "fantasy," as even he sometimes refers to it. His depiction of marriage and family embraces those who have been, those who are, and those who will be. He does not regard marriage as simply a matter of personal choice or legal contract, but of obligation both to ancestors and posterity. Men and women do not marry for themselves. The bonds of family and community transcend the here and now, extending both backward and forward in time, safeguards against the enthusiasms of the moment. Similarly, the men and women who sit at their own table and eat their own mutton, to recall C. S. Lewis, will not easily yield either to the bribery or coercion of the state. They will despise all such forms bondage, and will teach their children to resist the yoke of servitude should it ever be pressed upon their shoulders. Independence shall be their byword.

Despair is useless. I must confess, though, to sharing little of Carlson's hopeful outlook. His may be a voice crying not in the wilderness, but in the wasteland. Then, one day, there will be only the wasteland. Recent history does not inspire confidence. Detached from community ties and kinship networks, which have themselves dissolved, the family since at least the 1950s has become more insular, with an emphasis not on fostering household productivity and generational continuity, but on self-indulgence and individual fulfillment through consumption, with ample doses of sedatives distributed to calm rattled nerves and to temper unrealized expectations.

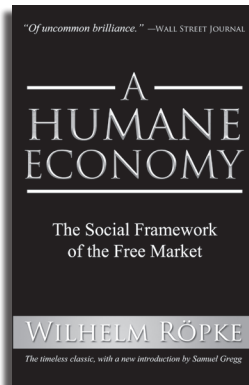
Carlson is undeterred. He suggests that, if recent history stands against him, the future has yet to be written—a future with antecedents deeply rooted in a past that,

although more distant, is also at once more venerable and more enduring than current sentiments and tendencies allow. As such, he concludes, “the prospects for building a well-settled landscape of productive homes rich with the laughter of children seem more promising than has been the case for decades” (145).

Carlson's *Natural Family* may be no more than an “agrarian fairy tale” to be dismissed and forgotten. *Caveat lector*. For, if nothing else, he has shown that in the twenty-first century rethinking the meaning of progress has become not only necessary but also viable. His book may turn out to be the first call for husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, grandparents and children to unite, reminding them that they have nothing to lose but their chains and that there may yet be a world to win. †

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