

THE RECOVERY OF FAMILY LIFE: EXPOSING THE LIMITS OF MODERN IDEOLOGIES

(SCOTT YENOR)

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You know what America needs? More mirrors for princes—the Renaissance genre of advice books directed at statesmen. On the Right, we have many books that identify, and complain about, the problems of modernity and the challenges facing us. Some of those books do offer concrete solutions, but their audience is usually either the educated masses, who cannot themselves translate those solutions into policy, or policymakers who have no actual power, or refuse to use the power they do have. Scott Yenor's bold new book is directed at those who have the will to actually rule. He lays out what has been done to the modern family, why, and what can and should be done about it, by those who have power, now or in the future. Let's hope the target audience is paying attention.

The Recovery of Family Life instructs future princes in two steps. First, Yenor dissects the venomous ideology of feminism, which seeks to abolish all natural distinctions between the sexes, as well as all social structures that organically arise from those distinctions. Second, he tells how the family regime of a healthy modern society should be structured. By absorbing both lessons and applying them in practice, the wise statesman can, Yenor hopes, accomplish the recovery of family life. (Yenor himself does not compare his book to a mirror for princes; he's too modest for that. But that's what it is.)

Yenor, in this 2020 book and in his 2011 book *Family Politics*, focuses on family regimes, meaning the complex of social organization around families. His earlier book was largely historical; this book is largely programmatic. Feminism is the author's main target. Feminism is one, perhaps the most destructive one, of the poisonous fruits of the Enlightenment—the ideology that emancipation, total freedom from any bond not freely chosen by each person, will create a new era of human happiness. In Yenor's view, this new ultimate value of unlimited autonomy arose when Enlightenment thinkers and their successors merged the ideas of contract and conquering nature (I think the origin is somewhat more pernicious, but no matter). He calls the application

of this ideology by feminism the “rolling revolution,” because it has no possible limiting principle; it must always seek fresh aspects of the traditional family regime to destroy.

The underlying frame of this book is that feminism, properly viewed, consists of three sub-ideologies that collectively have corroded our previously-healthy family regime. One is the strict core of feminism, which is the simple yet perverse desire to socially and legally abolish any distinction between men and women. A second is the specific desire to end marriage, the core family institution of the West, as a drag on autonomy and a contributor to the view that men and women are different. The third is the desire to eradicate all supposed sexual repression, with first a focus on homosexuality and, that victory having been won, today more of a focus on new perversions, again all in service of unlimited autonomy. These are all tentacles of the rolling revolution, and for Yenor are properly contrasted, and opposed by, the Old Wisdom—those verities about men, women, and the family known to mankind for millennia.

You will note that this is a spicy set of positions for an academic of today to hold. You will therefore not be surprised to learn that Yenor was the target of cancel culture before being a target was cool. He is a professor of political philosophy at Boise State University, and in 2016, in response to Yenor’s publication of two pieces containing, to normal people, anodyne factual statements about men and women, a mob of leftist students tried to defenestrate him. Yenor was “homophobic, transphobic, and misogynistic.” (We can ignore that the first two of those words are mostly content-free propaganda terms designed to blur discourse, though certainly to the extent they do have meaning, that meaning should be celebrated—I would have given Yenor a medal, if I had been in charge of Boise State.) They didn’t manage to get him fired (he has tenure and refused to bend), but the usual baying mob, led by Yenor’s supposed peers, put enormous pressure on him, which could not have been easy. He still teaches there; whether it is fun for him, I do not know, but it certainly hasn’t stopped him promulgating the truth.

I’ve never been the target of cancel culture myself, and now cannot be cancelled, but, little known facts about Charles, I taught for twelve years at Purdue University, in the Krannert School of Management, teaching Business Law and Entrepreneurship. Politics never came up

in my classes, and I stopped teaching in 2016, before the modern era of the academic Two-Minute Hate. And that job was not my career—it was a side job, non-tenure track, I took (and enjoyed—I think very highly of Purdue) in order to feed my family while starting my business, although Purdue regarded it, and paid it as, a full-time job. But between my own teaching and that my father was also an academic at Purdue (he taught Russian history), as was my grandfather an academic (he taught Classics at NYU), I have some understanding of the academic environment, which makes me even more impressed with Yenor's refusal to knuckle under to the bad people. (I was a popular teacher. And most importantly, on Rate My Professors, a review/ranking website for professors, I got a "chili pepper," an indication of hotness, showing my students appreciated my good looks. Of course, the site removed that marker entirely in 2018, because ugly professors complained they felt unsafe and marginalized. Sigh.)

Yenor begins by examining the intellectual origins of the rolling revolution, found most clearly within twentieth-century feminism. One service Yenor provides is to draw the battle lines clearly. He does this by swimming in the fetid swamps of feminism; I learned a lot I did not know, although none of it was pleasing. He spends a little time discussing so-called first-wave feminism, but much more on second-wave feminists, starting with Simone de Beauvoir, through Betty Friedan, and into Shulamith Firestone, this latter a literally insane harridan who starved herself to death. The common thread among these writers was their baseless claim that women had no inherent meaningful difference from men, and that women could only be happy by the abolition of any perceived difference. This was to lead to self-focused self-actualization resulting in total autonomy, and a woman would know she had achieved this, most often, by making working outside the home the focus of her existence. Friedan was the great popularizer of this destructive message, of course, which I recently attacked at length in my thoughts on her book *The Feminine Mystique*.

Now, engaging with the "thought" of these writers isn't easy, so you have to hand it to Yenor, that he bends over backwards to be fair—his book is not a polemic. He clearly states that he objects to the idea that humanity is plastic, but he tries to view the rolling revolution, as much as possible, as having both costs and benefits, even if the former

outweighs the latter. He says he doesn't want to be a "biological essentialist," though he also correctly points out those only exist in the mind of feminists. Nonetheless, he makes plain that the real vision of all these writers was extremely radical—the destruction of all traditional aspects of the family, from ending monogamous marriage to negatively viewing having children at all to promoting the sexual availability of children. Sometimes they bothered to hide their radicalism; sometimes not; but there was no substantive disagreement among any of them, then or now, as to the goal—total autonomy. Except, there can be no autonomy to choose wrongly, meaning in opposition to the rolling revolution. For example, women should not have the free choice not to work outside the home (something on which Beauvoir and Friedan both wholeheartedly agreed, though the latter wanted to lie about it for public consumption). Feminism is, in fact, the earliest example of what Ryszard Legutko calls "coercion to freedom," where the state is enlisted to ensure that all choices are free except those that tend to limit freedom, as defined by the Left.

There have since been written endless permutations based on these pioneers; Yenor notes that at Boise State, the library has 330 linear feet of such books published since 1980, all or nearly all of which parrot the basic claims of so-called mainstream feminism—in short, that what is male and what is female is a social construct, which if it can be destroyed, will lead to unbridled social flourishing and immense human happiness. No thoughts are ever really new; fresh authors focus either on narrow matters within the whole, or on political ways to make palatable to the masses feminism's goals that are rejected by most people, such as the total destruction of the family. Yet ever the practical application of the ideas of the rolling revolution rolls on; hence the movement in the past fifteen years toward even crazier ideas, such as the existence of fictitious multiple genders, gender fluidity, polyamory, and the like, all based on the same core principles first enunciated more than sixty years ago.

After this detailed examination of core feminist ideas, Yenor suffers more, slogging through the thought about autonomy of various two-bit modern con men, notably Ronald Dworkin and John Rawls. He analyzes the dishonest argumentative methods of all the Left, in general and in specific with regard to family topics—false claims mixed with false dichotomies and false comparisons, what he calls the "liberal

wringer,” the mechanism by which any argument against the rolling revolution is dishonestly deconstructed and all engagement with it avoided. The lesson for princes, I think, is to not participate in such arguments, and to remember what our enemies long ago learned and put into practice—that power is all.

Yenor describes how the modern Left (which he somewhat confusingly calls “liberalism,” but Rawls and his ilk are not liberal in any meaningful sense of the term, rather they are Left) uses the law to achieve its goal of the “pure relationship,” meaning the aim that all relationships must be ones of free continuous choice, that is, without any perceived repression. This leads to various destructive results when it collides with reality, including the reality of parent-child bonds, and more generally is hugely destructive of social cohesion. From this also flow various deleterious consequences resulting from ending supposed sexual repression; this section is replete with analysis of writings from Michel Foucault to Aldous Huxley, and contains much complexity, but in short revolves around what was once a commonplace—true freedom is not release from constraints, but the freedom to choose rightly, to choose virtue and not to be a slave to passions, and rejection of this truth is the basis of many of our modern problems.

After this complete tour, Yenor lays out, in precise detail, what the inherent limits of the three sub-ideologies of the rolling revolution are. This is a particularly compelling section, because it displays Yenor wrestling with the limits of his own principles, in essence exploring whether there is any truth whatsoever to any of the claims of feminism. He says he thinks there are, even describing some views to the contrary as “repugnant,” yet he doesn’t manage to convincingly identify any such truthful claim of feminism. That’s not surprising—I can’t think of any truthful claim of feminism either, and I wouldn’t have spent as much time as Yenor trying to find one. Any slogan or claim of feminists that seems self-evident (“women have value too!”) has nothing to do with feminism, and is used to distract from the actual aims of feminism; it’s classic motte-and-bailey argumentation, made easier by that we have all been falsely propagandized since our earliest youth that women of the past in the West were oppressed, a very dubious claim.

Yenor doesn’t shy away from controversy. He spends much of a chapter on consent as the rolling revolution’s touchstone talking about

the law of rape, mostly through the prism of Stephen Schulhofer, a leftist advocate of so-called “affirmative consent”—that any sexual contact is rape unless accompanied by continuous provable consent. Schulhofer is a tool, an annoying and not-very-intelligent man, which I know personally because he taught me Criminal Law at the University of Chicago in the 1990s. What I most remember about the class, other than the stench of beta that rolled off Schulhofer, was that when he was to teach about the law of rape for two weeks, he instead turned his class over to harpies from the Women’s Law Caucus, a radical feminist group, to lecture us about what rape law should be, rather than what it was, which I was paying Schulhofer to teach me. I have never forgiven him for stealing from me and making me listen to that clown show. Anyway, let’s just say that Yenor doesn’t buy what Schulhofer is selling, which automatically makes Yenor himself radical in today’s environment, something I’m sure Yenor is just fine with.

Finally, Yenor turns to what should be done, which is the most noteworthy part of the book. As he says, “Intellectuals who defend the family rightly spend much time exposing blind spots in the contemporary ideology. All this time spent in the defensive crouch, however, distracts them from thinking through where these limits [i.e., the limits Yenor has just outlined in detail] point in our particular time and place. Seeing the goodness in those limits, it is necessary also to reconstruct a public opinion and a public policy that appreciates those limits.” Thus, Yenor strives to show what a “better family policy” would be.

This is an admirable effort, but I fear it is caught on the horns of a dilemma. The rolling revolution does not permit any stopping or slowing; much less does it permit any retrenchment or reversal. Our enemies don’t care what we think a better family policy would be. And if we were to gain the power to implement a better family policy, by first smashing their power, there is no reason for it to be as modest as that Yenor outlines—rather, it should be radical, an utter unwinding of the nasty web they have woven, and the creation of a new thing. Not a restoration, precisely, but a new thing for our time, informed by the timeless Old Wisdom that Yenor extols. The defect in Yenor’s thought, or at least in his writing, is refusing to acknowledge it is only power that matters for the topics about which he cares most. But presumably the future princes at whom this book is aimed will know this in their bones.

Yenor himself doesn't exactly exude optimism. Nor does he exude pessimism, but he begins by telling us that "we are still only in the infancy" of the rolling revolution. This seems wrong to me; in the modern age, time is compressed, and fifty years is plenty of time for the rolling revolution, a set of ideologies based on the denial of reality, to reach its inevitable senescence, when reality reasserts itself with vigor. This is particularly true since every new front opened by the revolution is more anti-reality, more destructive, and more revolting to normal people, who eventually will have had enough, and the sooner, if given the right leadership.

Yenor advises a wide range of prudent, sound policies based on reality, from encouraging marriage and children, strengthening marriage roles that reflect who men and women are, refusing to privilege homosexuals, and so forth. These policies address two immediate social problems. One is the "new problem with no name" (a riff on Friedan's fantasies)—that the destruction of family life, in particular of stable marriages, harms the lower classes far more than the middle and upper classes. This is a point made by, and Yenor cites, Charles Murray in *Coming Apart*, Sam Quinones in *Dreamland*, and many others. But the destruction of family life harms the middle and upper classes too, just less obviously and, perhaps, more slowly. Not only is the number of permanently single people, mostly women, hugely increasing, and we are seeing the problems that result, not least frustration and anger at having been sold a bill of goods about being able to "have it all," but many other problems result, including unhappiness of married women and the erosion of masculinity. And then there is the looming population crash.

For most purposes, what Yenor advocates would be a restoration of family policy, both in law and society, as it existed in America in the mid-twentieth century. I'm not sure that's going back far enough for ideas. You're not supposed to say it out loud, and Yenor doesn't, but it's not at all clear to me that even first-wave feminism had any virtue at all. To the extent it is substantively discussed today, we are given a caricature, where the views of those opposed to Mary Wollstonecraft or John Stuart Mill are not told to us, rather distorted polemics of those authors about their opponents are presented as accurate depictions, which is unlikely, and even those depictions are never engaged with. But we know that most of what Mill said about politics in general was

self-dealing lies that have proven to be enormously destructive, so the presumption should be that what he said about relations between men and women was equally risible.

Let's take coverture, the legal doctrine in Anglo-Saxon common law that a married woman was under the protection and authority of her husband, with whom she formed a legal unity. (Unmarried women had in essence the same legal rights as men; something not found outside the West.) A woman was "covered" by her husband, in the sense that he became the outward facing member of the family—only he could own marital property (other than dowry property), and only he could be sued or sue on behalf of himself or his wife. This is often presented as unbelievable oppression; it began to disappear in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Coverture under early modern English law was stricter than the similar concepts that applied under medieval law, in large part the result of the systematization of the common law by Blackstone and the concomitant erosion of local custom as law. It is probably true that nineteenth-century coverture placed women in an overly dependent and subordinate position, especially in a modernizing economy. Yet it is also true that coverture worked very well, and there is no evidence that the average woman had any complaint about it—as with most past formal legal structures examined by Left ideologues, the elements of custom and social practice that changed its effects are ignored today, and I suspect in practice coverture was favored by the vast majority of women.

I don't think we can or should go back to coverture. As with colonialism, which hugely benefitted most of the colonized, you can't directly return to such older systems, no matter if they were successful, in the world of modern propaganda and ideologies. The way is shut. Returning to coverture would accurately enough be seen as oppression of women, and would not re-create the benefits it offered when it was an organic result of the customs of the time, a real partnership between men and women. It would attempt to force an artificial partnership between men and women, something that cannot be done. At the same time, we can empirically observe that only those societies where men and women have sharply distinct social roles, and that of men mostly outward-facing and those of women mostly inward-facing, have ever been successful.

There are no exceptions, and one can trace the decline of American society, to the degree it is tied to the family, both the family's stability and its ability to be a pillar of society by transmitting crucial values onward to the next generation, directly to the rise of demands the social system be changed to eliminate this structural difference between the social roles of men and women. Maybe it's a mere coincidence in time, but probably not. And given that, from the perspective of 2021, the feminism of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century looks like the opening salvos in what has now gotten us the sexualization of children by loathsome trannies, the burden should be on those arguing to the contrary.

Penultimately, Yenor addresses such new frontiers being sought by the rolling revolution, with the implication that the rolling revolution might, perhaps, be halted. Here he talks about the desire of the Left to have the state separate children from parents, particularly where and because the parents oppose the revolution, but more generally to break the parent-child bond as a threat to unlimited autonomy. He says, optimistically, "No respectable person has (yet) suggested that parents could be turned in for hate speech behind closed doors." But this has already been proven false; Scotland is on the verge of passing a new blasphemy law, the "Hate Crime and Public Order Law," and Scotland's so-called Justice Minister (with the very Scots name of Humza Yousaf) has explicitly noted, and called for, entirely private conversations in the home that were "hate speech" to be prosecuted once the law is passed. A man like that is beyond secular redemption, yet he is also a mainline representative of the rolling revolution. The reality is that discussion does not, and will never work, with these people, only force. Still trying, Yenor presents a balanced picture to his hoped-for audience of princes, such as discussing when state interference in the family makes sense (as in cases of abuse). However, such situations have been adequately addressed in law for hundreds of years; the rolling revolution is not a new type of such balancing, but the Enemy. Discussions about it will not stop it. No general of the rolling revolution will even notice this book, except in that perhaps some myrmidons may be detached from the main host to punish Yenor, or to record his name for future punishment.

Yenor ends with a pithy set of responses to the tedious propagandistic aphorisms of the rolling revolution, such as "Feminism is the radical

notion that women are human beings." And, laying out a clear vision of a renewed society based on the principals he has earlier discussed, he tells us, "In the long term, the goal is to stigmatize the assumptions of the rolling revolution." No doubt this is true; cauterizing the societal wound where the rolling revolution will have been amputated from our society will be, in part, accomplished by stigmatizing both the ideas and those who clamored for them or led their implementation. How to get to that desirable "long term," though, when their long term is very clear, and very different from the long term Yenor hopes for? He says "Prudent statesmen must mix our dominant regime with doses of reality." Yeah, no. Prudent statesmen, the new princes, must entirely overthrow our dominant regime, or not only will not a single one of Yenor's desired outcomes see the light of day, far worse evils will be imposed on us. Oh, I'm sure Yenor knows this; it's the necessary conclusion of Yenor's own discussion of those eagerly desired future evils. He just can't be as aggressive as me. I'm here to tell you that you should read this book, but amp up the aggression a good eight times—which shouldn't be a problem, especially if you have children of your own, whose innocence and future these people want to steal.

It might be objected that Americans aren't interested in any recovery of family life in the sense Yenor means—they want the rolling revolution halted and reversed in some areas, sure, but are happy with many aspects of the rolling revolution, such as sexual freedom, easy divorce, abortion, and so forth. Of course they are. The populace in a ruined society is, you know, ruined. But they weren't asked whether they wanted the rolling revolution; it was imposed on them by law, and by the culture that is, as always, downstream of power. Nor should they be asked if they want the new, better, system; the news laws will reshape opinion, in any case, and the rupture that will be necessary before our current rulers are stripped of all power will well prepare the ground for the acceptance of major changes that today seem inconceivable, but will, in an atmosphere where the Left has been defeated, discredited, punished, and exiled, seem entirely organic, because they will be entirely organic.