“A Ressourcement Approach to the Family?
Marx, Illich and the Challenge of History.”

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In his 2013 book, All in the Family, historian Robert O. Self chronicles the ways in which “the family” has served as a kind of cipher for a whole range of social, cultural, political and religious issues that have deeply divided Americans since the 1960s. Self tells a rather conventional story that pits hidebound, reactionary conservatives upholding one universal idea of the family against a coalition progressive, liberal, tolerant reformers struggling to open society to accepting a wide range of diverse family types. With allowance for local variations, one could tell a similar story concerning the plight of “the family” in other developed, industrialized nations over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Self clearly favors diversity over uniformity just as clearly as he accepts these options as the only possible alternatives.¹

¹ For a more extensive treatment of the issues Self raises in his book, see Christopher Shannon, “All or Nothing in the Family,” Society for U.S. Intellectual History website (December 22); (http://s-usih.org/2012/12/all-or-nothing-in-family.html); “All or Nothing in the Family, Part II,” Society for U.S. Intellectual History website (January 9);
Unfortunately, those seeking to affirm something like a more traditional or stable notion of the family too often accept the framework as laid out by progressives such as Self. Against the social anarchy of endless familial diversity, defenders of the “traditional” family affirm something called the “natural” family defined as the union of “one man” and “one woman.” Catholic philosophers such Robbie George routinely invoke “the natural law” as rational, universal and most importantly non-theistic basis on which to defend the “natural” family against its enemies in the public sphere.2 In this paper, I would like to offer a friendly dissent from this position and offer an alternative rooted in a modern Catholic tradition sadly neglected by most Catholics who seek to witness to the truth in the contemporary world.

First, my friendly dissent. For all its virtues, the natural law tradition has failed to persuade a skeptical modern world that its non-theistic language requires anything less than the kind of faith submission associated with traditional Christianity—and traditional Catholicism in particular.3 If not natural law, to whom, then, Lord, shall we go? My sense of the limitations of the natural law tradition for engaging the modern world draws on my reading in debates among Catholic theologians in the glory days of natural law discourse during the mid-twentieth century. As neo-Thomistic philosophers prided themselves on promoting a natural-law reasoning that

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2 See, for example, John Finnis and Robert P. George, “Natural Law and the Unity and Truth of Sexual Ethics: A Reply to Gary Gutting,” http://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2015/03/14635/.

could match the universalism of any Enlightenment-based philosophical rival, a small group of Catholic theologians argued that this whole project in effect transformed Thomism into a Enlightenment philosophy, much to the detriment of Thomism and the Church’s ability to offer a distinct message to the modern world. These thinkers, dubbed *la nouvelle théologie* by their critics, sought inspiration in both the pre-scholastic, patristic tradition of the Church and modern secular traditions previously thought irredeemably hostile to the Church. Figures like Henri De Lubac and Jean Daniélou, who identified their movement by the term *ressourcement*, argued that a return to the sources of the early Church—in particular to the patristic tradition, with its literary, historical, symbolic and liturgical sensibility—offered a spiritual antidote to the sterile rationalism that afflicted both Enlightenment thought and its neo-Thomist critics, which in turn enabled it to speak to the modern world in a refreshing and compelling way. Needless to say, given the time that they wrote, *ressourcement* theologians wrote no extensive treatises on the family. In offering a kind of *ressourcement* approach to the family, I proceed from two *ressourcement* strategies: the appeal to non-Catholic, and even anti-Catholic, intellectual traditions, and the appeal to history. An examination of Karl Marx’s treatment of the family in *The Communist Manifesto* and Ivan Illich’s historical-anthropological analysis of the family in his book *Gender* (1982) reveals that defenses of the “traditional” or “natural” family in the modern world have often served to obscure deeper disruptions of even more fundamental relations linking man to God and the natural world.

In turning to Marx, I am in a sense following the lead set by De Lubac himself in his classic work of the early 1940s, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*. That work advanced the bold (for its time) thesis that Catholics actually had something to learn from thinkers commonly identified as the sworn enemies of the Church. One of the classic Cold War American paperback
editions of the English translation of the book featured a picture of a big hairy Marx, surrounded by other atheist luminaries such as Feuerbach, Comte and Nietzsche. Affirming that for “the Church the work of assimilation never ceases, and it is never too soon to undertake it,” De Lubac proposed the following as a general Catholic interpretive attitude toward modern atheist writers:

There are many elements to be found in all [of them] . . . to which a Christian, as such, is not required to define his attitude; there are many others often mutually contradictory which he would have the right to claim as his own, after rescuing them from the synthesis which has warped them. They contain many audacities which do not frighten him. And, even at their most blasphemous, they advance criticisms whose justice he is bound to admit.4

De Lubac’s critical-yet-sympathetic engagement with Marx sought both to refute his highly influential arguments against the existence of God even as it acknowledged the legitimacy of many of Marx’s criticism of the hypocrisy and complacency of many aspects of bourgeois life and thought. Bourgeois hypocrisy and complacency are alive and well in many contemporary defenses of the “natural” family, and Marx’s work offers much Egyptian gold to be mined by the Catholic reader who has eyes to see.

Written in 1848, at perhaps the high water mark of the Victorian era, Marx and Engels’s *Communist Manifesto* takes us back to an age routinely invoked as the rock of ages for family stability. Victorians worshipped nothing if not the family and credited much of the tremendous material achievements of their age to the discipline and dedication instilled by the middle-class family. Socialist and communist plans to abolish the family struck defenders of middle-class capitalism as nothing short of social and economic suicide. Marx’s response to this charge merits quoting at length:

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Abolition of the family! Even the most radical flare up at this infamous proposal of the Communists.

On what foundation is the present family, the bourgeois family, based? On capital, on private gain. In its completely developed form this family exists only among the bourgeoisie. But this state of things finds its complement in the practical absences of the family among proletarians, and in public prostitution. . . .

The bourgeois claptrap about the family and education, about the hallowed correlation of parent and child, becomes all the more disgusting, the more, by the action of modern industry, all family ties among the proletarians are torn asunder, and their children transformed into simple articles of commerce and instruments of labour.⁵

Here, Marx argues that the bourgeois defense of the family flies in the face of the reality that the bourgeoisie itself has created. According to Marx’s analysis, capitalism had already uprooted the mass of humanity from the only family life it had ever known, a family life rooted in (largely landed, agricultural) property. Prior to capitalist economic development, family life consisted in the home economy, the main institution of economic productivity in traditional societies. Family bonds were primarily economic rather than affective; the transfer of property from generation to generation within families and between families through inter-marriage was essential to maintaining the stability and continuity associated with traditional society. With the traditional, agrarian family abolished by capitalism, only the bourgeois family remained as a source of stability—yet only for the elite few, and even for those, not for long. Capitalism’s logic of socialization and collectivization would soon make even the bourgeois family obsolete.⁶

Marx captured this logic in perhaps the most lyrical and darkly prophetic passage of the *Manifesto*:

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form, was, on the

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⁶ For the best treatment of how this logic played itself out in the twentieth century, see Christopher Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World* [get ref]
contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life and his relations with his kind.7

To be clear, Marx thought all of this was not simply necessary and inevitable, but good. He had nothing but contempt for what he elsewhere called “the idiocy of rural life” and was happy to see both the traditional and the bourgeois family disappear. The continuing value of Marx’s work lies in the clarity with which he presents the revolutionary nature of capitalism, a nature obscured by a century and a half of palliative reform, periods of generalized prosperity and the triumph of the sentimental cult of the family as the guarantor of social stability.

As in Marx’s time, some of our most vocal defenders of the “natural” family—that is, American political conservatives—are also among the most vocal promoters of the destabilization of social and cultural norms through the relentless expansion of global capitalism. To be fair, defenders of family diversity share their conservative opponents’ commitment to global capitalism; in fact, the fluidity they promote in family life is actually a perfectly appropriate analog to the general fluidity of social relations in advanced capitalist societies. Conservatives today adopt the old Victorian strategy of envisioning family life as a “haven in a heartless world,” a still, secure point of stability that holds society together against the otherwise centripetal force of capitalism’s creative destruction. In the pre-modern era, the family did not function as an antidote to instability so much as an analog to a broader stability understood as inherent in a properly functioning social order. Reductive definitions of marriage and family

7 Marx and Engels, Ibid., 54.
(“one man, one woman,” etc.) only perpetuate the illusion that family stability is the solution to the broader problem of social instability. Efforts to restore stable definitions of the family will fail—indeed, must fail—short of addressing the deeper disruption in relations between men and women wrought by capitalist modernity.

This brings me to my second ressourcement moment, an engagement with Ivan Illich’s 1982 work *Gender*. At first glance, a turn toward Illich would seem in the spirit of my previous turn toward Marx. Once a darling of the 1960s counterculture, Illich is remembered, if at all, for his radical critique of the mainstream institutions of modernity, most especially the university. When I first came to read his work, I tried to understand him in relation to the critical theory of the Frankfurt School and other Marxist-inspired traditions of continental radicalism. Much like many 1960s-era neo-Marxists, his work betrayed traces of an almost Romantic sympathy for pre-modern society as a human alternative to capitalist modernity; however, in my early reading of his work I detected distinctly Catholic pre-modern sympathies that seemed to set him apart from most of his radical contemporaries. Years later I discovered that these sympathies in large part proceeded from the fact that Illich was in fact a Catholic priest, though one who since the late 1960s had surrendered his faculties (without ever seeking laicization). Indeed, as I read more deeply in Illich, I came to view him as a kind of second-generation ressourcement fellow traveler. An Austrian priest coming of intellectual age during the nineteen fifties, he eschewed the still-dominant school of neo-Thomism to pursue liturgical studies in the spirit of the then still marginal liturgical movement among German-speaking Catholics. A brilliant intellectual, groomed for Vatican service, he abandoned the bureaucratic fast-track and made his first great contribution to the Church by ministering to Puerto Rican immigrants in New York City. Against Cardinal Spellman’s vision of evangelization as assimilation, Illich sought to reach out
to Puerto Ricans by helping them retain their traditional devotional and liturgical practices. The critique of modern institutions that so endeared him to the counterculture was in large part but an episode in his life-long struggle to understand the place of the Church in the modern age. Illich had in fact come to see modernity as not anti-Catholic, but rather a perversion of Catholicism that confirmed the old adage, *corruptio optima quae est pessima* (the corruption of the best is the worst). Later in his life, as he looked for correctives to this corruption, he turned to the work of Hugh of St. Victor, a twelfth-century Churchman regarded as one of the last great patristic thinkers prior to the scholastic revolution.  

Illich withdrew from the public life of the Church largely because of his disagreement with Church authorities over the issue of birth control. Still, he was no advocate of the sexual revolution. Whatever his limitations on the particular issue of birth control, his reflections in *Gender* reveal a profound awareness of the depth and scope to which capitalist modernity has unsettled family life and relations between men and women in general. Illich captured this unsettling through his articulation of a distinction between “gender” and “sex.” In perhaps his clearest statement of this distinction, Illich writes:

> My theory allows me to oppose two modes of existence, which I call the *reign of vernacular gender* and the *regime of economic sex*. The terms themselves indicate that both forms of being are dual and that the two dualities are very different in kind. By social gender I mean the eminently local and timebound duality that sets off men and women under circumstances and conditions that prevent them from saying, doing, desiring, or perceiving ‘the same thing.’ By economic, or social, sex I mean the duality that stretches toward the illusory goal of economic, political, legal, or social equality between women and men. Under this second construction of reality, as I shall show, equality is mostly fanciful. The essay, then, is cast in the form of an epilogue on the

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industrial age and its chimeras. Through writing it, I came to understand in a new way . . . what this age has irremediably destroyed. Only the transmogrification of the commons into resources can be compared to that of gender into sex.9

As the reign of “gender” stresses difference and complementarity, so the regime of “sex” emphasizes sameness and equality to the point that, to use Illich’s earthy imagery, a “characteristic but quite secondary bulge in the blue jeans” is all that distinguishes one kind of human being from another.10 Illich embeds this category distinction in a broader historical narrative of the great transformation from traditional societies (of gender) to a capitalist modernity (of sex). There is no doubt that he generally sees this transition as a bad thing.

As with most of Illich’s writings, Gender has much to infuriate people across the political spectrum. In one characteristic sentence, Illich writes: “To me, the pursuit of a non-sexist ‘economy’ is as absurd as a sexist one is abhorrent.”11 Here, he criticizes both progressives who reduce male-female relations to an equality that would abolish meaningful and ennobling gender distinctions, yet also conservatives who, in the name of defending “traditional” relations, are actually defending the subordination of women within a regime of sex. For Illich, keeping women at home hardly qualifies as shoring up gender against sex, for the home has, according to his analysis, already long been transformed into yet another capitalist workplace: the stay-at-home mom is simply the low person on a totem pole—a single measuring stick of productivity and remuneration—that she shares with her more economically successful go-to-work husband.

Drawing on a wealth of historical and anthropological data, Illich sets a very high bar of authenticity for his ideal of gender. At the same time, it is a very practical and clear bar that avoids the seemingly more realistic, but in fact hopelessly subjective, modern psychological

9 Ivan Illich, Gender (New York: Marion Boyars, 1982), 20-21.
10 Ibid., 13.
11 Ibid., 4.
discourse of male and female identity. For Illich, gender distinctions have manifested themselves historically most clearly with respect to work—or more specifically, with respect to tools:

In all pre-industrial societies, a set of gender-specific tasks is reflected in a set of gender-specific tools. Even tools that are there for *common* use can be touched by only half the people. By grasping and using a tool, one relates primarily to the appropriate gender. As a result, intercourse between genders is primarily social. Separate tool kits determine the material complementarity of life.”\(^{12}\)

Gender distinctions are as various as the number of traditional cultures, but every recorded culture makes some sort of distinction between men and women’s work. Dire consequences can follow from transgression of those gender boundaries. Illich recounts one example of such consequences from an anthropological account of an Amazon jungle culture, in which women identify themselves in relation to baskets in the way that men understand themselves in relation to the hunting bow:

If ever a woman touches the bow of a hunter, he loses his manhood and becomes ‘*pané*’. His arrows become useless, his sexual powers are lost, he is excluded from the hunt, and, if he does not just shrivel and die, he lives out his life behind women’s huts, gathering food in a discarded basket.\(^{13}\)

Any cursory observation of recent trends in everything from male higher education to altar boy recruitment suggests that even our modern regime of economic sex cannot escape the kind of enduring gender truths reflected in the hunter-gatherers of the Amazon.

Illich’s text is full of provocative, fascinating observations, with many casual, throwaway statements that call for book-length development. Perhaps most provocatively, he credits (or blames) Christianity as perhaps the decisive factor in the shift from gender to sex. It was St.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 90.

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 91.
Paul, who, after all, claimed that in Christ there is neither male nor female (Gal. 3:28). Even if we accept this connection in terms of Illich’s sense of modernity as a perversion of Christianity, history nonetheless offers many counter examples of Christian cultures that have successfully synthesized gender complementarity with the notion of a genderless soul. We cannot and should not simply try to return to some lost world of pre-modern gender; however, neither should we respond to contemporary gay and transgender assaults on the family by affirming pseudo-gender distinctions that mask the persistence of an insidious and corrosive regime of sex. Approaching the challenges facing the family with Illich’s concept of gender may seem hopelessly nostalgic, yet the fact remains that more the supposedly more realistic compromise with modern sex (a stay-at-home-mom and a go-to-work-dad) has simply not been able to achieve social stability on a large scale beyond perhaps the charmed, and exceptional, generation of the nineteen fifties. That arrangement was bound to fail for it was based on an industrial economic foundation that existed, and continues to exist, through the constant revolutionizing of the means of production. A vision of family life rooted in something like Illich’s conception of gender would inevitably move us away from the industrial model and toward more sustainable, and loving, relations among ourselves and with nature.