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Family Life and Individual Welfare in Post-war Europe

Britain and Italy Compared

Stefania Bernini
European University Institute
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# Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Name</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AAI</td>
<td>Amministrazione Aiuti Internazionali (International Aid Administration)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APC</td>
<td>Archivio Partito Comunista (Italian Communist Party Archive)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCO</td>
<td>Conservative Central Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEA</td>
<td>Church of England Archive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPA</td>
<td>Conservative Party Archive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPC</td>
<td>Conservative Political Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRD</td>
<td>Conservative Research Department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CUCO</td>
<td>Conservative and Unionist Central Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DC</td>
<td>Democrazia Cristiano (Christian Democrat Party)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECA</td>
<td>Enti Comunali di Assistenza (Council Bodies of Assistance)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FSU</td>
<td>Family Service Unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INAM</td>
<td>Istituto Nazionale per l'Assistenza di Malattia ai Lavoratori (National Health Insurance Institution)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MH</td>
<td>Ministry of Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MI</td>
<td>Ministero dell’ Interno (Ministry of the Interior)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MWC</td>
<td>Moral Welfare Council (Church of England)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NHS</td>
<td>National Health Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSPCC</td>
<td>National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ONARMO</td>
<td>Opera Nazionale per l’Assistenza Religiosa e Morale degli Operai (National Organisation for the Religious and Moral Assistance of the Workers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ONMI</td>
<td>Opera Nazionale Maternità e Infanzia (National Organisation for Maternity and Child Welfare)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCI</td>
<td>Partito Comunista Italiano (Italian Communist Party)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRO</td>
<td>Public Record Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNRRA</td>
<td>United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WNAC</td>
<td>Women’s National Advisory Committee (Conservative Party)</td>
</tr>
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Introduction

The regulation of family life and its implications at the social level are high on the political agenda of most European countries. Public order, social cohesion, even the ability of contemporary multicultural societies to integrate their citizens in a cohesive body have been variously linked to the ability of the family to perform its role. Most of the references to the role of the family in the political arena may have a tinge of populism, but this does not reduce the ‘appeal’ of the family in political debates. At the same time, a growing diversification of domestic arrangements has rendered increasingly problematic to talk about the family as a recognisable (and even less uniform) entity.

A significant part of current discussions focuses on the ability/inability of contemporary families to provide for their members’ welfare. Much emphasis is put on the family as the primary locus of individual responsibility, particularly in relation to processes of welfare retrenchment and a rolling back of the state. At the same time, there is much discussion concerning the consequences of the family’s alleged ‘crisis’, whose manifestations would include wide divorce rates, lowering fertility rates (especially in Italy), growing rates of births outside marriage. Many current arguments ‘in defence’ of the family seem to imply that each of these symptoms is the result of lowering commitment to the responsibilities of family life.

Most of these discussions originate from a particular understanding of the family, its social role and the relationships between its members and by an enduring fear that changes in individual desires and expectations will result in undesirable social costs. Both recent political discourses and scholarly works have emphasised the transformation undergone by the family as an institution and have suggested various interpretations of their consequences. While some authors have given a relatively
positive interpretation of changes taking place in family life, particularly linking them with growing individual freedom, others (arguably in greater number) have read changes as inevitably leading to problems and decay.2 In Göran Therborn’s words, ‘the “Western family” is widely seen by writers with loud voices and strong opinions to be in “great disorder”’.3 This book originates from a desire to understand how changes in family life have been perceived, conceptualised and discussed in two different political, social and cultural contexts throughout the post-war period.

A recurrent theme in studies of the family is the attempt to pin down ‘moments of change’ both in demographic and cultural terms. A vast consensus exists among historians of the modern and contemporary period that ‘many of the most dramatic family changes … actually occurred after the early 1960s’.4 Most of the original research upon which this book is based concentrates on the period between 1945 and the mid-1960s. However, the analysis of the immediate post-war period is set in a wider chronological context and an attempt is made throughout the book link with the narrative from the past to a number of contemporary developments. My aim in doing so is to trace the origin and consolidation of particular understandings of the family that have informed the regulation of individual behaviour throughout the post-war period.

The 1950s are often described as a period when traditional roles within the family were still largely unchallenged and the domestic realm was still unshaken.5 Nonetheless, 1950s observers commented (and lamented) the transformation of the contemporary family with no less concern, urgency and sense of finality than later commentators. Then as now, discussions about the family went beyond patterns of cohabitation, marriage or reproduction. In discussing the destiny of the family, post-war observers discussed expectations and anxieties wider than the dynamics that were taking place within the household and yet inextricably linked to them.

Comparing the experiences of Italy and Britain demonstrates that the definition of what constitutes a family is both the result of social and cultural transformations and the outcome of specific political processes. It is the interplay of contingent political factors and long-term cultural legacies that determine different understandings of the nature and role of the family and that explain the origin of different approaches to the regulation of family life, the promotion of individual welfare and the legitimate spheres of state intervention.

The regulation of family life is considered within the book as a means of pursuing actual political interests as well as of fostering particular
values or visions of society. In the post-war period as now, the family acted as a catalyst for a range of anxieties and was used as a privileged instrument of political propaganda. Real and perceived changes in the relationships taking place within the home attracted a disproportionate level of interest not because they threatened the existing social order, but because they provided a powerful means of expressing concerns related to changes in individual aspirations and lifestyles and the most effective way of capturing the interest of the public.

Family and social policy: The state of the debate

While references to the state of ‘the family’ in contemporary societies fill political rhetoric and public debates, what the term actually describes is at once ambiguous and taken for granted. I come back to this discussion in Chapter 1, where I also explain how the concept of ‘the family’ is used within this book. Before doing so, however, it is useful to review briefly some of the current discussions dealing with family and social policy in contemporary Europe and to explain the contribution that this book brings to these ongoing debates.

Although a number of works exist that deal with different aspects of the history of the family in modern Europe, rather few of these have concentrated on the specific impact of state intervention and even fewer have done so combining a historical and a comparative perspective. Moreover, the relationship between state and family has been largely neglected in ‘classic’ studies of the welfare state, and even the growing number of works dedicated to the relationship between gender and social policy has often overlooked the family as a concept. Similarly, the influence exercised by the state upon the family through social policy has entered only sporadically into studies dealing with the ‘theory of the family’ and its relationship with the political sphere.

This patchy situation is repeated in the case of studies specifically dedicated to the Italian and British cases. Although important works have centred on the development of family policy in Italy up to and including the fascist period, few authors have looked at the relationship between social policy and the family after 1945, especially from a historical perspective.

Greater attention has received the history of the family in post-war Britain, with particular attention given in recent historical works to cultural transformations and their impact on the construction of the domestic sphere. Moreover, historians of sexuality have drawn an increasingly accurate map of the complex transformations of intimacy
in the modern period. However, most studies of sexuality have made little reference to the family as a concept, perhaps as an understandable reaction against a concept for long time synonymous with normalised (hetero)sexuality.\textsuperscript{12}

To sum up, while a growing literature exists on particular aspects of the history of the family, with increasing attention given to a cultural historical perspective, and a consolidated tradition has explored the political history of social policy, these two levels have rarely met. This lack of dialogue between those who have concentrated on the changes taking place within the family and those who have concentrated on the transformation of the role of the state may contribute to explain the endurance of polarised interpretations of the position of the family in contemporary societies.\textsuperscript{13}

This book is an attempt to consider some of these issues from a different perspective, looking at how the family has been understood and regulated in relation to care in two different historical contexts. The aim is to put forward a comprehensive interpretation of the ways in which normative definitions of the family came to be constructed throughout the post-war period (particularly through political, medical, religious and sociological discourses) and to confront these sets of ideas with the treatment applied to specific situations where the family appeared to be failing in its prescribed role.

**Scope of the book**

My main interest is the construction of the family in post-war public discourse and the interaction between dominant ideas about the nature and position of the family and state intervention in family life. Although differences in welfare policy in Italy and Britain are discussed at various points within the book, the book itself is not about models of welfare intervention or different models of family life.

Rather, the book is about the attempt made in different political contexts to regulate individual behaviour according to specific notions of family life. The main questions I seek to answer are: which were the main actors responsible for the creation of dominant definitions of what is a family in the post-war period? Which were the main interests according to which particular definitions of family life were upheld and challenged over time? How and why such actors and interests diverged in the Italian and British contexts?

On one side, I try to show how changes in individual behaviour and expectations in relation to family life reflected cultural transformations
Introduction 5

and influenced political choices. On the other, I suggest that political interests influenced the way in which family policy was conceived as a means of social intervention. In its essence, I seek to demonstrate that the treatment of the family should not be seen as a one-way route dominated by the state, but rather as a process of constant mediation taking place between contrasting interests at state, social and individual level. The outcome of such process was strongly influenced by specific national conditions.

In order to illustrate the different characteristics assumed by the treatment of the family in Italy and Britain, I seek to combine two levels of analysis. The first level concerns the construction of the family as an ideal in different (and sometimes conflicting) discourses, with particular attention given to the position expressed by political, religious and medical authorities. The second level of analysis looks at a specific case of policy intervention, namely the treatment of ‘children in need’. I use the case of ‘children in need’ to show how social intervention represented not only a means of improving individual circumstances, but also a way of promoting particular types of family relationships, considered better able to cope with adverse circumstances better. The comparison between Britain and Italy highlights the cultural, political and social factors that contributed to shape attitudes towards the family and helps to review some lasting assumptions concerning the supposedly peculiarly ‘familistic’ nature of the Italian political culture.

Approaches to family and social policy differed in post-war Italy and Britain. This was the result of a number of different factors, including institutional circumstances, economic conditions, political dynamics and cultural legacies.14 I will discuss the different weight exercised by these different elements throughout the book. Here, my only aim is to sketch some of the most apparent differences that characterise the approaches to social policy and the family in Britain and Italy at the aftermath of the war.

The post-war British welfare state established a system of benefits and services that seemed to provide the state with the means of integrating and if necessary even substituting the family in some of its core functions in relation to care. The modesty of Italian post-war welfare policies seemed to leave to the Catholic Church an unchallenged authority over the family and to the family an overwhelming responsibility for individual care.

Among the possible explanations that have been suggested in order to account for such differences in approaches an enduring assumption is that the family played a more important role in Italy than in Britain.
This is not without reason. Throughout the post-war period, Italians (although not Italians alone) have shown a greater tendency than their British counterparts to live with or in the proximity of their close relatives and to maintain intense daily exchanges with family members and close friends. As it has been noted, however, the meaning of such enduring closeness in terms of individual investment in family life is in many respects ambiguous. As Paul Ginsborg has pointed out, the transformation undergone by the Italian family in the post-war period is significant from whichever point of view we decide to look at it. In the space of a few decades, Italy went from having one of the highest birth rates in Europe to one of the lowest birth rate in the world. Although the causes of such sharp decline were complex and multifaceted, the apparent lack of enthusiasm of Italian couples towards procreation must inevitably question the desire to invest in the family and perhaps the status of the family as such. The apparent closeness and reciprocal support suggested by the relative proximity in which different generations still tend to live in Italy cannot be read only as a sign of family solidarity. Financial pressures and lack of social policies providing alternative to the family as main provider of individual support need to be taken into account, together with the potential costs that such protracted dependence on the family may have at individual level.

Equally ambiguous appears the relationship between the Italian family and other social institutions, a relationship that has been often portrayed in sharply contrasting terms.

On one hand, the Italian family has often been seen as a powerful institution, able to provide support to individuals in the face of a poor system of public welfare. (The definition of the Italian welfare state as familista has stressed the extent to which welfare policies have relied on the family as a provider of individual care and support.) On the other hand, the apparently exclusivist nature of Italian family life has been read as a factor antagonistic to the flourishing of civic engagement and to the emergence in Italy of a rich civil society. Of particular interest for this book are the analyses (mostly by English and American commentators) that have sought to describe the different role played by the family in the Italian and British political development. In many respects, these arguments represent the starting point of my research. Throughout the book, I try to discuss some of their origins and to reassess whether they can tell us something about the make up of the Italian and British society and more generally about the way in which the family has been seen and regulated throughout the post-war period.
Three main ideas are explored within the book. First, that both in Italy and in Britain the family was conceptualised and treated as mainly responsible for individual and collective welfare and as an instrument of political penetration. Second, that in neither country–state intervention was aimed at reducing the functions of the family; rather it aspired to increase the means of shaping family life in a direction considered suitable to the interest of society as a whole. Third, that both the conceptualisation and the treatment of the family varied between Italy and Britain, as a result of the two countries’ social, cultural and political specificities.

Comparing Britain and Italy

Throughout the post-war period both Britain and Italy had to confront social, demographic and economic developments that modified individual needs and expectations and challenged the ability of existing social services to keep pace with fast-changing demands. Changes in households’ composition, diminishing birth rates, population ageing and women’s growing participation to the labour market transformed the scenario upon which post-war social policies were built and required the establishment of new paradigms for future reforms. So did changes in attitudes towards marriage, divorce and cohabitation.

However, Britain and Italy differed in the pace at which transformations took place and in the way in which social services and the state reacted to them. Focusing on the post-war years reveals differences in scope, sequence and logic in British and Italian approaches to social policy and the family, but also similarities in the way in which family life in post-war society was discussed and regulated.

Differences in family politics were the result of both long-standing cultural factors and specific post-war political and social conditions. It is useful to sketch here some of the factors at work in Britain and Italy since 1945.

In Britain, the Labour landslide in 1945 initiated a period of extensive social intervention and economic transformations. The widespread reforms introduced by the Labour government elected in 1945 were widely presented as a consequence of the experience of the war and followed, at least in part, plans developed by the wartime coalition government. Nationalisation programs and the creation of the welfare state marked an unprecedented role of the state in economic management that could only be partially reverted to by Conservatives after their return to power.
Family Life and Individual Welfare in Post-war Europe

in 1951. The 1950s represented a decade of rising living standards and increasing consumerism, consistently promoted by Conservatives. During the same years the Labour Party suffered three electoral defeats and had to confront a growing Conservative appeal among the working classes and growing internal divisions before returning to government in 1964.

In Italy, the end of the war brought about a rapid but intense phase of political and institutional transition. The fall of the fascist regime in 1943 was followed by 2 years of virulent armed confrontation between nazi–fascist militias and anti-fascist organisations. The years between 1945 and 1948 were characterised by far reaching institutional transformations, culminating in the abolition of the monarchy and the creation of a new republican state. The same years saw rising expectations of social transformations, encouraged by the temporary alliance established between Christian Democrats, Communists and Socialists, following their common participation to the resistance struggle. However, the political and social climate changed appreciably after the electoral victory obtained by the Democrazia Cristiana (Christian Democrat Party) (DC) in the elections of the first republican legislature held in April 1948. This marked the beginning of a long period of continuous Christian Democratic power, but also of uncertain political coalitions, frequent cabinet reshuffles and constant searches for more stable alliances. The political system created after the war aimed to guarantee plurality rather than effective government, by distributing power among a number of reciprocally controlling institutions. In the political polarisation that followed the war, it encouraged coalitions held together by a determination to keep the Communist Party in opposition rather than by common programs. This combined with the predominance gained within the DC by the socially conservative and economically liberal faction in frustrating expectations for extensive social reforms. The development of the Cold War strengthened the political polarisation between Catholics and Communists, and enhanced the importance for political parties for acquiring a strong social presence. The family became a central theme upon which they grounded their respective commitments to the country’s values.

Equally relevant are some of the differences that characterised British and Italian social development. By 1945, Britain was a fully industrialised country, with the majority of its population employed in industry and a marginal agricultural sector. The social and political consequences of the industrial revolution had long been confronted and a consolidated tendency to low social conflict achieved. At the same time, the
social costs of the mass unemployment of the 1920s and 1930s constituted a powerful reminder of the possible consequences of an unregulated economy, and contributed to make measures intended to sustain economic growth acceptable among traditional advocates of economic liberalism, including businessmen and ‘progressive Conservatives’.19

As for Italy, in 1945 agriculture was still the largest economic sector and informed the social structure of most of the country, with the only noticeable exception of the main industrial cities of the North. The fast economic growth that took place from the late 1950s (in contrast with the economic slow down in Britain during the same years) promoted a process of urbanisation completed in Britain by the end of the 19th century and radically changed the country’s social and demographic structure.20 However, it did little to reduce the country’s social inequalities, and particularly the distance that separated living conditions in the north and south of the country.21

Finally, something needs to be said about social policy in the two countries, in order to set the context in which debates concerning the role of the family took place.

Post-war British and Italian social policy differed in nature, style of implementation and scope. The British welfare state represented a comprehensive system of intervention, which aimed at providing universal protection in all situations of need, at least in the case of employed men. Social policy in Italy remained based on a corporatist system characterised by sharp contrasts in the protection available to different professional groups and by extremely modest social services delivered by the state.

Equally different was the implementation of reforms in the two countries. The British welfare system was built upon the detailed blueprint elaborated by William Beveridge in 1942. His Report on Social Insurance and Allied Social Services envisaged a package of reforms that were implemented in a relatively short period of time between 1944 and 1948. In Italy, an equivalent of the ‘Beveridge’s Plan’ never emerged and fragmentary reforms spread over a long period of time without any wide-ranging project behind them.

Finally, policies differed sharply in their purpose in relation to the family. In Britain, reforms were guided by a largely accepted view of social policy as a means of fostering certain kind of social relationships in general and of family life in particular. In Italy, on the other hand, social policy was never conceived in such a coherent way because the very notion of state intervention in social life, and even more so in family life, remained a highly divisive issue.
British Post-War Governments implemented measures of social policy based on a coherent model of family life, which envisaged the male as the main, if not the only, breadwinner. Albeit modified in important respects, the defence of the main (male) wage earner model has remained a recognisable feature of the British welfare state since. Intervention in Italy reflected a much less clearly defined view of social relations. While strongly biased towards the protection of the male head of the family in areas such as employment legislation and pensions, Italian social policy never included measures explicitly supporting ‘his’ family in case of need. Rather, the family was implicitly treated as the main provider of individual support and collective welfare.22

Structure of the book

Chapter 1 describes the origin of the book by going back to some influential interpretations of the role played by the family in British and Italian political development and discusses how the terms ‘state’ and ‘family’ are employed in this book. Chapter 2 and 3 trace the main characters of the ideology of the family prevalent in Italy and Britain during the post-war period through the analysis of dominant political, religious and medico-scientific discourses. Chapter 4 and 5 look at provisions for children in need in the two countries. Chapter 4 looks at approaches towards ‘children in care’ in the two countries and the relationship established between the family and the state under such circumstances. Chapter 5 concentrates on the treatment of illegitimacy and maladjustment as ‘pathologies of the family’ and explores differences in attitudes towards adoption and fostering as means of recreating the family. In both chapters, the attention is on what children’s treatment has to say concerning the family, rather than on the actual experiences of children themselves.
1
Family, State and Democratic Development in Britain and Italy

From fiction to scholarly works, the Italian family has exercised a powerful fascination over foreign observers. Popular representations have emphasised the ideal image of large rural families, characterised by strong ties of support between different generations, despite the fact that such a family hardly represents the situation of the majority of households in today’s Italy. Academic analyses have looked at the interaction between the family and other social institutions. Attention has been drawn alternatively to the Italian family’s authoritarian nature, resilience in adverse political circumstances and slow pace of transformation. Many of these descriptions have established implicit parallels with the position of the family in different social and cultural contexts. This chapter looks at how the role of the family has been analysed in relation to democratic development in Italy (drawing comparisons with approaches towards Britain) before moving on to introduce how the family is treated in the book.

The civic culture approach

Since the 1950s, Italy has represented a popular subject of study among (predominantly Anglo-American) scholars. This was at least in part because of the supposed ‘peculiarities’ of the Italian path to democratic development, which, in the words of the American scholar Joseph La Palombara, forced scholars ‘to revise or expand’ theories of the democratic state.¹

Of particular interest for my argument are analyses of Italian political and civic culture that made explicit reference to the influence exercised by the family on the country’s democratic development.
In a study published in 1973, the American political scientist Robert Putnam compared Britain’s ‘celebrated tradition of consensual evolution’ with the Italian political history, characterised by ‘disunity, instability, and authoritarian adventures’. Among the most relevant of the differences pointed out by Putnam was the fact that the Italian government lacked the ‘justified reputation for effectiveness, stability, and responsiveness’ that characterised the British one. At the same time, Italian politicians showed higher degrees of ideology, partisanship and hostility for the opponents than their English colleagues. The explanation, according to Putnam, laid partly in the greater ideological distance that separated Italian political parties, and partly in the two countries’ different patterns of historical development. Politicians reflected the ‘pervasive social distrust among Italians generally’ and their ‘greater sensitivity’ to social conflict, encouraged by the fact that the Italian ‘socio-economic pie’ was ‘smaller and less well distributed than in Britain’.

Putnam’s interpretation followed the analytical approach set forth in 1963 by Almond and Verba in *The Civic Culture*. In its classical formulation, the civic culture thesis defined democracy as a participatory political system, where (among other things) ordinary men acted as influential citizens. In other words, democracy required a consistent political culture, based upon citizens’ participation in civic affairs, high level of information and widespread sense of civic responsibility. A civic culture was a ‘pluralistic culture based on communication and persuasion’, which integrated ‘consensus and diversity’ and therefore ‘permitted change’ while moderating it.

Stable democratic processes, which allowed change while preventing disintegration and polarisation, were the result of the successful encounter of ‘modernising tendencies’ and ‘traditional powers’. Such processes could be observed at their best in Britain and in the United States. In Italy, on the other side, the contrast between tradition and change had been too strong for a shared culture of political accommodation to emerge, determining the survival of a ‘pre-modern social and political structure’. Almond and Verba found that the relationship between the family and the larger polity had played an important part in this process.

**Setting the paradigm: Families, morality and backwardness in Montegrano**

According to Almond and Verba, the Italian family had played a role antagonistic to ‘the bureaucratic authoritarian organs of the State’ and the ‘civic-political organs of party, interest group and local community’.
Far from preparing individuals to enter civil society, the family had remained their unique sphere of interest and identification, preventing them from trusting and engaging with other areas of social life. Moreover, the family had acted as an instrument of political partisanship, contributing to the reinforcement of existing political and ideological divisions.

This reading of the Italian family as a powerful force antagonistic to political modernisation relied heavily upon the familistic paradigm, set in the mid-1950s by the American anthropologist E. C. Banfield. In *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*, published in the United States in 1956 and in Italy in 1961, Banfield presented the outcome of observations conducted in the town of Chiaromonte (renamed Montegrano in the study), in the Southern province of Potenza. Banfield’s own standpoint was declared from the outset.

The book opened with a quotation from de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*: ‘in democratic countries the science of association is the mother of science; the progress of all the rest depends upon the progress it has made’.

In sharp contrast with de Tocqueville’s precept, Banfield found in Chiaromonte a society dominated by an ‘amoral familistic ethos’, summed up in a single principle:

Maximise the material, short run advantage of the nuclear family; assume that all others will do likewise.

In essence, a society of ‘amoral familists’ was one where ‘no one will further the interest of the group or community except if it has private advantage to do so’. As a consequence, Montegrano lacked entirely the ‘civic improvement associations, organized charities and leading citizens who take initiative in public service’ which could be found in small American towns.

The only two organisations operating in Montegrano were the church and the state, both of which existed because they were ‘provided from the outside’, but neither of which could prosper. The inability to associate relegated Montegrano to the backward majority of the world, far away from the thriving American community life.

The definition of amoral familism introduced by Banfield constituted a modified version of a concept used by contemporary American sociologists to describe middle classes’ ‘investment in the familial system of the society’. In this context, ‘familism’ defined a lifestyle choice involving ‘marriage at young ages, a short childless time-span after marriage’, and a preference for large families and suburban living.