

VALUING FAMILIES

Riane Eisler

Politicians and the media keep talking about family values. The unfortunate truth, however, is that U.S. policies do not value families. The United States has fewer family supports than any other Western industrialized nation. We're told we can't afford these policies, but the truth is that we can't afford not to have them.

Unlike families in most other industrialized nations, American families bear the full burden of paying for health care, infant and child day care, after-school programs, and ever more costly higher education. Not surprisingly, the United States also has a high divorce rate, the greatest number of children living in poverty of any industrialized nation, the largest number of incarcerated people, and, according to a recent report by the UN Children Fund, ranks second to last in children's overall wellbeing compared to other Western nations. Not only that, according to a 2006 CIA report, the wealthy U.S. was 42nd in infant mortality, a rate that is not only higher than that of every other "developed" nation but above that of much poorer nations such as Andorra and Cuba.

By contrast, Sweden has some of the lowest child poverty rates in the world, very low crime rates, and students that score high on international tests. That's because the Swedish government offers universal health care, high quality child care, child care subsidies, and generous paid parental leave.

We are a much richer nation than Sweden. We can well afford to help parents care for their families. Indeed, we must do so. Not only because it's the right thing to do, but because not investing in children will cost us dearly in purely economic terms. Unlike other Western nations, we will not have the "high quality human capital" economists tell us is essential for the postindustrial economy.

In the U.S. the cry of socialism is raised when people propose single-payer health care, high quality childcare, and other pro-family policies. But Sweden, Norway, Finland and other nations with pro-family policies are not socialist countries. They are nations where government priorities are not for funding prisons, weapons, and wars, but for funding the most essential human work: caring for people, beginning in childhood. Indeed, Nordic writers often refer to their nations not as socialist or even welfare states, but as caring societies.

We too must recognize that children are the real wealth of nations. Let's let our government representatives know this – and see to it that government policies really value and support families.

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