

# Beyond Patriarchy: A Libertarian Model of the Family

*Written by Roderick Long, as published at the Center for a Stateless Society.*

The family is one of the issues that divide liberals from conservatives. In general, conservatives tend to see private associations — the family, the church, the corporation — as bulwarks of freedom against the state. Few conservatives question the need for a powerful state apparatus, but they insist that it operate in the service of private associations rather than supplant them. Liberals, by contrast, are more likely to see these private associations themselves — family, church, corporation — as threats to autonomy, and to view state intervention as a guarantor of freedom against the oppressive tendencies of private associations. Few liberals seek to abolish such associations, but they do want to subordinate them to the state — just as conservatives want to subordinate the state to the private associations.

This dispute, like so many between the right and the left, is one that libertarians have to sit out. Libertarians agree with conservatives that the state is the chief threat to freedom, and that private associations must be protected from governmental interference. But libertarians are also sensitive to the potential for oppression in private associations, especially when these associations are the beneficiaries of government favoritism. The conservative approach of putting the state in the service of family, church, and corporation simply hands the reins of power to these institutions, which are no more to be trusted with such power than are governmental bureaucracies.

Conservatives see the family as the fundamental unit of society. But for libertarians the fundamental unit is the individual. Hence libertarians have traditionally been ambivalent about the family (as about its kin, the church and the corporation). The family, as a locus of influence and loyalty separate from the state, is certainly something that opponents of centralized power are eager to defend. But on the other hand, libertarians are keenly aware that the family has not always been a sphere of individual freedom, particularly for women and children. How, then, should libertarians think about the family?

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