“The Finest Type of Existing Marriage”: Family and Nationhood in Theodore Roosevelt’s Speeches and Writings

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With great rhetorical gesture, Theodore Roosevelt, U.S. President from 1901 to 1909, reaffirmed traditional family values in his public speeches and writings. In the same breath, however, the popular President also catered to the changing zeitgeist by including progressive images of family life and especially of gender roles. My essay discusses Roosevelt’s rhetoric as a strategically motivated attempt to grapple with (and eventually overcome) the crisis of the American family in the late Victorian era. This type of family rhetoric, I will argue, was an important element in the fin-de-siècle discourse of cultural self-fashioning. Not only did it reflect upon a newly-won sense of national expansion, visible in the U.S. policy in Cuba and the Philippines, it also helped to shape the belief in the large family as the essential core of a functioning society. By staging his own family as a ‘prototypical American’ one, Roosevelt launched an ideology of the family as the ‘bedrock of the nation’ – a pattern which functions as an operational principle in the cultural imaginary to this very day.

Introduction: Theodore Roosevelt – The ‘Family President’

On June 21, 1904, Theodore Roosevelt wrote a telling letter to his son Kermit, in which he pondered his upcoming nomination for President by the Republican Party. Composed in a rather nostalgic mood, the letter concluded as follows:

I don’t think that any family has ever enjoyed the White House more than we have. I was thinking about it just this morning when Mother and I took breakfast on the portico and afterwards walked about the lovely grounds and looked at the stately historic old house. It is a wonderful privilege to have been here and to have been given the chance to do this work […]. (1925c: 528)
Roosevelt’s letter is revealing for two reasons: First of all, it expresses gratitude towards the people of the United States of America, who have granted him the privilege of becoming their President. His attitude is that of a thankful son, a son of his nation, who has been chosen to conduct an important task. The reward is obviously the permission to dwell in that beautiful residence in Washington, D.C., taking breakfast on the portico and meandering through the estate’s “lovely grounds.” Second, and perhaps more importantly, Roosevelt’s letter establishes an intimate connection between the First Family and the historic site of the Presidency, the White House. The “historic old house” is not simply an artefact or symbolic marker in this rhetoric, but a real place, a place of enjoyment and vitality.

How much the Roosevelts did indeed enjoy the White House is demonstrated in yet another letter, from March 19, 1906, in which the President describes the noble estate as a place of lively family interaction, with his two youngest sons playing around:

One night I came up-stairs and found Quentin playing the pianola as hard as he could, while Archie would suddenly start from the end of the hall where the pianola was, and, accompanied by both the dogs, race as hard as he could
the whole length of the White House clean to the other end of the hall and then tear back again. Another evening as I came up-stairs I found Archie and Quentin having a great play, chuckling with laughter, Archie driving Quentin by his suspenders, which were fixed to the end of a pair of woollen reins. Then they would ambush me and we would have a vigorous pillow-fight [...]. (1925c: 558)

It is through such anecdotes that Roosevelt was allowed to celebrate the unity of family life and national leadership. Since the President was the First Man in his country and representative of all people, his family assumed the role of a model family, symbolizing the ideal American household. In this model family, even conflicts seem to have taken place humorously, eventually strengthening family cohesion.

At first glance, the Roosevelts fit perfectly into the stereotype of the traditional large family in late Victorian America. On a publicity postcard from 1903, we can see Roosevelt, the patriarch, posing at the side of his loved ones—his wife Edith (a devoted housekeeper and mother) and his six bright children, Alice, Ted Jr., Kermit, Ethel, Archie, and Quentin. This postcard was not the only case in which the Roosevelt family became the object of professional (self-)marketing. In many well-orchestrated events, the President cultivated his image as “a man who loved his family above all else” (Markham 1985: 106). An early biographer reports that the Roosevelts regularly invited children from other Washington families to parties at the White House.

Such a party was given during the last holidays, and was attended by several hundred children, all of whom, of course, came arrayed in their best. [...] There was a Christmas tree at one side of the room, and the table was filled with fruit, cake, and candy. The President came in and helped to pass the ice-cream and cake, and Theodore, Jr. and some of the others passed the candy and other good things. (Stratemeyer 2007 [1904]: ch. 30)

The image of Teddy Roosevelt serving candy at children’s parties was an important signifier in his public portrayal as a family president. As legend has it, he once rejected an invitation by President McKinley in order to hurry back home and play with his children (Wagenknecht 1958: 172). All these stories were instrumental in creating the impression that Roosevelt was not only a vigorous political leader, trustbuster, and war hero, but also a loving father and patriarch.

“Teddy Bear Patriarchy” and the Challenges of the Modern Family

Roosevelt’s closeness to the world of children, and especially to that of the “American boy,” was already manifested by the nickname “Teddy” affection-
In his writings, Roosevelt maintained that leadership and character building were conjoined through the principles of sportsmanship and endurance (1902a: 164). It is no coincidence that youth organizations like the YMCA and the Boy Scouts of America, which sprang up during this time, saw themselves as “character factories” designed to transform boys into brigades of functional workers (Rosenthal 1986: 6).

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Extended households were not uncommon during the time. Due to a variety of phenomena—e.g., wars, epidemics, illnesses, and birth complications—families were often compounded by widows and widowers and their new offspring. "In the late nineteenth century," Steven...
Edith Kermit Carow was Roosevelt's second marriage. In her, Roosevelt found not only a soul-mate but also an intellectual partner. “In intelligence and character,” one biographer states, “she was her husband’s equal” (Wagenknecht 1958: 166). Although Edith visited only a few classes in literature at New York Comstock School, she managed to obtain a broad literary education through her family’s large collections of books. “She is better read,” Theodore confided to a friend, “and her value of literary merit is better than mine. I have tremendous admiration for her judgment. She is not only cultured but scholarly” (Caroli 1995: 123).

Out of Roosevelt’s first marriage with Alice Hathaway Lee came a daughter, also named Alice, who, after Lee’s premature death in 1884, was raised by Roosevelt’s second wife. Curiously enough, Alice publicly rejected the moral virtues that her father stood for, even condemning Christianity in various statements. Despite that (or maybe because of it), she quickly became a darling of the media and a well-known cover girl of Harper’s Weekly, setting the fashion of the early 20th century. “Her high profile,” one biographer notes, “made her America’s most famous young woman and the first celebrity First Daughter. Dashing, beautiful, iconoclastic, and independent, she was the prototype of the ‘New Woman’” (Cordery 1992: 353).

Instead of discarding his daughter’s rebellious tendencies, Roosevelt began to utilize Alice’s unconventional charms for his own purposes. During his first term as a President, he sent Alice to countries like Cuba, Japan, and Prussia for month-long diplomatic trips, even making her an unofficial emissary to Puerto Rico in 1903. After her return from the Caribbean, Alice was warmly greeted by her father: “You were of real service down there because you made those people feel that you liked them and took an interest in them” (Cordery 2007: 73).

Roosevelt often jokingly portrayed himself as a family tyrant who, however, had to suffer from a ‘female dominion’ in the household. One letter to his daughter Ethel from June 24, 1906, written at a time when he was still President, is signed “Your affectionate father, the tyrant” (1925c: 568). An image sketched by Roosevelt himself shows him being exposed to what seems to be a ritual accusation from the side of his family – an actual “chorus […] led by daughter: For he is a tyrant king!” (ibid.). Such lamentations were too obviously ironic to be taken seriously by the addressee. As Roosevelt’s biographer Edward Wagenknecht observes, it was “part of the fun […] to pretend that he lived under an intolerable domestic tyranny” (1958: 169).

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Ruggles and Ron Goeken note, “family and household composition in the United States was more complex than ever before” (1992: 15).

Her later reputation as a “hedonist” and “honorary homosexual” contributed to this image, which she cultivated until her death at ninety-six in 1980 (Cordery 2007: 464).
To the French ambassador in Washington, D.C., Roosevelt once remarked: "[P]eople think I have a good-natured wife, but she has a humor which is more tyrannical than half the tempestuous women of Shakespeare" (ibid.). The symbolic reversal of traditional power structures in the Rooseveltian rhetoric had a double function.

On the one hand, it playfully brought up the idea that Roosevelt’s “man’s house” might actually be “ruled by a woman – and the man in it too” (Wagenknecht 1958: 167). On the other hand, the rhetoric was also designed to make fun of matriarchal power by depicting female dominion as a sheer travesty.

The “Woman Question”

Roosevelt’s concept of the family was intimately connected to what at that time was labeled the ‘woman question’ – namely, the question of equal opportunities and voting rights for women. In an influential essay titled “The American Woman as a Mother,” which appeared in July 1905 in The Ladies’
There are certain old truths, which will be true as long as this world endures, and which no amount of progress can alter. One of these is the truth that the primary duty of the husband is to be the home-maker, the bread-winner for his wife and children, and that the primary duty of the woman is to be the helpmeet, the housewife and mother. (1905: 2)

The article conjured up an apocalyptic vision according to which the survival of the nation depended on the willingness of individuals to sacrifice themselves for the benefit of the community. As a consequence of the alarming reports on sinking birth rates and rising divorce numbers towards the end of the 19th century, new tactics had to be developed to save traditional marriage from dying out. One of these strategies was the symbolic revaluation of women's role in society.

The Woman who is a Good Wife, a good mother, is entitled to our respect as no one else; but she is entitled to it only because, and so long as she is worthy of it. Effort and self-sacrifice are the law of worthy life for the man as for the woman; though neither the effort nor the self-sacrifice may be the same for the one as for the other. (1905: 2)

The readers of The Ladies’ Home Journal were prepared for Roosevelt's demagoguery by a previous cover story of the magazine. In the edition from May, 1905, the former Democratic President Grover Cleveland had described women’s clubs, in a furious essay, as a “menace,” calling for a return to “the real path of true womanhood” (1905: 4). Cleveland’s argument culminated in the rhetorical question: “Are Women Retaliating on Men?” Compared to Cleveland’s article, a foaming indictment of the women’s movement, Roosevelt’s case seems almost a moderate one. Notably, it is not the strict rejection of women’s rights as in Cleveland’s text which lies at the basis of Roosevelt’s argument, but rather the plea to society as a whole to unite. This does not necessarily make Roosevelt’s case less conservative, but it was certainly more convincing to fin-de-siècle Americans, who were

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5 The essay was originally conceptualized as a Presidential address, given before the National Congress of Mothers in Washington, D.C., on March 13, 1905.

6 The historian Mark J. Stern writes that, in 1830, “the birth rate in the United States was at least twenty percent higher than that in Western Europe. By the early twentieth century, it was lower than those of England, Wales, Austria, Italy, and Spain [...] The United States had become a low-fertility society” (1987: 8). Similarly disturbing data were reported with respect to divorce rates. The numbers in the United States increased from 7,000 in 1860 to 56,000 around the turn of the century and then soared to an upsetting 100,000 at the start of World War I (Filene 1975: 42). As early as 1871, the magazine New Northwest diagnosed a “divorce mania” in the U.S., making reference to the commercial success of marriage and divorce dramas such as Collins’s Man and Wife and Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter (Leach 1980: 5).
The tone of Roosevelt's discussion of woman's suffrage was demonstratively diplomatic as well as strangely circuitous:

I would leave the matter to be decided by vote of women themselves. Most of the women whom I know best are against woman suffrage, and strongly criticize me for aiding in, as they term it, “forcing” it on them. But surely both the women who oppose the suffrage and the women who demand it ought to be willing to argue the matter out with the members of their own sex. If a majority of the women of a State vote affirmatively for the suffrage, it is time to give it to them. If only a small minority vote for it, it ought not be forced upon the hostile and the indifferent majority. (ibid.)

One reason for Roosevelt's meandering explanation could be that he did not want to risk alienating progressive voters. By using women as advocates against women's suffrage, Roosevelt systematically shifted the angle from his own standpoint to that of the average woman. The trope of “forcing” voting rights on women, first used as a quote from the “women whom I know best,” appears later in the same essay as part of his own argument:

Most of the women whom I know best are against woman suffrage precisely because they approach life from the standpoint of duty. They are not interested in their “rights” so much as in their obligations. (ibid.)

By putting the word ‘rights’ in quotation marks, Roosevelt dilutes the significance of voting rights in comparison to the ‘natural rights’ of the family. Women's suffrage, the argument goes, can only be meaningful for society if used “wisely and honorably” and other social concerns and “iniquities” would be tackled (1925e [1912]: 283). After extensively delineating the caveats against women's voting rights, Roosevelt comes to the somewhat surprising conclusion that

I believe in the movement for woman suffrage, and believe that it will ultimately succeed and will justify itself. But I regard it as of far less consequence than many other movement [sic!] for the betterment of present-day conditions as affecting both men and women. I feel that, instead of having to develop in the future […] the highest and most useful type of woman, we already have that type with us now. (1925e [1912]: 288)

It was this tactical embrace of feminism – on Roosevelt's “own terms,” as one critic sharply puts it (Carlson 2003: 1) – that rendered the rhetoric so desperaturly seeking for a positive and unifying theme. When Roosevelt, in his article on “Women’s Rights,” advocated “woman suffrage wherever the women wish it” (1925e [1912]: 282), he also reached out to progressive Americans. The tone of Roosevelt's discussion of woman's suffrage was demonstratively diplomatic as well as strangely circuitous:

In another work, he declared that “[e]xceptional women-like Julia Ward Howe or Harriet Beecher Stowe or Mrs. Homer-are admirable wives and mothers, admirable keepers of the home, and yet workers of genius outside the home” (1925b: 145).
powerful and compelling to many contemporary readers. More than once in his writings, Roosevelt honored the renowned abolitionist Julia Ward Howe as a model feminist: “I pin my faith to woman suffragists of the type of the late Julia Ward Howe” (1925e [1912]: 280). The figure of Howe, for Roosevelt the embodiment of that “serene” type of womanhood (1925e [1912]: 288), was particularly central to the argument since she personified the values of both Victorianism and progressivism. In an energetic reference to Howe’s social activism, Roosevelt called for a revitalization of the traditional utilitarian ideal, namely familial duties and social responsibility: “The vital need for women, as for men, is to war against vice, and frivolity, and cold selfishness, and timid shrinking from necessary risk and effort” (ibid.). In his Autobiography, published shortly after the “Bull Moose” campaign, Roosevelt continued this argument. Bestowing on women the “complete and entire rights with man” (1946 [1913]: 161), he wrote, should not be considered a universal remedy to heal all social problems the United States were faced with.

When this has been done [i.e., women’s voting rights have been granted] it will amount little unless [...] the woman realizes that she has no claim to rights unless she performs the duties that go with those rights and that alone justify her in appealing to them. (ibid.) Roosevelt’s praise of the values of responsibility and unselfishness culminated in a longer passage in his Autobiography which documented a brief exchange of letters with an unnamed American mother. In her letter to Roosevelt, written January 3, 1913, the woman had complained that, after bearing her husband nine children and doing all necessary work in the household, “including washing, ironing, house-cleaning, and the care of the little ones” (1946: 164), she was becoming “boring” to her agile and erudite spouse:

My husband more and more declined to discuss things with me. [...] So here I am, at forty-five years, hopelessly dull and uninteresting, while he can mix with the brightest minds in the country as an equal. (1946: 164–165)

Roosevelt’s response eight days later was full of appreciation for her performance as a housewife and mother. “If these facts are so, you have done a great and wonderful work” (1946: 166). Not surprisingly, Roosevelt advised the woman to talk to someone in her family and show that person (“whether
it is your husband or one of your children”) her letter and the written answer to finally achieve the positive reception she deserved. Roosevelt concluded by recommending a reading of Kathleen Norris’s romantic novel *Mother* (1911), a copy of which was attached to the letter. “Man and woman alike,” he added, “should profit by the teachings in such a story” (Roosevelt 1946: 167–168).

Roosevelt’s choice of Norris’s *Mother* as a piece of edifying literature for the misunderstood American housewife was not coincidental. The book tells the story of Margaret, a young lady who leaves home and rejects family life hoping to find self-fulfillment in a career. When God starts to speak to the woman, she realizes that independence and affluence cannot grant her the warmth and gratification of a family. Margaret’s occupation turns out to be the real prison, while home and motherhood promise liberation and redemption. In the novel’s last chapter, the protagonist repudiates a well-paid job to reunite with her own mother, finally comprehending that her energy and ambition are better invested in family life than in her potential life as a career woman. The romantic message of Norris’s text is obviously shared by Roosevelt himself, who, in the final paragraph of his essay for *The Ladies’ Home Journal*, appeals to the same sense of duty in the average woman: “The woman’s task is not easy […] – but in doing it […], there shall come to her the highest and holiest joy known to mankind” (1905: 2). In Roosevelt’s argument, the toils and efforts shouldered by the American mother not only seem justified by the Holy Scripture but also form “the foundation of all national happiness and greatness” (ibid.). Roosevelt leaves no doubt where the priorities in national self-fashioning should be placed: “[F]ar more important than the question of occupation of our citizens is the question how their family life is conducted” (1905: 1). In one of his Presidential addresses, he phrased this point even more harshly: “The home duties are the vital duties” (1970 [1903]: 493). The consequences of a misguided family life, it seemed, were much more serious than those of mismanagement in the national economy.

[T]he nation is in a bad way if there is no real home, if the family is not of the right kind; if the man is not a good husband and father, if he is brutal or cowardly or selfish, if the woman has lost her sense of duty, if she is sunk in vapid self-indulgence or has let her nature be twisted […] (ibid.)

**Social Darwinist Rhetoric and “Strenuous Life” Ideology**

Roosevelt’s frequent references to the adaptability of the American family and the role of female reproduction owe a lot to the Darwinist model of evolutionism. “There is small question,” David H. Burton asserts, “that
Theodore Roosevelt was an evolutionist of some sort" (1965: 103). As the deliberate vagueness in Burton’s phrase (“an evolutionist of some sort”) suggests, there was indeed a strong sense of ambiguity underlying the Rooseveltian rhetoric. In particular, Roosevelt took issue with the Social Darwinist argument that evolutionary processes were mainly rooted in individual interests. Sacrifice and abdication, he argued, were as important in the development of societies as individual strife and vigor. Roosevelt’s approach is well illustrated in his review of Benjamin Kidd’s famous treatise *Social Evolution* (1894). “Side by side with the selfish development in life,” he wrote, there has been almost from the beginning a certain amount of unselfish development too; and in the evolution of humanity the unselfish side has, on the whole, tended steadily to increase at the expense of the selfish, notably in the progressive communities. (1924d: 114)

Roosevelt’s rejection of the radical currents within the discourse of Social Darwinism even grew stronger throughout his Presidency. Even as he “clung to the vestiges of the ‘survival of the fittest’ theory”, one of his biographers notes, “he drastically modified his application of those concepts” (Harbaugh 1961: 346). By 1908, he had become a staunch supporter of key progressive tenets such as democratization, social reform, regulation of monopolies, and conservationism. Instead of endorsing a *laissez-faire* type of capitalism, like most representatives of the Republican Party, Roosevelt openly advocated governmental actions, especially with regard to the improvement of social conditions and the protection of the environment. In a revealing correspondence with the socialist writer Upton Sinclair, whose novel *The Jungle* (1906) he admired, Roosevelt maintained that “energetic, and, as I believe, in the long run radical, action must be taken to do away with the effects of arrogant and selfish greed on the part of the capitalist” (in: Harbaugh 1961: 257). Consequently, he also promoted “the need for collective action” (1946 [1913]: 25) and argued that “in addition to […] individual responsibility, there is a collective responsibility” (ibid.). One of Roosevelt’s last essays, “The Origin and Evolution of Life,” published in *Outlook* magazine in 1918, underlined this notion, putting forth the argument that Social Darwinism did not supply a satisfactory explanation of the development of human societies (1924a: 29–37).

10 Roosevelt’s standpoint on Social Darwinism has been described as a “pragmatic compromise that put practical considerations above theoretical ones” (Harbaugh 1967: xxxviii). Although he acknowledged the importance of Darwinist theories for his own thoughts and writings, he recoiled from fully subscribing to them. “Of course,” he wrote, “there is no exact parallelism between the birth, growth, and death of species in the animal world, and the birth, growth, and death of societies in the world of man. Yet there is a certain parallelism” (1910: 6).
By the same token, Roosevelt’s views on ‘race’ were more ambiguous and diversified than those of many of his contemporaries. In an address to students and professors at Oxford University on June 7, 1910, tentatively titled “Analogies between Biology and the Human Story,” he asserted that “[a] great nation rarely belongs to any one race” (1910: 6). In another essay, Roosevelt even rejected the notion of ‘race origin’ altogether, while at the same time endorsing the theory that a new ‘American race’ had developed as a hybrid of various other ‘races.’ “[Q]uestions of race origin,” he postulated, “must not be considered: we wish to do good work, and we are all Americans, pure and simple” (1967 [1893]: 15).

The construct of ‘Americanness’ allowed Roosevelt to develop his apocalyptic theory of “race suicide” – a tragic fate that he predicted for a nation entrapped in the temptations of self-indulgence and egotism. As in many other works written around the fin de siècle, the terms race, nation, and people are used almost interchangeably in Roosevelt’s writings. This becomes particularly obvious in his 1917 book on American domestic policy, The Foes of Our Own Household (1925b). One revealing passage documents a letter that Roosevelt sent to an impoverished mother of a child-rich family who had earlier protested against his opposition to birth control. “I do not want to see us Americans forced to import our babies from abroad,” he wrote,

I do not want to see the stock of people like yourself and my family die out […]; and it will inevitably die out if the average man and the average woman are so selfish and so cold that they wish either no children, or just one or two children. (1925b: 153)

His statement somehow frivolously catered to the prevailing fears of “racial degeneration” as well as those of uncontrolled immigration. However, Roosevelt’s characterization of the American nation as a “stock of people like yourself and my family” is not without ambiguity. While subscribing to the Christian values of individual sacrifice and self-abandonment, Roosevelt also conjured up the Darwinist idea that only “[i]f a people proved adaptable” to the changing conditions of their environment, “they merited full acceptance” (Harbaugh 1967: xxxviii). Paradoxically, Roosevelt’s advocacy of collective responsibility and unselfishness as the highest ideals of civilization positioned his argument, at least in parts, in opposition to the common discourse of Social Darwinism. Where contemporary supporters of Darwin-
ism praised the ‘economic man,’ i.e., the man best adapted to the laws of the market, as the highest authority of a functioning society. Roosevelt extolled the moral qualities of family life as a life of abdication and self-abandonment. The Darwinist model of ‘the survival of the fittest’ is replaced in this scenario by a model of maternal love as a “true source of progress” (Carlson 2003: 4). Ironically enough, this ‘motherly’ ideal is shared by both sexes who equally participate in the rescue of civilization. The “highest ideal of the family,” Roosevelt holds in “National Life and Character,” “is attainable only where the father and the mother stand to each other as lovers and friends” (1903 [1894]: 121). Only if men and women engaged in a “partnership of happiness,” which, as Roosevelt points out, must also be a “partnership of work” (1924b [1911]: 161), general conditions could be improved to the benefit of the whole nation.

Roosevelt’s model figured, in his own words, as a program for “a truer Christianity” (1919 [1905]: 289). In order to establish this concept as a functioning principle of social practice, each individual had to strengthen the basic relationship between family and society. It was precisely this tie between the individual and the whole which, in Roosevelt’s view, guaranteed the survival of the nation. Against the backdrop of the burning conflict between the classes, a reinforcement of the basic links between family and society seemed more important than ever. In a Presidential address held on August 10, 1905, Roosevelt warned that “[a]n apparent disregard for family ties [was] growing among the poorer classes which will eventually lead to a disregard of the blessings our country affords them” (1919 [1905]: 289–290).

An accentuation of the real “blessings” of the nation state seemed to provide a more viable perspective than the unflinching focus on an unrealistic, albeit more impressive ideal. “The important thing to work for in marriage,” Roosevelt argued a few years later in an essay in Outlook magazine, was “to raise the average marriage relations to those that already obtain in the finest type of existing marriage” (1925e [1912]: 288). Notably, the article does not promise a vague or even utopian ideal of marriage but aims at “the finest type of existing marriage” (my emphasis). This focus on the realness of marriage – as an actual fact of social and private life – lent to Roosevelt’s doubtlessly romanticizing approach a more pragmatic tone – a tone which was, as we know today, well received by many contemporary readers. To one of his supporters Roosevelt wrote that the avoidance of marriage and the resistance to procreation was one of the most despicable ‘crimes against the nation’:

12 This is documented in a number of enthusiastic letters to Roosevelt, in which voters thanked him “for your ready sympathy and understanding” (1946 [1913]: 167).
The man or woman who deliberately avoids marriage and has a heart so cold as to know no passion and a brain so shallow and selfish as to dislike having children, is in effect a criminal against the race and should be an object of contemptuous abhorrence by all healthy people. (1970 [Oct. 18, 1902]: 509)

By lauding the “angel of the home” as a feasible model for “true womanhood,” Roosevelt managed to make his rhetoric appear concrete to readers. The recurrent reference to actual women and mothers also helped him to reject the accusation of pure idealism. “No woman will ever be developed,” he jokingly stated, “who will stand above the highest and finest of the wives and mothers of today and of the yesterdays” (ibid.). Through his symbolic appreciation of women’s merits for the family, Roosevelt managed to soften the harsh rhetoric of his usual attacks against a potential failure of the American nation state. The bitter pill of the “strenuous life” ideology, it seemed, could only be swallowed if the implicit message – that of an overall betterment of society through labor and sacrifice – was conveyed plausibly to the American audience. This becomes clear in the following statement towards the end of his Ladies’ Home Journal essay:

If either a race or an individual prefers the pleasures of mere effortless ease, of self-indulgence, to the infinitely deeper, the infinitely higher pleasures that come to those who know the toil and the weariness, but also the joy, of hard duty well done, why, that race or that individual must inevitably in the end pay the penalty of leading a life both vapid and ignoble. (1905: 2)

The obvious references to Darwinist thought in Roosevelt’s rhetoric are barely concealed by the emphasis on partnership and self-sacrifice. In his Autobiography, Roosevelt writes that “[t]he relationship of man and woman is the fundamental relationship that stands at the base of the whole social structure” (1946 [1913]: 161). This romantic concept of traditional marriage as the last resort of a civilization on the verge of extinction might be called reactionary. Yet, by adding the components of mutuality and equal tasks (even if only symbolically), Roosevelt endowed the concept with a progressive touch. Instead of rejecting women’s creative impulses, as supporters of Silas Weir Mitchell’s famous rest cure therapy did, he attempted, at least rhetorically, to integrate these energies into his model of national efficiency. No doubt, the idea of separate spheres is still alive and kicking in Roosevelt’s model, yet with the slight difference that men are invited to get involved

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13 Silas Weir Mitchell and George Beard, celebrated physicians of their time, claimed in their writings – e.g., Wear and Tear (1891), and American Nervousness, (1881) – that creative activities such as writing and painting could easily lead to hysterical phenomena in women. To “cure” their patients from this “illness,” they recommended strict rest and abandonment of any form of intellectual or imaginative work.
in domestic activities and women to extend their scope of action to the public realm.

Roosevelt’s theoretical interest in the structure of marriage had always been based on a direct analogy between the family and the nation. By leaving out in his argument the political processes which connected the smallest units of society with the larger body of the nation, Roosevelt evoked the impression that the relationship between family and nation was primarily of a metaphorical nature. In Roosevelt’s rhetoric, the average family represented the nation state in the form of a *pars pro toto* relation. The community as a connecting link between the two is basically non-existent in this scenario. Roosevelt’s essay on “True Americanism,” first published in *The Forum* in April, 1894, is a good case in point. In unusually strong words, Roosevelt criticizes in the article “that unwholesome parochial spirit, that over-exaltation of the little community at the expense of the great nation” (1902d: 52). The “spirit of provincial patriotism” (ibid.), he adds, should be replaced by the concept of the “great nation,” of which the family seemed the most important representative. “[T]he words ‘home’ and ‘country,’” we read three pages later, “mean a great deal” (1902d: 55). The notion of the ‘home’ is so crucial to Roosevelt’s definition of patriotism that the love of one’s country is equated with the love of one’s spouse. “At present,” Roosevelt argues, “treason, like adultery, ranks as one of the worst of all possible crimes” (ibid.). While also clinging to a religiously oriented thinking based on moral values, Roosevelt here takes a bow to the post-Darwinian zeitgeist:

> A race must be strong and vigorous; it must be a race of good fighters and good breeders, else its wisdom will come to naught and its virtue be ineffective; and no sweetness and delicacy, no love for and appreciation of beauty in art or literature […] can possibly atone for the lack of the great virile virtues. (1967 [1893]: 4)

Roosevelt’s evocation of “the great virile virtues” placed his national vision on the grounds of an ideology of manliness. Whereas in some writings he undertook great efforts to involve women in his concept of nationhood, he sketched an almost entirely homosocial vision in programmatic essays such as “The Manly Virtues and Practical Politics” (1925d [1894]) and “Manhood and Statehood” (1902c [1901]). Postulating a fortification of “the iron qualities that must go with true manhood,” Roosevelt here refers to heroic figures of the national past like Washington and Lincoln, claiming that “[t]he least

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14 This emphasis on the ‘inherent truth’ and ‘profound meaning’ of social processes puts Roosevelt in a secret alliance with naturalist writers such as Frank Norris and Jack London. In his programmatic essay “The Responsibilities of the Novelist,” Norris compared the novel to a powerful weapon and the writer to a warrior. “If he [the writer] is not true nor strong he has no business with the bow. The people give heed to him only because he bears a great weapon” (1969 [1902]: 7).
touch of flabbiness, of unhealthy softness in either, would have meant the ruin for this nation” (1902c: 257). The “fathers of the nation” are literally transformed in Roosevelt’s argument into patriarchs whose sole interest lied in the preservation of America’s integrity as a nation state. “A politician who really serves his country well […] must usually possess some of the hardy virtues which we admire in the soldier who serves his country well in the field” (1925d [1894]: 47). The same metaphor is used in Roosevelt’s passionate apology of the Spanish-American War, *The Rough Riders* (1924c [1899]), a glorification of the famous cavalry regiment by the same name, whose leader Roosevelt was. “My men were children of the dragon’s blood,” he writes, adding that the brigade “was a typical American body” (1924c [1899]: 188, 207). The symbols of fatherhood and the male body are combined in this rhetoric into a trope of the nation as a family of men. Such ‘masculinizing’ descriptions of the American family as a military body seem to function as a companion text to Roosevelt’s usual accounts of the relationship between man and woman as the basic core of society. Roosevelt’s teasing declaration in one of his essays, “I know men better, but I can talk of women, too” (1925a [1911]: 247), serves as an ironic comment on his own androcentric approach.

**The Family as the “Bedrock of the Nation”**

Not surprisingly, the child-rich family is praised as the archetypal symbol of the functioning nation state in many of Roosevelt’s writings. By citing scholarly works as evidence for his assumptions, Roosevelt aspired to place his argument on a scientific, often even medical foundation. In *The Foes of Our Own Household*, he quoted approvingly from a scientific article published in July 1917, in *The Journal of Heredity*: “[I]n a normal and healthy community […] the health of the mother is best, and the infant mortality lowest, in families with at least six children” (1925b: 164). Notably, Roosevelt assured his audience time and again that this philosophy was mirrored in his own life and doings. In a personal letter, written three years before this death and addressed to a disappointed mother of eleven children, Roosevelt reminisced about his own family life, describing fatherhood as one of his greatest successes:

*We have had six children in this family. We wish we had more. Now the grandchildren are coming along; and I am sure you agree with me that no other success in life, not being President, or being wealthy, or going to college, or anything else, comes up to the success of the man and woman who can feel that they have done their duty and that their children and grandchildren rise up to call them blessed.* (1925b [letter from February 9, 1916])
Even after Roosevelt had left the White House, his family remained a symbol of American national unity. In various reports and cartoons, Roosevelt’s residence at Sagamore Hill, Long Island, to which he retreated after the Presidency, was stylized into a marker of public attraction. In one particularly informative sketch, a ‘schoolboy elephant’ is depicted (symbolizing Roosevelt’s enthusiastic following in the Republican Party) which spies over the walls of the former President’s estate. Although earlier campaigns had ridiculed Roosevelt as a rich guy “born with a gold spoon in his mouth” (Banks & Armstrong 1901: 56), later accounts would depict him more and more as a typical American and his family as an average American family. According to Brander Matthews, the later Roosevelt “was frank in declaring that he had been happy beyond the common lot of man” (1924: ix). This change in the public perception was, to a great extent, due to a successful rhetoric by which Roosevelt portrayed himself not as a rich man but as a friend of the ordinary laborer (Schaefer 1992: 214). By placing the ‘average man’ and the ‘average family’ on the pedestal of national well-being, Roosevelt underlined the often cited analogy between the smallest unit of society and the overall structure of the nation state. “In the last analysis,” he reasoned in his 1905 address to the National Congress of Mothers,

the welfare of the State depends absolutely upon whether or not the average family, the average man and woman and their children represent the kind of citizenship fit for the foundation of a great nation; and if we fail to appreciate this we fail to appreciate the root morality upon which all healthy civilization is based. (1905: 1)

At a time in which public opinion was obsessed with images of degeneration and national decline, Roosevelt’s call for strong family bonds fell on fertile ground. Instead of celebrating the self-made man as the sole ideal of Western progress, as many of his contemporaries did, Roosevelt chose to hold up the family as a model of social survival. In his presidential addresses, Roosevelt tirelessly stressed the analogies between the family and the nation. The duties of the individual family, he pointed out, were central to the well-being of the whole. In another address, given at the unveiling of the Sherman Statue in Washington, D.C., he exclaimed:

The nation is nothing but the aggregate of the families within its border; and if the average man is not hard-working, just, and fearless in his dealings with those about him, then our average of public life will in the end be low. (1970 [Oct. 15, 1903]: 493)

In this rhetoric, the concept of unselfish effort for the sake of the nation is often most emphatically applied to women:

The woman who has borne, and who has reared [...] a family of children, has in the most emphatic manner deserved well of the Republic. Her burden has
Such references to the democratic framework of the nation (“the Republic”) are not merely accidental. What Roosevelt evokes through such phrases is an ideal of society in which the ‘homely duties’ are recognized as equivalent to state duties. The “indispensable work for the community,” he holds, is not that of career-building or industrial development but “the work of the wife and mother” (1925b [1917]: 145).15

It would be easy to dismiss Roosevelt’s rhetoric as simply conservative and reactionary. But that would certainly leave unconsidered the strategic endeavors invested into the discourse of democratic unity and equality. By singing the hymn of the family instead of praising the ideal of rugged individualism, the Rooseveltian rhetoric called attention to the equal duties of men and women and, at least symbolically, resisted the dominant version of Social Darwinism. Aside from the civic duties, Roosevelt argued, “there are certain homely qualities the lack of which will prevent the most brilliant man alive from being a useful soldier to his country” (1970 [1903]: 493). These “homely qualities” in the public servant were so important, Roosevelt claimed, that their absence could not even be compensated by the “shrewdness or ability” of the public servant (ibid.).

A similar rhetoric can be found some eighty years later in a statement made by “the great communicator” Ronald Reagan:

[T]he family is the bedrock of our nation, but it is also the engine that gives our country life. [...] It’s for our families that we work and labor, so we can join around the dinner table, bring our children up the right way, care for our parents, and reach out to those less fortunate. It is the power of the family that holds the Nation together, that gives America her conscience, and that serves as the cradle of our country’s soul. (1989: 1252)

In these remarks, made towards the end of Reagan’s Presidency, we find the same romantic image of the American family united at the dinner table, of unselfish support for other family members, as are found in Roosevelt’s writings. This type of rhetoric, as shallow as it may seem, has proven to be a successful motor of national unity. The family, for Roosevelt as well as for Reagan, is more than an isolated entity; it stands for America itself.

The Rooseveltian family rhetoric, I have argued, was an important element in the fin-de-siècle discourse of cultural self-fashioning. Not only did it reflect upon a newly-won sense of national expansion, visible in the U.S. policy in

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15 This symbolic recognition of women’s efforts is not identical, of course, with a plea for political participation. Nevertheless, it represents a shift in society towards an acknowledgment of women’s energies and performances in society.
Cuba and the Philippines, it also helped to shape the modern belief in the large family as the essential core of a functioning society. Roosevelt’s argument established a link between the conservative ideals of *noblesse oblige*, protectiveness, and reproduction on the one hand and the progressive concepts of exploration, individual empowerment, and efficiency on the other. By modeling his own family as a ‘prototypical American’ one, Roosevelt manifested an ideology of the family as the ‘bedrock of the nation’ – a pattern which functions as an operational principle in the cultural imaginary to this very day.

References


“The Finest Type of Existing Marriage”

Illustrations


Figure 2: “Drawing the Line in Mississippi.” Cartoon by C. Berryman. 1902. Dec. 21, 2008. [http://www.teddybearandfriends.com/archive/articles/history.html].

Figure 3: “The Tyrant.” Sketch drawn by Theodore Roosevelt in a letter to his daughter Ethel, June 24, 1906 (from: Letters to His Children 568).

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