

FAMILY, RELIGION, PEDAGOGY AND EVERYDAY EDUCATION PRACTICE

EDITORS

BEATA PIETKIEWICZ-PAREEK

RAFAŁ WŁODARCZYK

INSTYTUT PEDAGOGIKI
UNIwersytetu Wrocławskiego

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GRAŻYNA LUBOWICKA

University of Wrocław

ORCID: 0000-0001-5988-112X

A FAMILY APART. THE CRISIS OF THE FAMILY IN POSTMODERNITY¹

ABSTRACT:

A crisis of values and pluralism in postmodern society have led to the family no longer being considered an essential value or an element of an unalterable social order. Individualistic attitude of postmodern man focused on self-realisation implied that the family should bring personal fulfilment, as well as satisfaction and pleasure. Frail human bonds, in particular, un-stable intimate relationships, are changing the family into a contract between free partners, a deal or a transaction that should provide for emotional and spiritual needs of the contracting parties.

KEYWORDS:

family, crisis of values, pluralism, individualism, postmodernity

The crisis of the family in postmodernity is the consequence of many transformations, for example the erosion of universal values and pluralism, individualism and the instability of interpersonal bonds. The above phenomena dilute the importance of the family, violate its continuity

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and deinstitutionalise it². The purpose of this text is to outline the change in the importance of the family in the context of the transformation of postmodern society, and above all in relation to the crisis of values and for the domination in this society of attitudes of individualism and the priority of self-realization.

In modernity, the family and marriage were considered to be the individual's basic mode of operation within society. As Krystyna Slany stressed, "in general one could not possibly live outside of marriage"³. Marriage determined an individual's social status, roles, functions and usefulness to society itself, and regulated areas such as daily life, household functioning and sexual activity. The family was a purely economic community, as Anthony Giddens confirms: "In pre-modern Europe, most marriages were contracted, not on the basis of mutual sexual attraction, but economic circumstance"⁴. Marriage was determined by economic motives and the choice of the partner often depended on the parents' decision. The family guaranteed economic or ontological security and defined the individual's position in society. According to Przemysław Wrochna, "This made the life of an individual a complete 'narrative'"⁵. Thus, the family both had an unquestionable importance as an institution and a top position in the hierarchy of values.

One of the signs of the crisis of the family in postmodernity is that it ceases to be a permanent, fixed and definitive social arrangement. The crisis affects the family as an institution, since its traditional model is being replaced by various forms of partnerships; it is becoming only one of the available options to choose from. Marriage is no longer mandatory and is no longer treated as an indispensable stage in a person's life. Postmodernity is also marked by a radical change in people's attitudes and

² The crisis of the family is the collapse of the importance of the family as a community in favour of its members' preference for their own self-fulfilment needs. Anthony Giddens writes about it in the book *The Transformation of Intimacy. Sexuality, Love and Erotism in Modern Societies* (Stanford 1992), which, referring to the relationships that are built in the family or in more detail in intimate relationships, describes them as 'confluent love' or 'pure relationships'.

³ K. Slany, *Alternatywne formy życia małżeńsko-rodzinnego w ponowoczesnym świecie*, Kraków 2002, p. 55.

⁴ A. Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*, op. cit., p. 38.

⁵ P. Wrochna, "Intymność w stanie obłączenia", *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska. Sectio I, Philosophia – Sociologia* 2016, vol. 41, no. 2, p. 144.

approach to marriage, family, childrearing and divorce. Social consent to the dissolution of marriages and the multiplication of reasons for breaking off a relationship reinforce the conviction that divorce is natural. Family and marriage themselves are no longer the utmost values, which oblige people to make sacrifices. The character of bonds in the family is also changing; relationships are becoming looser, individualism is on the up and the importance of moral and religious norms is decreasing.

In the next part of this study, I will discuss the transformations of the family in the context of postmodern social phenomena and will distinguish the following threats: a crisis of universal, traditional values and the attendant crisis of the family as a value, pluralisation processes resulting in the relativisation and subjectivization of moral values, and individualism. Of particular importance for the crisis of the family is the last of the above phenomena, which makes self-realisation, being oneself and authenticity the key values for the individual; their consequence is the impermanence of interpersonal bonds⁶.

THE FAMILY AND THE CRISIS OF VALUES⁷

The family does not hold a high position in the hierarchy of values of the postmodern society. The reasons are the crisis of universal values and the attendant radical pluralism. The disruption of the code of ethical principles as normative foundations in the postmodern society means above all an absence in the convictions of individuals and in social standards of their traditional, objective hierarchy, which used to be dominated by moral (spiritual) and religious values. The axiological perspective adopted in postmodernity is thus characterised by the abandonment of an established code of ethical principles and an objective hierarchy of values.

⁶ On the causes of the erosion of traditional understanding of the family, see e.g.: A. Kwak, *Rodzina w dobie przemian. Małżeństwo i kohabitacja*, Warszawa 2005; A. Kwak, *Współczesne związki heteroseksualne: małżeństwa (dobrowolnie bezdzietne), kohabitacja*, Warszawa 2014; M. Majkowski, *Rodzina polska w kontekście nowych uwarunkowań*, Kraków 2010; K. Slany, *Alternatywne formy życia małżeńsko-rodzinnego w ponowoczesnym świecie*, op. cit.

⁷ I looked into the question of a value crisis in the text: G. Lubowicka, J. Maj, "Uniwersalne, tradycyjne wartości – kryzys czy zmiana?" (*Edukacja Etyczna* 2006, no. 12).

In the postmodernist concept, values are treated as something very fluid and changeable. Values change as reality changes and also depend on the changing attitude of the individual. According to Rorty, values are never absolute and universal. There is no fixed system of values external to man that determines norms and ways of behaviour. Usefulness is the criterion which accounts for the whole postmodern reality⁸.

The postmodern society is not based on traditional values. On the contrary, it is founded on a pluralism of worldviews rooted in democratic principles, the limits of which are set by laws enacted in democratic procedures. Therefore, no individual values considered as elements of a worldview can dominate it and should not constitute principles that are absolutely binding on the entire political community. As a result, the adoption or selection of values as the basis of behaviour or their validity is shifting into the private realm of individuals, limited by their own conscience, loyalty to their neighbours, tenets of morality, and rules of cooperation with other members of society. This pluralism of values in postmodernity consists, as Agnieszka Borowiak points out, in “the co-occurrence of incommensurable, sometimes even contradictory moral norms and the recognition of pluralism as a superior cultural value [...]”⁹.

Postmodernism not only abandons a search for moral principles that would transcend history and culture and strips values of their transcendental (in both secular and religious versions) universal nature but also relativises and subjectivises moral values. This abandoning of attempts to establish rigid, timeless ethical codes (aspiring to be universally binding) and an objective hierarchy of values contributes to the personalisation, individualisation of morality, subjectivisation of the choice of values, and as a consequence intensifies their pluralism. The crisis of values in postmodernity means therefore the lack of universal recognition for traditional, higher or spiritual, values. This is aptly defined by Janusz Mariański:

⁸ M. Miczyńska-Kowalska, *Wartości w postmodernizmie. Koncepcja dekonstrukcji rzeczywistości społecznej – analiza krytyczna*, Lublin 2013, p. 47.

⁹ A. Borowiak, “Ponowoczesna etyka i ponowoczesna tolerancja”, [in:] *Tolerancja i wielokulturowość. Wyzwania XXI wieku*, ed. A. Borowiak, P. Szarota, Warszawa 2004, p. 40.

In stable, traditional societies with uniform value bases of a religious and moral nature, there was a consensus on basic values and their order. In open, pluralistic societies, the situation becomes completely different and most of them today are becoming individualistic societies. Such societies are characterised by individual understanding of values and subjectivisation of lifestyles, worldviews and morals. Scepticism about binding and shared ideals, relativism in religious and philosophical matters and moral nihilism are widespread¹⁰.

The crisis of values in postmodern society is further aggravated by the crisis of a tradition which is passed on from one generation to another and perpetuates the past shared culture with its values and moral norms. The departure from the ordered world of values, rejection of the system of social control, lack of shared and universally binding values in post-traditional societies and individualised criteria of value selection strip human interactions and actions of regulators and signposts, 'certainties', stable guidelines, and a sense of obligation. The status and significance of the family in modernity upheld the world of late modernity, which, as Katarzyna Suwada notes, "was based on the pursuit of order, on defining reality [...]"¹¹. The idea of social order sustained by the community and the institutions of the state has given way to an ambiguous reality. "Reflexivity is to replace tradition and customs, social order suddenly begins to depend on the choices of individuals rather than on universal norms"¹². Consequently, attempts to establish a code of universal ethical principles, regulating the behaviour and moral attitudes of individuals, are abandoned once and for all as such a canon is nowhere to be found. Timeless values have lost their meaning because they are not upheld by tradition, authorities or the community, which have also been deprived of their binding force. The moral order has been disrupted.

The collapse of universal values as normative principles, the loss of the conviction of their binding role in action, the irrelevance of

¹⁰ J. Mariański, *Religia w społeczeństwie ponowoczesnym. Studium socjologiczne*, Warszawa 2010, p. 22.

¹¹ K. Suwada, "Jak nazwać współczesność? Problem konceptualizacji płynnej nowoczesności Zygmunta Bauman, drugiej nowoczesności Ulricha Becka i późnej nowoczesności Anthony'ego Giddensa", *Kultura i Edukacja* 2007, no. 3, p. 43.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 44.

'thinking according to values', which no longer constitutes a basis for commitment, has resulted in the disappearance of the very value of the family and of sacrifice in its name, as well as of the sense of commitment that underlies personal decisions. This disbelief in timeless values is linked to the destruction of the traditional social order in which the family held a privileged place. The crisis of family values is accompanied by deinstitutionalisation; the institution of marriage and the family in the current model is being criticised and relaxed, which makes it assume new forms (partnership, cohabitation or same-sex marriages). The institution of marriage no longer belongs to the immutable and sacred social order but rather becomes an object of free choice.

The lack of respect for values and for the institution of the family itself is strengthened not only by postmodern pluralism, but also by individualisation and a sense of freedom seen as a possibility to make choices and decisions on one's own.

We can therefore claim to deal with multiple moralities in a pluralistic reality. Their normative criteria often overlap, diverge or even contradict each other. This plurality of moralities not only prevents an unambiguous evaluation of the moral actions of other subjects but also undermines the certainty of our own moral choices. Postmodern freedom deprives us of permanent and universal principles and thus of the possibility of achieving a universal order based on morality¹³.

A lack of preferred values and the fact that all beliefs and values are equal implies the consent for the coexistence in social space of behaviours that will refer to other systems of evaluation and values than those professed by a given individual. According to Borowiak, morality has been individualised and privatised and is subject to free and unrestricted choices:

The idea of conformity of conduct to an established code of ethics is replaced by understanding ethics as the domain of emotions and feelings,

¹³ M. Korzewski, "Wolność a odpowiedzialność, czyli o prawie i moralności w ponowoczesności", *Kultura i Społeczeństwo* 2002, vol. 46, no. 3, p. 17.

from which moral sensitivity grows. [...] Instead of relying on authorities, postmodernists suggest that we should act in accordance with our own moral intuition, as it allows us to build up attitudes of compassion and empathy, and thus sources of behaviour and moral attitudes¹⁴.

A worldview and concept of the good that are created and chosen by the individual in an autonomous and free manner enhance a liberal approach to understanding the family and contribute to an emergence of its diverse forms.

THE FAMILY IN THE FACE OF INDIVIDUALISATION

Individualism is a distinctive feature of postmodernity. It elevates individuals, emancipates them, gives them autonomy, supports their sense of self, and offers numerous tools and ways of self-realisation. According to Agata Dziuban

Late-modern 'individualised society' [...] is a society of autonomous individuals, making their own decisions about their own lives, biographies, work, interests and values. Here collective determinants and traditional frames of reference are becoming less important¹⁵.

Individualisation, on the one hand, is understood as the freedom to decide for oneself, to develop oneself independently and to fulfil oneself. It is also an emancipation from traditional social ties and social conditions that have so far limited the autonomy of the individual. On the other hand, individualisation contributes to the disintegration of traditional communities and the breakdown of social bonds. Focusing on working on one's own identity leads to the realisation of personal freedom, independence, decision-making, which allow individuals to decide about themselves and their everyday life, to be free to express themselves and to be free from external pressure or coercion that limit self-expression and growth of the individual self.

¹⁴ A. Borowiak, "Ponowoczesna etyka i ponowoczesna tolerancja", op. cit., p. 40.

¹⁵ A. Dziuban, *Gry z tożsamością. Tatuowanie ciała w indywidualizującym się społeczeństwie polskim*, Toruń 2013, p. 20.

For Giddens, individualism as a focus on the self and on the creation of one's own identity, as autonomy and as the multiplicity of possibilities according to which the individual can make numerous choices, has an impact on interpersonal relations and especially on the sphere of intimacy. Intimacy is a relationship that is strictly personal, close and intense, the essence of such forms of human interaction as friendship, romantic and erotic love, as well as marriage and the family. Relationships in which both parties strive for self-fulfilment and self-creation are special in that the partners affirm their identities in them. As Agnieszka Dziuban notes,

a relationship is not only a space of an intimate bond with the other, but also a platform of developing and negotiating one's own identity. This is because the main aim of being in such an intimate relationship is self-realisation seen as being authentic with the other¹⁶.

Intimate relationships are supposed to contribute to an individual's self-creation and are therefore freely chosen. Self-realisation in the form of reflexive projects makes interpersonal bonds open and optional. This aspect makes "individuals are now confronted with an endless series of choices as part of constructing, adjusting, improving or dissolving the unions they form with others"¹⁷; moreover, traditional principles and ideas concerning relationships cease to bind. In line with Giddens's observations, "It is characteristic of modern systems of sexual intimacy and friendship that partners are voluntarily chosen from a diversity of possibilities"¹⁸. The result is the trivialisation of human relationships. Marriage loses its binding character and individuals in intimate relations do not recognise the need for basing them in law.

Individualism and a sense of freedom trigger a belief in the value of pleasure and personal satisfaction, to be realised in interpersonal relationships and in the family. As a result of this thinking, the family becomes not so much a duty, a task to be performed, but a source of satisfaction. Relationships, marriage and the family are subordinated

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 72-73.

¹⁷ A. Giddens, *Sociology*, Cambridge, Malden 2009, p. 373.

¹⁸ A. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity. Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Cambridge 1991, p. 87.

to the egoistic pursuit of 'the enjoyment of life' and to the strategies applied by individuals, with covert narcissism and an instrumental treatment of others. According to Zygmunt Bauman:

If the partner in partnership is 'conceptualized' in such terms, then it is no longer the task of both partners to 'make the relationship work' - to see it work through thick and thin, 'for richer for poorer', in sickness and in health, to help each other through good and bad patches, to trim if need be one's own preferences, to compromise and make sacrifices for the sake of a lasting union¹⁹.

These diagnoses are elaborated on by Scott Lash in *Reflexive Modernization*²⁰. In his view, relationships involve the cult of being free to be oneself, their vital aspect being not so much reflexivity as an exchange of meanings, defined by the author as an 'intense semantic interchange' between partners, an exchange which creates a shared 'semantic horizon'²¹.

THE FAMILY AND THE FRAGILE HUMAN BONDS

According to Zygmunt Bauman, we now know that "all relationships are 'pure' (that is: frail, fissiparous, unlikely to last longer than the convenience they bring, and so always 'until further notice')"²². The model of a lasting and permanent relationship is being replaced by partnerships that can be revoked at will. Especially characteristic of postmodern bonds is the the so-called pure relationship described by Anthony Giddens²³. According to the scholar, this is

a relationship liberated from coercion, external obligation and responsibility, [...] sustained on the initiative and for the pleasure or benefit of the

¹⁹ Z. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge 2000, p. 164.

²⁰ U. Beck, A. Giddens, S. Lash, *Reflexive Modernization. Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*, Stanford 1994, p. 110-173.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 204.

²² Z. Bauman, *Liquid Love. On the Frailty of Human Bonds*, Cambridge 2008, p. 90.

²³ A. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, op. cit., p. 87-88.

parties involved and only as long as they are satisfied with it. A pure relationship, then, is a relationship that is potentially impermanent²⁴.

Unlike the bonds in traditional societies (which rely heavily on external factors), a pure relationship is founded on a free participation of its members²⁵. Today's relationship

becomes more and more a relationship initiated for, and kept going for as long as, it delivers emotional satisfaction to be derived from close contact with another. Other traits – even such seemingly fundamental ones as having children – tend to become sources of ‘inertial drag’ on possible separation, rather than anchoring features of the relationship²⁶.

The value of a pure relationship lies in “what the relationship can bring to the partners involved”²⁷ and participation depends on the level of satisfaction obtained in the relationship. It is satisfaction (satisfying the partner's needs and expectations) is of fundamental value in a given relationship; other factors are clearly secondary. Giddens stresses that ‘pure relationship’ “refers to a situation where a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another [...]”²⁸. A ‘pure relationship’ is in a way a transaction in which both parties invest their own resources and expect the other party to meet their obligations in the profit and loss account. Partners in a relationship are then equal and free entities and the relationship itself is informed by partnership and respect of each party. The purity of the relationship lies in the fact that its shape and specificity depend primarily on the individuals involved rather than on external regulations and orders. According to Giddens, relationships allow individuals to achieve freedom from social conventions (for example, the need for marriage or traditional family forms), and cohabitation now appears as a subject of discussion and agreement²⁹.

²⁴ A. Dziuban, *Gry z tożsamością*, op. cit., p. 72.

²⁵ P. Wrochna, “Intymność w stanie oblężenia”, op. cit., p. 42.

²⁶ A. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, op. cit., p. 89.

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 90.

²⁸ A. Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*, op. cit., p. 58.

²⁹ See ibidem, p. 187–189.

The bond in the modern family is above all a personal (as well as emotional) one and therefore it is less enduring than the bond in the traditional family. It depends not so much on the objective basis of fulfilling structurally imposed duties as on the subjective feeling of satisfying one's own emotional needs. Zygmunt Bauman emphasises that "An unprecedented fluidity, fragility and in-built transience (the famed 'flexibility') mark all sorts of social bonds [...]"³⁰. In postmodernity, intimate bonds are fragile and ephemeral, and their flexibility, fluidity or openness is evident in the forms of interpersonal relationships. The sustainability of relationships depends on how much satisfaction marriage and family offer and on the recognition of whether giving up the relationship will entail the loss of important investments. The institution of marriage is no longer seen as the only way to achieve happiness because of potential alternative relationships, such as cohabitation. The contemporary transformation of intimacy materialises not only in the 'content' of the relationship itself, its various forms, but may also lead to the abandonment of such relationships and the increasingly attractive option of being single, i.e. a conscious choice to live alone.

THE FAMILY APART

The term 'crisis' used in reference to the changes the family has experienced in postmodernity implies a loss of the significance and status attributed to it in modernity. Back in the day, the family held a high position in the hierarchy of values, which involved sacrifice and entailed certain obligations. As an institution, it was an element of an objective moral and social order which was independent of the individual. It was an obligatory stage of life and determined social roles and identities. The crisis of values, social pluralism and the spread of individualism in the postmodern society have altered the status of the family. It is still seen as an important value, yet is no longer considered a universal, supra-individual moral norm but as a determinant of self-realisation and therefore a value which can be chosen at will.

³⁰ Z. Bauman, *Liquid Love*, op. cit., p. 91.

The family thus belongs to the individual's chosen moral preferences, goals, aspirations, and life projects. It is subordinated to the understanding of happiness and life satisfaction. It is a space for self-realisation of individuals focused on an independent construction of identity or their own biography. As a consequence, it ceases to be a value in itself, a good shared by all of its members, and instead is an opportunity for the self-realisation of the partners, but separately. The family is increasingly perceived as a subject of a decision, a negotiation, an agreement, a transaction in which the emotional, spiritual and intellectual interests and common horizons of meanings of both partners are to be secured. It is considered as a transaction that can be terminated after an analysis of the profit and loss account. The family subordinated to the realisation of individual aspirations of each of its members is no longer a stable and sustainable institution. The family is not a value in itself, but a means for obtaining satisfaction from one's own life, shared with others for this very purpose.

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