

Labor's Love Lost: The Rise and Fall of the Working-Class Family in America, by Andrew J. Cherlin. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2014. 258 pp. ISBN: 9780871540300.

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Andrew Cherlin's latest book is a concise history of U.S. family trends since the late 19th Century. The history builds a well-argued case for policies to improve family stability, to address the problems of children facing "the chaos of postmodern culture and the constraints of the hourglass economy" (p. 195). The book should serve as a staple in the debate over the causes and consequences family change, offering the most reasonable case for the downside of contemporary trends.

Cherlin frames the history around the post-War 1950s-1960s as a period of peak stability and conformity among working-class families, surrounded by periods of greater instability and inequality in the decades before and after. Peak conformity meant the smallest social-class gap in marriage rates between rich and working-class families, compared with the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, when rich people were much more likely to be married than those in working-class occupations. Cherlin sees the trend in the current period as perilous for children because family instability – concentrated among working-class families – is accompanied by high levels of income inequality and poor support for social mobility from institutions outside the family.

Thus, Cherlin argues, we should consider policies to "lessen the effects of the fall of the working-class family on children" by finding ways to "support stable partnerships without returning to the gender imbalances of the past" (p. 176). He favors policies that would disseminate cultural messages in favor of delaying childbearing, bolster education and training for working-class children and young adults, and raise incomes for those with less than a four-year college degree.

This book should be widely read and taught. It is compellingly written, making a sophisticated set of arguments with original evidence; I recommend it for undergraduate as well as graduate courses. Cherlin's treatment of the "rise of the working-class family" in

the industrial era is well-crafted and original. Especially welcome is the extensive discussion of gender norms and the "masculinity imperative" (p. 30) in the construction of the working-class family ideal. He has a non-superficial view of culture, and incorporates evidence from qualitative research and linguistic trends as well as Census data and economic trends. He also pays considerable attention to Black workers, from their historical emergence from slavery to the effect of declining blue-collar opportunities on their families after the post-War economic peak.

Cherlin's treatment of the era of peak family conformity addresses the abuse, alcoholism, and women's alienation that are too-often swept under the rug in accounts that privilege family stability and draw not just from historical nostalgia but "male nostalgia" (p. 92). That includes a revealing and enlightening description of his own family upbringing (he was born to White, working-class parents in 1948), in which his father was happy but his mother – whose abilities were underutilized during her time out of the labor market, and who was prescribed opiates to treat allergies – probably was not. But in the end he had a "happy childhood" (p. 99), and his conclusion about the era returns to the privileging of stability: "All things considered, children received good upbringings in these [1950s] families and experienced stable, two-parent environments while growing up" (p. 100). In the decades that followed, marriage became less common, and less stable, for people with less than a four-year college education, in what Cherlin calls the "fall of the working-class family" (which, as he notes, undermined the very notion of social-class identity for families as opposed to individuals).

Cherlin concludes that the 1950s "was a good era for children," who "benefited from this familistic culture" (pp. 115-116). But the evidence we have for this is based on the fortunes of a generation which, although born to those families, turned against their norms as adults, riding a wave of prosperity into the women's movement and abandoning universal early

marriage, shotgun weddings, and enforced domesticity. It is ironic that so many people (Cherlin is certainly not alone here) attribute the success of the Baby Boom children to a style of upbringing that they themselves largely rejected at the first opportunity.

Cherlin ably represents the growing chorus of social scientists concerned that poor and working-class parents today are “creating complex and unstable family lives that are not good for children” (p. 5). To his credit, Cherlin’s prescriptions for improving family stability mostly focus on education and the labor market, but the stated goal is the promotion of family stability. Why? For all the research into effects of family instability on children, we know that this factor is not more decisive than its economic precursors; that is, it’s more valuable to have one or more parents with adequate education and income (regardless of their marital status) than it is to have stably married parents, many of whom are time-and resource-poor in our economic and policy environment. This point of contention is important because Cherlin’s case for aiming interventions at family stability – which have, as he acknowledges, no record of success – assumes that the parameters of our stingy and ineffective welfare system are constant.

Cherlin makes a strong case for economic policy to promote employment and wage growth, expanded access to education at all levels, and institutional reforms such as financial regulation and a higher minimum wage. Absent from this discussion, however, is any consideration of our welfare system, including any treatment of family leave policy, child tax credits, guaranteed basic income, or access to health care – all part of the current (albeit lopsided) policy debate. There are a lot of proven policy levers to mitigate the effects family change. Given this range of options, it is unclear why, even as Cherlin records the abject failure of marriage promotion programs, he nevertheless believes “the message of pregnancy postponement may be worth trying,” in conjunction with efforts to improve the labor market at the low end (p. 183).

In conclusion, *Labor’s Love Lost* is an important, valuable book, from which many sociologists and their students can learn, and over which many fruitful arguments should emerge.