Faulty Ideas about Marriage

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Political junkies will remember how former Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels was being groomed to run for president in 2012 before he made his foolish statement that the next president should "call a truce on the so-called social issues." Americans do not want a leader who is unable or unwilling to articulate and lead on important social issues.

Four years after the Daniels misstep, many have failed to learn that lesson. The New York Times has proclaimed the "libertarian moment" has arrived, by which they seem to mean libertarian ideas about marriage and the family.

We hear people say the libertarian view is to "get the government out of marriage." But where did that slogan come from? There is simply no basis for that notion in the works of classic libertarian writers.

As a Harvard graduate student, I was present for what could be considered the beginning of libertarian thought in America. It was the first American speech by Friedrich Hayek following the worldwide success of "The Road to Serfdom," which had been read by millions of Americans through its publication in the Reader's Digest.

The thesis of Hayek's great book is that government efforts to redistribute the benefits and burdens of economic activity inevitably involve a loss of individual freedoms, which could lead to a totalitarian state as happened in Germany and Russia. Now 70 years later, Hayek's basic idea is part of most Republican stump speeches and forms the basis for Republicans’ adamant opposition to Obamacare.

But nothing in "The Road to Serfdom," or in any of Hayek's later works or those of his fellow Austrian economist Ludwig von Mises, questioned the value or necessity of civil marriage in a free society. There is nothing to suggest that regulation of marriage was somehow inconsistent with individual freedom.

Mises' American disciple, the radical libertarian Murray N. Rothbard, once famously proposed selling off lighthouses to private owners who would then be supported by voluntary contributions from passing ships. Rothbard wanted to privatize nearly everything, but he never suggested privatizing marriage.

Another influential libertarian was the Russian-born novelist Ayn Rand, whose novels depict a titanic struggle between the creative geniuses who need maximum freedom to produce, versus the "looters" and "second-handers" who try to regulate them and share their wealth. Ayn Rand attacked Christianity and other conventional beliefs, but never questioned the value and necessity of civil marriage defined by law.

If nothing in Hayek, Mises, Rothbard or Rand supports the abolition, redefinition, or privatization of marriage, then where did those ideas come from? The answer is that they came from writers on the left -- most significantly, from the Communist Manifesto written by Karl Marx and published in 1848.

To be sure, Marx did not originate the notion of undermining the family, which had been introduced by the utopian socialists Charles Fourier and Robert Owen, but he eagerly endorsed and propagated it. After Marx's death, his partner Friedrich Engels wrote a whole book elaborating on Marx's anti-family ideas.

A major part of the Communist Manifesto is its unrelenting attack on the so-called "bourgeois family" which Marx believed was responsible for the inequality he despised. If communism was to succeed, he wrote, the bourgeois family had to be done away with.

The bourgeois family is the Marxist term for what modern liberals call the "Ozzie and Harriet" or "nuclear" family. It means a husband and wife who are legally married to each other, using the husband's name, with the husband as provider and authority figure, and the wife as nurturing homemaker, and with both parents raising and educating their own children within the household.

Marx hated the bourgeois family, not only because it provided the means of transmission and accumulation of private property, but also because the family controlled the formation and education of children. Marx wanted to break the family so that children could be raised and educated communally, free from patriarchal ties and religious beliefs.

With all that history which should be familiar to every educated American, it’s incredible that we're now seeing the worst of Marxist ideas, the deconstruction of the family, presented in the name of libertarianism and even conservatism.

Besides marriage, Marx’s ideas on education have influenced too many education reformers on the right, including, unfortunately, the Bush family's obsession with remaking public education. George H.W. Bush wanted to be the "education president," George W. Bush wanted to "leave no child behind," and now Jeb Bush wants to impose the Common Core.

As conservatives seek new leadership for 2016 and beyond, let’s insist on candidates who recognize that marriage and the nuclear family are the essential foundation of a free and prosperous society.

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