

["Abridged" it says in very fine print on the back cover.](#)

We learn from other readers' comments that it has been distilled from 800 pages down to 200. There are some significant flaws that could and should have been fixed in this heavy-handed editing. Despite all that, the gems of thought in this book are bright enough to shine through some plodding and repetitive prose.

Zimmerman describes a universal progression of family organization from the "trustee family" through the "domestic family" and finally the "atomistic" family" in three separate eras: classical Greece, Rome, and contemporary Western civilization.

In the broadest terms, in a "trustee family" the current generation is seen as only a trustee for an entity that exists for all time. The trustee family fills the roles that will be taken over by the church and state at higher levels of civilization. Specifically, the trustee family administers its own justice, fights its own wars, and keeps family members in line. Trustee families existed until recently in the feuding Kentucky hills, and they are our plague as America fights in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The "domestic family" is the bedrock of traditional civilization, a mother, father, and children who view themselves as integral parts of a civilization: church, state, civil society, and a family structure. The key feature of a domestic family is a commitment to bearing and raising children. The motive may be somewhat economic -- children are certainly useful in an agricultural setting -- but it is equally religious. The parents of a domestic family feel an obligation, usually religious, to bear and her children, and the society reinforces the message that children should obey their parents. The church's call is to "proles, fides, sacramentum" or children, fidelity, and the sacred. Zimmerman goes on at length about the ways in which the Protestant Reformation, the counterreformation, the Enlightenment and then the English, French, and Russian revolutions undermined the domestic family.

The "atomistic family" evolves when civilization reaches a high plateau, in which a wealthy, literate class emerges. These intellectuals are skeptical of received wisdom, especially religion, and dedicate themselves to the pursuit of individual pleasures. The morality which held the domestic family together comes to be held in contempt. The individual reigns supreme, and the traditional constraints on divorce, abortion, adultery, homosexuality, all forms of what is otherwise considered sexual but privately, and of course childlessness fall away. The worthier citizens feel they have better things to do with their time than raise children, and the society has to depend on immigration and the fertility of minorities to replenish itself.

The move from country to city is part and parcel of the transition from the trustee family through the atomistic family. The apparatus of government works best in urban environments. Children are an outright burden -- they cannot help support the family, and they cost money to feed, clothes, and educate. Government in urban areas is able to promise to support people -- free bread in Rome, free health care in modern Western societies -- in exchange for their tax money and a surrender of freedom. In every exchange the government borrows against the future. When there are enough people without children, that is, with no stake in the future, the government promises are less subject to critical analysis.

Zimmerman was well schooled in the classics, and I am grateful to him for several obscure sources. The Latin lawyer Modestius wrote that law's function is to "command, forbid, punish and allow." That sounds like a good synopsis of modern American government's attitude, whether Republican or Democrat. He provides interesting opinions on the writings of Plutarch, Erasmus, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Hume and others, from his unique perspective of family sociology.

He provides some examples of retrogression. Progress got ahead of itself in the French and Russian revolutions, during which divorce at will became the standard, and after which the autocrats -- Napoleon and Stalin -- felt obliged to reinforce marriage so they would have some soldiers. Zimmerman was very pessimistic about the United States of 1947, failing to see the emerging baby-boom which would postpone his dire predictions by a quarter century.

Still, however, after that quarter century the 1960s delivered every horror that he had predicted, and the ensuing decades have not diminished the plight of the family. The United States depends on massive immigration, legal and illegal, from the precise group that Zimmerman predicted -- Hispanics. Europe likewise depends on Muslims. Unlike our previous generations of immigrants, and those which populated Rome for five centuries, these appear unlikely to become

assimilated into the dominant culture. They may indeed repopulate America and Europe, but they will not reproduce its culture.

Zimmermann expressed a wan hope that his Harvard intellectuals would finally figure it out and embrace familism. We can say conclusively that that has not happened. Failing that, he projected that a religious revival would be necessary. We see something of a religious revival in the red state/blue state dichotomy. The one is somewhat Christian, the other scoffs at such primitive credulity. And there is mankind's problem. Thinking minds have difficulty embracing religion, but without religion we die out. A sweet dilemma.

I'll close with a practical note on the book's shortcomings. For all that it is abridged to one fourth its original size, it is quite repetitive. The index is absolutely terrible -- most of the quoted authors and Latin terms do not appear in it. The essays by the conservatives do not add much. All that said, enough brilliance seeps through that I still give this book a very high rating.