

The ‘Black Death’ and Living in Perpetual Crisis

Ismael Hernandez

Founder, Freedom & Virtue Institute

It takes a family to raise a village.

—Dr. Jennifer Roback Morse

Some sociologists talking about the black family still insist that single-parenting is just another form of family life.¹ They reason that there have always been single-parent families in the black community. In the past, the primary reason was death of the father and today it is divorce and out-of-wedlock births.² Due to a supposed constant in the number of children growing in single-parent households, pathologies cannot be attributed to the absence of fathers.³ However, the evidence suggests that poverty in black America is directly related to the proliferation of families headed by single mothers. In 1959, two thirds (66%) of all black children lived in poverty. By 1995 that number had fallen to forty-two percent (42%). However, in 1995, sixty-two percent (62%) of children in female-headed families lived in poverty while only thirteen percent (13%) of children in intact families were poor.⁴ Of all black children in poverty, eighty-five percent (85%) lived in fatherless families. This means that “six out of seven live in a mother-child household.”⁵

Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom point out that even when you control for income,⁶ ‘family structure has an independent effect that is measurable, and that, in important ways, the effect of growing up in a single-parent family is negative.’⁷ If we turn to the interesting case of new immigrants, we find that low birth weight and infant mortality are higher among babies born to U.S. mothers than among babies born to immigrants. This happens in spite of the fact that typically, immigrant women come from poorer backgrounds and receive less pre-natal care. Adolescents from immigrant families experience less health related school absences and engage

¹ ‘Between 1940 and 1990, the percentage of Black children living with both parents dropped from 75.8 percent to 33.2 percent, largely because of increases in never-married Black mothers.’ In S. E. Tolnay, “The Great Migration and Changes in the Northern Black Family, 1940 to 1990”, *Social Forces* 75 (1997) pp. 1213-1238, cited in Linda Malone-Colon, “Responding to the Black Marriage Crisis: A New Vision for Change” (Research Brief No. 6, Future of the Black Family Series, June 2007).

² “Only 18 percent of black women who married in the 1940s eventually divorced a rate only slightly higher than that for white women of that era. But, of that far smaller number of black women who married in the late sixties and early seventies, 60 percent have already divorced.” See Dennis A. Ahlburg and Carol J. DeVita, “New Realities of the American Family,” *Population Bulletin* 47, no.2 (August 1992) p. 15 cited in Maggie Gallagher, [*The Abolition of Marriage: How We Destroy Lasting Love*](#) (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 1996) page 117.

³ David Blankenhorn states that the supposed constant is not so. In 1900, the percentage of children living in single-parent homes was 10% and in 1992, it was 27%. See *Fatherless America*, p. 23.

⁴ See Thernstrom & Thernstrom, *America in Black & White*, p. 236.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 237.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 241. The authors of *America in Black & White* point out that controlling for income is not justifiable due to the strong connection between poverty and single parent family structure. Holding income constant in such a case is arbitrary.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 241.

less in risky behaviors. Hence, economics does not explain away the problems of single-parent homes. There is something lacking in the human interaction in these homes affecting connectedness at the earliest foundations of child rearing.⁸

Even if we were to grant that the number of children in single-parent households is the same today as it was fifty years ago, there are profound differences that must be accounted for. Fatherlessness due to death and fatherless due to abandonment are not the same thing; nor is fatherless due to death the same as families where there was *never* a father. As David Blankenhorn points out, this thesis is a sophism.⁹ Death brings finality and affirms the idea of fatherhood while abandonment creates anxiety, resentment, continual insecurity, and turmoil, diminishing the image of the father. The image of a father is damaged with abandonment while the image of a father lost by death is highlighted and uplifted. This is a common human response to the loss by death, one we see even with the loss of one who, while alive, was not necessarily well regarded. Death tends to bring perspective and public moderation to the memory of those left behind. Children who never knew a father cannot in turn revere their memory or relate to the image. In fact, what many children living with single mothers experience is the inconsistency of intermittent relationships with multiple men who often leave just when the child had begun to hope for a long-term relationship.¹⁰

We are now confronted with the real possibility of the extinction of the *husband-father* stable male presence substituted by the *boyfriend-father* intermittent presence. This prospect is tragic for our entire country but especially for black America. The relationship of the boyfriend with the mother is very often sporadic and unstable. Many of these relationships are established with young mothers with very young children by men who often have absolutely no desire for permanence in the relationship. These young black men usually have offspring with several young ladies and pay minimal attention to the children. Resentment, anger, and humiliation are consistently felt by the fathers in relationship with the girlfriends and by the children against both parents. ‘As a result, the boyfriend-father frequently becomes a violent guy, using his fists or a weapon to grab for something—ultimately, perhaps, a sense of control and self-respect—that his situation renders almost inherently unattainable.’¹¹

When we dismiss deviancy, as Moynihan told us, society suffers.¹² The family has lost the fundamental idea of morality and virtue: to love your neighbor. It is in the deep recesses of love that we can ever find the answer to the problems of the family. We learn to love, we are supposed to be trained to love. If we don’t train our children to love, our hormones will lead the way toward appetite. We cannot love if we are not trained and we cannot train if we were not trained; a deadly cycle that avoids the truth that ‘the human child is talked into talking and loved into loving.’¹³

The breakdown we see in the black family today is a microcosm of the entire society. How could it not be as the family is the most basic of human institutions? Many black families, especially but not exclusively those at the bottom rung of the economic ladder, are ‘families in perpetual crisis.’¹⁴ This crisis is an ongoing experience of frustration, despair, and

⁸ *Hardwired to Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities* (Institute for American Values, 2003) p. 10.

⁹ See David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America*, pp. 23.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 24.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 36.

¹² Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “No surrender”, *City Journal* (Manhattan Institute) (Summer, 1993).

¹³ *Hardwired to Connect*, p. 25.

¹⁴ See Richard Kagan & Shirley Schlosberg, *Families in Perpetual Crisis*, New York: Norton, 1989).

disillusionment. As Richard Kagan and Shirley Schlosberg tell us, ‘Living in a crisis-oriented family is like riding a roller coaster 24 hours a day: terrifying, energizing, and addicting.’¹⁵ The grief process has been blocked in these families by deep personal hurts, unfulfilled dreams of meaningful relationships, traumatic and repeated experiences of loss, and the incessant victim-focused propaganda about the roots of their condition. It is as easy to blame ‘my man’ (or ‘that bitch’) for all my troubles as it is to blame ‘the man’ (or ‘Whitey’) for the problems of the black community as a whole. In fact, both attitudes are the two sides of the same coin of victimhood. Denial and rage are the escape valves and diversion tactics which protect the crisis-oriented family from facing real change;¹⁶ and the same responses also feed the insatiable need to point the finger at society in general and whites in particular for every conceivable social problem.

Single mothers and heroic aunts and grandmothers, exhausted and lonely, are often victims of a painful reality of loss and despair. Yes, there are so many heroines out there raising children on their own. It should not be like that, still! A broken family cannot adequately help children develop moral strength. As stated, children are born to attach, an essential condition to develop a conscience, to develop as moral beings.¹⁷ Scientist Barbara Stillwell tells us that ‘[m]oralization is a process whereby a value-driven sense of oughtness emerges with specific human behavioral systems, namely the systems governing attachment, emotional regulation, cognitive processing, and volition.’ As the child broadens his network of connectedness (or lack thereof) to the extended society, new influences will have formative influence on his character and his conscience. A child that cannot attach at home will not attach in the larger society. As anthropologist David Guttmann asserts, adolescents ‘discover the ideal self outside of the self’ by recognizing ‘an equivalence between his own, usually inchoate, origin myth and the founding legacy of some worthy group, vocation, profession, religion, or nation.’ If children are exposed to individuals, ideals and organizations raking in victimhood, they will become adults with a deeply internalized propensity to such a vision of the world, connected to an unworthy version of otherness, venerating the idea of victimhood.¹⁸

Children in perpetual loss soon become adults in perpetual grief. At times, they become adults ready to launch at others. The intrusion of death into the life of a child is a painful experience that may, however, bring with it the opportunity for the closing of a chapter. There are traditions, ceremonies, rituals and even children’s games providing true opportunities to grieve and move on.¹⁹ In black America, abandonment of children by their fathers has become the equivalent of the bubonic plague in medieval times; a true Black Death condemning black children to a long and profound state of grief. There is no ritualistic remedy for abandonment; no chanting of rhymes, no memories to cherish, no rituals to close a chapter. We only get an open wound, always afresh, always hurting. Instead of dramatic enactments of loss, many children become teens living dramatic and grieving lives, with no escape around the experience of loss offering the opportunity to move on from it.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 3.

¹⁷ Barbara M. Stillwell, “The Consolidation of Conscience in Adolescence,” *Commission of Children at Risk*, Working Paper 13 (New York: Institute for American Values, 2002) p. 2.

¹⁸ *Hardwired to Connect*, pp. 26-27.

¹⁹ For a great discussion of such processes see Robert Kastenbaum, “The Kingdom Where Nobody Dies” in Kenneth J. Doka, ed., *Living with Grief: Children, Adolescents and Loss* (Hospice Foundation of America, 2000) ch. 1. The traditional rhyme ‘Ring-a-ring-a roses, all fall down!’, for example, originated as a ritual of enacting death during the difficult Medieval times when the bubonic plague decimated at least one-fourth of the population in Europe and Asia.

In fatherless black families in perpetual crisis one of the outcomes of disconnectedness is youth violence due to problems in the development of male identity. David Blankenhorn addresses this situation:

When this process of male identity does not succeed—when the boy cannot separate from the mother, cannot become the son of his father—one main result, in clinical terms, is rage. Rage against the mother, against women, against society. It is a deeply misogynistic rage, vividly expressed, for example, in contemporary rap music with titles such as ‘Beat that Bitch with a Bat.’²⁰

This dangerous course helps the individual evade the challenge of confronting reality and face difficult human existence. It offers a valve of escape into a pseudo-existence where self-pity and self-righteousness merge into a confusion and anger. Instead of focusing on the opportunities and risks inherent in taking responsibility, crisis-oriented families ‘act out’ the pain and inner void, built on too many disappointments, by hurting people and blaming ‘the system.’ Outsiders play the role of ‘enabler’, ‘hero’, and ‘scapegoat.’²¹ These roles are often played by government officials and agencies of the welfare state. As Kagan and Schlosberg say, ‘Professionals caught up in ‘enabling’ roles often miss the context of a family’s behavior and their own roles in an ongoing cycle of crises.’²² In fact, at times, ‘helpers’ become so involved in the turmoil of a crisis-oriented family that they become part of the cycle, taking sides, and fighting with other ‘helpers’ engaged in the dynamic.

Family therapist Evan Imber-Black recounts a case where a single-parent family and other family members were engaged in family disputes where professionals became involved. ‘Each side then began to enlist outside helpers, characterizing the other side as bad, intractable, unworkable, and so on. Mistrust among the helpers ran extremely high, replicating the pattern in the family.’²³ These professionals cannot help but to serve as enablers due to the fact that the welfare state is an enabling system and their schooling has trained them well to become enablers. The state as enabler becomes an all-powerful entity to which family members transfer the essence of their being. As authority and decision-making is moved from the individual and from whatever remnant of community still present in the family system to the state, it *momentarily* becomes the ‘hero.’ It is so tempting and so difficult for the agents of collectivized state compassion to offer excuses for bad behavior and provide all sorts of tangible benefits to ‘stabilize’ the family. The preferred excuse of those in the system is precisely to blame the system, racism, discrimination, oppression, and white people.

A family in crisis requiring enabling in perpetual fashion cannot support free individuals. Only leaving the plantation of dependency on state action will allow such families to break free from their slavery. Only a free and healthy family can teach children about trust and love, about intimacy and connectedness and about, what worthy living is about thus allow them to thrive as free persons. The problem is not poverty, as many decent and prosperous children grow up in families with few economic resources. The issue is love; the realization that marriage is about the

²⁰ See David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America*, pp. 30-31. Hyperactive masculinity and misogyny are often found in rap videos and in the behavior of young black men. Both are the result of problems with male identity caused in large measure by fatherlessness.

²¹ Kagan & Schlosberg, *Families in Perpetual Crisis*. p. 8.

²² *Ibid*, p. 8.

²³ Evan Imber-Black, *Families and Larger Systems: A Family Therapist’s Guide Through the Labyrinth* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1988) p. 19.

disinterested gift of self. The issue is placing constraints on our behavior for the good of the other. The issue is love.

The ‘cultural hurricane of the 1960s,’ as it is called by Dr. Jennifer Roback Morse, with its gospel of collectivism to lift up the poor by government action, with its commandments of sexual license, ‘authenticity’ and tolerance for any self-regarding behavior regardless of its depravity, wounded true love in the black family. Soon, the tragic hero of the state became a ‘scapegoat.’ The state as parent, as hero, as savior soon becomes the great enemy reminding families of their deficits and providing benefits forcing them to remain dependent. As we read in *Families and Larger Systems*:

Some families and larger systems have difficulty disengaging because the larger system have put services in place that confirm a view of deficits, which the family grudgingly, or sometimes shamefully, accepts while communicating resentment toward helpers, which becomes further confirmation of the family’s lack of resources...At times families respond with anger toward a deficit view of their functioning. Such anger is often underpinned by fear regarding the power of larger systems.²⁴

The context of a black family in perpetual crisis just described mirrors that of a community in the same mode, what John McWhorter ably terms Victimology.²⁵ The state has become both the source of all our problems and the answer to them; it is worshipped and hated all at once. Victimology defenders compound the problems of our families in crisis by providing another layer of crisis to be dealt with, another scapegoat to point the finger at. Children who do not belong become adults refusing to belong to the society where they exist. Perpetual crisis is experienced both at the most basic levels of life and at the higher levels of social interaction. Crisis becomes the totality of existence exerting the most galling tyranny over the lives of people living under such perpetual influence. Instead of depicting a future of hope and opportunities, victimologists offer only darkness and hopelessness. Instead of abiding by an unconditional commitment to a real American identity, bought with sweat, blood, and tears by our ancestors, victimologists offer the myth of Afrocentrism and more identity confusion. The pain evolves into separatism, rage, violence, and criminality. The liberal policies and radical alternative worlds affecting blacks since the 1960s created a dangerous *utilitarian ethos* in the family; in a family in perpetual crisis such an ethos has brought only disaster.

By promoting dependency and challenging the traditional moral consensus about sex, family and the economy, the new liberalism promoted a nefarious attitude of entitlement to a ‘moral alibi’ which justified irresponsible behavior. What we have seen in black America in the last few decades is paradoxical, although clearly tied to the modern liberal understanding of social processes. On the one hand, a collectivist victim mentality denying space for self-affirmation has emerged; on the other, a utilitarian and individualistic understanding of freedom—a *freedom without responsibilities*.²⁶

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 34.

²⁵ McWhorter, *Losing the Race*, pp. 32-34.

²⁶ See Pope John Paul II, *Letter to Families* (Boston: Pauline Books, 1994) p.47.