

The Working Class Family in Crisis

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.

Reviewed by Kevin Kusmierz

What is happening to America's working class families? In *Labor's Love Lost*, Andrew J. Cherlin traces major changes in marriage and nonmarital cohabitation among the non-college-educated majority, investigating the effects of race, education, and culture, as well as economic and political influences, on the dynamics of the working-class family. After exploring over 250 years' worth of trends and data, Cherlin concludes that the more and more such families have devolved into an unstable, unhealthy combination of temporary cohabitation with often multiple births outside of marriage, creating a negative environment for children. The working-class family's overall instability results in a marriage gap between the educated and the uneducated, with the former demonstrating stable family lives while the latter demonstrates high-turnover family behaviors. Cherlin attributes much of the decline of the working-class family to a combination of economic changes – particularly pay stagnation and the shift of manufacturing jobs in the US to cheaper overseas sources – and cultural changes, specifically the increase in short-term adult cohabitation and birthing of children without marrying.

Cherlin, a professor of sociology at Johns Hopkins, covers an ambitious swath of history from the Gilded Age to 2010. He argues that the Industrial Revolution, as it matured in the mid-1800s, increased the supply of relatively well-paying manufacturing jobs and male-breadwinner families, increasing family members' reliance upon the husband's wages and decreasing the wife's status as a housewife. Employment in manufacturing industries increased steadily until after World War II, when improvements in technology, transport, and communication allowed for increased offshoring. Increased offshoring led to the polarization of the economy, creating what is often referred to as an "hourglass economy:" low-skilled workers and high-skilled workers maintain their job security while middle-skilled or middle-educated workers suffer from contracting employment opportunities. Those who ended their schooling with a high school degree – his definition of "working class" – have been most vulnerable to long-term

unemployment, creating strains that changed each member's role in the family. Wives enjoyed more freedoms, working generally inside the home in order to maintain the husband's social reputation, but then increasingly working outside the home in response to the family's increased needs. Children became more independent and took on more dominant roles, sometimes surpassing the father as the main breadwinner of the family. By covering the rise, peak, and fall of industrialization, Cherlin emphasizes its impact on the working-class in order to more accurately analyze and understand the working-class family.

When analyzing the impacts of various influences on the working-class family, Cherlin focuses on the dynamics of the roles of husbands and wives along with the relationships between parents and children. Over time, he argues, industrialization helped redefine society's understanding of manhood by introducing men to emotional skills and requiring husbands to dedicate time to household work. These changes can be largely attributed to improvements in women's rights and independence, especially in the work force. With more women, particularly wives and mothers, joining the work force, husbands were forced to take on more household responsibilities, even at the risk of damaging their reputations, in order to survive during periods of low employment. The rise of industrialization promoted a male-breadwinner family, but its fall pushed women into the labor force and out of the house as families required more income.

Cherlin argues that black families generally rejected the male-breadwinner model, with both men and women working outside of the home. Discrimination in education, employment opportunities and access to labor union protections long hindered the employment of black males, creating a need for both partners to bring in an income. However, black communities also had different understandings and definitions of manhood, relying more heavily upon supportive social networks in which both men and women would work in order to provide for one another.

Some of the most major cultural changes to impact the working-class family occurred during the 1950s, the peak years when families shrank in size and technological advancements made households more efficient. During this period, many parents decided to invest more heavily in less children, resulting in declines in birth rates and in housework and increases in education for all. More efficient technology in the household continued the decline in work at home, leaving more wives feeling unsatisfied with their lives. Pink collar workers entered the labor force as women took on clerical or service jobs, threatening the male-breadwinner family dynamic. The decline of industrialization furthered the threats to the male-breadwinner family, resulting in what Cherlin considered to be its inevitable breakdown.

The fall of industrialization resulted in poor economic conditions, but the working-class family still maintained traditional views about marriage. In that way, the economic and cultural conditions of the 80s mirrored those of the Great Depression, when families maintained traditional beliefs about marriage while facing a bad economy. However, families living during the Great Depression experienced little to no changes in nonmarital childbearing, despite being in the same conditions as families living during the fall of industrialization, when nonmarital childbearing increased. Cherlin attributes this increase to the economy's transition into more vulnerability to globalization combined with reductions in the bargaining power of unions. Living in a more competitive market ripe with offshoring, skill-based labor, and shrinking unions, middle-skilled or middle-educated young adults lack the financial suitability they seem to deem necessary for marriage. As a result, working-class adults choose to bear children while maintaining cohabitations, choosing to prolong marriage until they find partners deemed financially suitable.

Addressing the issue of unstable, unhealthy family lives promoted by cohabitation and nonmarital childbearing, Cherlin emphasizes the role of education, comparing families with highly educated parents to families with parents who have solely high school degrees. The issues that result in instability and unhealthy environments for children tend to exist in less educated families, regardless of external influences such as increased independence among women or various economic conditions. Higher-educated families often lack the same levels of nonmarital childbearing and cohabitation, enjoying more stable family lives. As a result, Cherlin strongly recommends improvements to the current education system, suggesting that the US increase education's availability while decreasing its cost. Doing so would improve the educational opportunities for working-class young adults. Cherlin also recommends apprenticeship programs for high schools or community colleges, designed to train people in specific skillsets at the cost of attaining a bachelor's degree instead. Cherlin's solutions strive to expand working-class economic opportunities, in the hope that improving working-class families' financial stability will also improve family stability.

Cherlin also comments on policy changes that encourage marriage between low-income partners or at the very least diminish any barriers that might unintentionally penalize low-income partners for marrying. By encouraging and promoting marriage, Cherlin believes working-class families can become more stable, improving children's home lives and general environments. If children from working-class families enjoy better home lives, they might experience improved success in adulthood. Cherlin also comments on the possibility of initiating government programs designed to improve the relationships between couples in working-class families with the overall goal of promoting marriage and stable home lives. Given the failures of previous government programs designed to promote marriage, he suggests that a more promising strategy could be to promote delayed pregnancies rather than increased marriages, recommending that public messages be sent to encourage the delay of pregnancy within working-class families. Such delays would occur up until the point where a working-class family can financially support children in a healthy, stable home.

In addition to policies or government programs that directly or indirectly influence the culture of working-class families, Cherlin examines multiple suggestions concerning the promotion of economic growth, as an improved economy would result in higher incomes and improved living conditions for working-class families. At various points in *Labor's Love Lost*, Cherlin comments on the drastic and persisting declines in unionization within the US, drawing attention to the potential for working-class families to enjoy higher wages with the help of increased unionization. However, the book makes painfully clear throughout how globalization and computerization will in the future, as in the recent past, tend to complicate all efforts to design successful strategies to strengthen both job growth and family stability.

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REGIONAL LABOR REVIEW, vol. 18, no.2 (Spring/Summer 2016).
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