

Love & Economics: Why the Laissez-faire Family Doesn't Work

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The author gamely yokes together economics, libertarian politics, philosophy of love, and self-help for families—all in one book. She cuts across these disparate genres to explore the intersection of political philosophy and home life, arguing that political institutions and ideas matter, but no more so than the daily toil of “wiping runny noses, visiting old people, practicing spelling lessons, packing lunches, and hearing about each other’s days.”

The book is strongest in the early and middle sections, where Morse relies on academic sources to bolster her arguments. She clearly outlines the boundaries of libertarian political theory, and cogently describes the libertarian perspective on the problems inherent in government programs like social security and welfare. In her view, such programs allow citizens to rely on “other people’s money” in ways that ultimately undermine family obligations.

Despite her dedication to libertarianism in the political sphere, she believes that its underlying principles of individualism do not hold up within the context of family life. She points to increases in divorce, single-parent households, daycare, and government programs as disturbing examples of the trend toward “laissez-faire families.” A strong economy, she explains, depends upon loving and intact families: “The love of a parent for a child allows the child to learn trust. This trust allows the child to learn many things that an economy needs for its smooth functioning: delayed gratification, impulse control, cooperative behavior, promise-keeping.”

The discussion is marred at times by superficial attacks on feminist thought (how many feminists have actually argued that love is “nothing but a conspiracy to keep women contented so they can be oppressed”?) and an overly simplified discussion on the ways that religious faith will sustain loving families. To nonbelievers, she points out that since no one can prove that God does not exist, the universe should be given “the benefit of the doubt.” The point feels out of place in the context of her larger discussion.

Morse concludes that loving families create self-restraining individuals who will become the foundation for a free society. The book presents a refreshing perspective because of the author’s willingness to peer directly into private home life and show its unquestionable relevance to the larger society’s overall vigor and health.

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