

The Village Knows Better, and Other Forms of Mob Rule

Written by Patricia Sohn

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PATRICIA SOHN, JUN 2 2017

I have been musing over a few issues that have troubled me for some time. (1) Why does “It Takes A Village To Raise A Child” still stand as a preferred philosophy in the U.S. family courts today, given its abject destruction of the authority and rights of Mothers vis-à-vis the off-spring of their own bodies? (2) Why has it taken until a traditional conservative, Republican President to get the U.S. moving in the direction of paid family leave? By some reports, only 9 countries do not have some form of paid family leave, including such examples as Papua New Guinea, Suriname, Tonga – and the United States. And, something that has bothered me since childhood, (3) given that the Romans’ best claims to fame were acts that now count as Crimes Against Humanity, why is it that we put so much faith in their historical accounts?

I know these seem like unrelated, or hardly-related topics. And, yet, there they are, bothering me, as I write up my courses and design new websites for them for the next academic year.

When Hillary Clinton’s *It Takes A Village And Other Lessons Children Teach Us* came out as a book in 1996, it all sounded great. People should support children. People should support Mothers in taking care of their children. And, yet, what it has meant in practice in local courts around the U.S. for twenty years now is a wholesale assault on Mother’s rights in service of the authority of state-appointed bureaucrats — who have the power of the state behind them but who do not, in fact, get their paychecks from the state — taking Mothers’ authority away in service of governing the individual family themselves, up-close-and-personal. Why? Because *the Village knows better*.

This sort of *mob rule* and *tyranny of the community* has been known in many other eras in the West. The Soviet Union. The Catholic courts of early-modern Europe. Both European and Salem, Massachusetts witch hunts. Not the best and most brightly shining moments in Western history. And, yet, here we are again. Puzzling.

For women whose children have been taken away without due process in states around the U.S. using *The Village Knows Better* theory, certainly, the Soviet Union is a very good comparison. Religious women and women of any-color-whatsoever are the most hard-hit by these policies, most of which mandate that the citizen pay the paychecks of the very bureaucrats doing them this social (and political – since it is, ultimately, at the hands of the state) violence.

So, here we are. Mob Rule is the new politically-mandated social sanctioning, mandated by the state, paid for by the victim of the state, and unregulated by the one department within most states that is supposed to take care of Children and Family Services/issues/problems. The state is far more conservative about direct intervention *when its agencies are on the line, constitutionally, and when it is footing the bill*. Welcome to a world in which the state hides its own policies behind state-appointed citizens who are paid by their citizen victims for *state-mandated but functionally unregulated* intervention into the private lives of citizens. 1984 is not so far away; Big Brother (and Sister) starts with Mom. Perestroika is nowhere in sight. And legislators and executive personnel are blissfully free of responsibility!

To the second issue puzzling me this summer. (2) Why has it taken until a traditional conservative to move the U.S.

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toward paid family leave? The BBC reports that the U.S. is the only developed nation that does not provide paid family leave.

It is widely acknowledged among feminists – and now by the Washington Post as well – that childrearing comes at a high price to women in terms of career trajectories and earning potential in a country in which the traditional bargain in marriage usually leaves women uncared for, if not destitute. For most women, work is a necessity. It is not a privilege.

Many feminists who were part of the first generation of the second wave of the women's movement in the U.S. (roughly beginning in the late-1960s) have hailed Hillary Clinton's *It Takes A Village* solution, despite the Soviet-styled political order that it assumes. I say this as a committed Trotskyite (remembering that Trotsky — who knew that Marx was against centralized state authority given *The Eighteenth Brumaire* and other works – was killed for arguing against centralization).

The European solution of paid family leave has come as the state acknowledges that it is in its interests that children grow up well-cared for and thereby more apt to become healthy, contributing citizens. Paying for up to one or two years of family leave – or three years of paid and unpaid job protection — has been seen in Europe and elsewhere as, empirically, a smaller price tag than the other alternative of various patterns of pathology, which are well-predicted by the psychology literature on child development for some decades now. Daycare is not the same as Mom in terms of psychological outcomes for infants and small children. Dad is better than daycare, too. But it must be said that daycare is better than putting your infant in the streets among wolves, so it should also be supported by both market and state. (Some countries that offer paid family leave take these scientific results to the extreme of requiring paid maternity leave – e.g., maternity labor – for some number of weeks, and maternity may be regulated in other ways as well, none of which should be allowed in the U.S.)

And, finally, (3) Rome. With wonderful films such as *Spartacus: War of the Damned* available to show us exactly what Roman rule meant in beautiful techno-color, it puzzles me when I hear scholars put great credence in the accounts of Rome's *paid* "historians;" all the more so when I hear some people suggest that the U.S. should become the New Rome. Huh?? Which parts should we reinstate? The killing of Christians? The forced orgies on women, children, elderly, and slaves alike? The forced gladiator schools in which slaves were required to kill one another for the entertainment of the aristocracy? Why would we put so much stock in the historical documents of such a people, to say nothing of seeking to emulate them? Never was the Roman propaganda machine known for its dedication to empirical accuracy nor its people known for walking the *middle path*, associated with both Buddha and Jesus the Christ.

I want to become neither New Rome, nor *The Village Knows Better*, which is to say, the New Soviet Union.

I recommend the U.S. Constitution as a highly plausible alternative to both New Rome and *The Village Knows Better*. Just a thought.

About the author:

Patricia J. Sohn is associate professor of political science and Jewish studies at the University of Florida. She is a scholar of comparative politics with an expertise in micro-level and historical institutional analysis, particularly as they relate to the politics of the Middle East, comparative judicial politics, and the intersection of law, religion, and gender politics. She is the editor of the e-textbook, *Qualitative Comparative Politics*.