

Chapter 3: Never Just a Choice: Three Theoretical Approaches to Economic Constraints on Family Formation

Kate Ward

This article attempts to understand how economic realities influence decisions around forming and raising a family for US people, whether poor or well-off.¹ By forming a family, I mean the decision to have children and decisions around how many children one has, as well as commitment to a partner. Critical realist social theory, reproductive justice, and the Catholic documentary tradition on families all assist in understanding these realities and articulating solutions to the challenges they pose. Part of this essay's work will be to reveal a surprising amount of common ground among the three approaches. Still, none of the three, in my view, thoroughly succeeds at describing pursuit of the human good of family formation by persons who are themselves socially constituted, as are the options from which they choose. The fact that each of these theoretical approaches recommends similar political responses to family formation serves to highlight critical distinctions between the affordances and drawbacks of each approach. In addition, reading these traditions in concert allows us to see and critique a discrepancy between the ways Catholic tradition understands economic

¹ I am grateful to the CTEWC Reproductive Justice and the Common Good Virtual Table and the other contributors to this volume for helping shape my thoughts on reproductive justice and Catholic thought and specifically for their invaluable feedback on this essay. I also thank the Women Shaping Theology discussion group, particularly Jessica Coblentz and Elyse Raby, for supportive and helpful feedback, and Leah Wakefield for research assistance. This research was supported by a fellowship grant from Marquette's Institute for Women's Leadership. I am grateful to the IWL leadership and affiliates for the supportive community they provide in service of the flourishing of women scholars.

constraints on family formation and the way present US church leadership responds to them.

The critical realist tradition describes the complexities of family and reproductive decision-making amid economic constraint better than the Catholic tradition, with its less precise but equally communal understanding of personal agency, or reproductive justice, which defaults to an individualist framework when it speaks in terms of rights. However, the descriptive critical realist tradition cannot offer a normative moral vision, while reproductive justice and Catholic thought find surprising common ground on their own—both describing family formation as a positive good and encouraging society to support a greater range of genuinely attainable options. Each tradition, in turn, critiques the others in the service of the shared goal of articulating family formation as a positive good and calling for society to meaningfully support it. Catholic thought, with those other two traditions, understands family formation decisions, like all other personal actions, as taking place within a social context which shapes the environment of human action. However, the public rhetoric of US church leaders shrinks that communal understanding of the person to individual agency, prescribing personal dispositions like “openness to life” and advocating vociferously for laws that restrict individual choices like abortion and birth control. By so doing, the public witness of the US church fails to be a prophetic witness in the context of the dominant US culture, unfortunately ascribing to that culture’s individualistic understanding of family formation decisions.

Economic Realities

The dominant US culture tends to understand family formation as a matter of individual agency, envisioning parents “choosing” whether and how many children to have. This consumerist framing is evidenced in the rhetoric of “choice” surrounding reproductive decisions and the widespread understanding that at higher income levels, families with more

children function as status symbols for their parents.² As dominant US culture highly prizes individuality and remains uncomfortable with morally normative claims, viewing family formation as a “choice” may be the best it can do in terms of expressing that families are a good in human life (since if it is a choice, at least some people must consider it choice-worthy.) However, this insipid popular rhetoric obscures the fact that concrete economic realities in the US constrain people’s freedom to found their families, to have as many children as they hope to, and to exercise their right to bodily integrity by avoiding pregnancy. While people in poverty face the starkest constraints, even fairly well-off people find their choices around family size and pregnancy restricted by economic realities.

Sadly, poverty is not an aberrant experience for US families. The most recent relevant Census report showed 24.1 percent of single parent families living in poverty. The data for this report came from 2017, a year otherwise notable for record stock market highs and low unemployment. Significantly, 18.4 percent of these single parents raising families below the poverty line were employed full time.³ It is often suggested that the reason families are in poverty is that parents are not working; allegedly, encouraging them to work, or making more job opportunities available, will solve the problem. Over two million single parents, working full time and still raising their

² For a critique of “choice” language from Dorothy Roberts, a legal scholar within the reproductive justice framework, see “Reproductive Justice, Not Just Rights,” *Dissent Magazine*, Fall 2015, www.dissentmagazine.org/article/reproductive-justice-not-just-rights. See also Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, *Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 6–7. Regarding larger families as status symbols for the wealthy, see Ronald Bailey, “Kids as Status Symbols,” *Slate*, June 28, 1997, slate.com/news-and-politics/1997/06/kids-as-status-symbols.html; and Emily Hales, “This Used to Be a Sign of Poverty; Now It’s a Status Symbol,” *Deseret News*, July 9, 2014, www.deseret.com/2014/7/9/20544454/this-used-to-be-a-sign-of-poverty-now-it-s-a-status-symbol.

³ Timothy Grall, “Custodial Mothers and Fathers and Their Child Support: 2017,” US Census Bureau, 2020, 5, www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2020/demo/p60-269.pdf.

children in poverty, testify that it is not so simple.⁴ The US could easily reduce or eliminate poverty for children and their families with redistribution programs, but only occasionally summons the political will to institute programs that effectively do so. An expanded child tax credit intended to support families through the economic shock of the Covid-19 pandemic drove child poverty to a record low in 2021, but the program was ended after just one year.⁵

While not all families are founded by married partners, it is worth noting that a growing “marriage gap” in the US describes the reality that those with college degrees are significantly more likely to marry and less likely to divorce than those with less education.⁶ It has been alleged that poor people marry less because they value marriage less; perhaps they have a different culture than those who are better off. Sociologists disagree. In fact, poor women value marriage a great deal. Unfortunately, they struggle to find partners who meet their completely reasonable standards. Sociologists Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas found that the widely known lower rates of marriage among women in poverty are not evidence that poor women do not value marriage. Rather, they do, but in general the partnerships they find available to them do not live up to their standards

⁴ Grall’s report identifies 12.9 million single parent families. By my calculations, that means at least 2,373,600 families are living in poverty while working full-time.

⁵ Kalee Burns, Liana Fox, and Danielle Wilson, “Expansions to Child Tax Credit Contributed to 46% Decline in Child Poverty Since 2020,” Census.gov, September 13, 2022, www.census.gov/library/stories/2022/09/record-drop-in-child-poverty.html; Ben Casselman, “Child Tax Credit’s Extra Help Ends, Just as Covid Surges Anew,” *New York Times*, January 2, 2022, www.nytimes.com/2022/01/02/business/economy/child-tax-credit.html; Jason DeParle, “The Expanded Child Tax Credit Is Gone. The Battle Over It Remains,” *The New York Times*, November 25, 2022, www.nytimes.com/2022/11/25/us/politics/child-tax-credit.html.

⁶ Victor Tan Chen, “America, Home of the Transactional Marriage,” *The Atlantic*, August 20, 2017, www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/08/marriage-rates-education/536913/; The related phenomenon of “assortative mating,” marrying those with similar education and income, contributes significantly to economic inequality. Jeremy Greenwood et al., “Marry Your Like: Assortative Mating and Income Inequality,” National Bureau of Economic Research, January 2014, www.nber.org/papers/w19829.

for marriage: trust, freedom from abuse, responsibility, and maturity and financial stability on the part of both partners.⁷

While shaky economic prospects hinder marriage, they can incentivize the pursuit of successive short-term partnerships out of financial necessity. Economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton observe that “repeated re-partnering in the US is often driven by the need for an additional income, something that is less true in Europe with its more extensive safety net.”⁸ Contrary to claims that marriage can be a magic solution for poverty, one in four US families consisting of married parents with children qualifies as low income, living on less than thirty-eight thousand dollars per year for a family of four.⁹

Economic constraints profoundly affect when, if ever, US people will feel ready to become parents and how many children they will end up having.¹⁰ Many US people experience the postpartum period as a time of increased economic desperation, due to the fact that only 13 percent of workers have access to paid leave, and many fear career consequences if they actually use it.¹¹ The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) guarantees unpaid leave, which does precious little good when families depend on that parent’s paycheck. This helps explain why nearly a quarter of new mothers in the US return to work within a shocking *two weeks* after

⁷ Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas, *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood before Marriage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 130–131, 216–217.

⁸ Anne Case and Angus Deaton, “Mortality and Morbidity in the 21st Century,” *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity* (Spring 2017): 397–476, 414.

⁹ Shawn Fremstad, “Partnered but Poor,” Center for American Progress, March 11, 2016, www.americanprogress.org/issues/poverty/reports/2016/03/11/131968/partnered-but-poor/; Rebecca J. Rosen, “Marriage Will Not Fix Poverty,” *The Atlantic*, March 11, 2016, www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/03/marriage-poverty/473019/.

¹⁰ Pope Francis notes that young people considering starting families face competing pressures: economic limitations in some cases, too many tempting choices in others. Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, nos. 40–42.

¹¹ Jay L. Zagorsky, “Divergent Trends in US Maternity and Paternity Leave, 1994–2015,” *American Journal of Public Health* 107, no. 3 (2017): 460, doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2016.303607; Sharon Lerner, “The Real War on Families: Why the US Needs Paid Leave Now,” *In These Times*, August 18, 2015, inthesetimes.com/article/18151/the-real-war-on-families (13%: BLS figure).

giving birth.¹² In many states, single mothers of infants receiving state cash assistance encounter equally draconian work expectations during their postpartum period.¹³ That any mother of a newborn should be compelled by family financial realities or state assistance requirements to reenter the workplace this soon after giving birth ought to be a national scandal. At two weeks postpartum, many new mothers are still healing from the physical labor of birth themselves and all are adjusting to the physical, mental, and spiritual demands of caring for a newborn. Most daycares will not accept infants before six weeks of age, potentially leaving mothers with no safe option for childcare, and protective vaccines are not given until two months of age or later. When financial circumstances compel postpartum mothers to return to work so early, they endanger the health and safety of mother and baby alike.

When welcoming children can devastate a family's finances and health, why do poor women continue to found their families, even, most frequently, outside marriage?¹⁴ Sociologists explain that poor women are well aware their economic prospects are constrained. They know implicitly what economists confirm: economic inequality in the US is "sticky" at the top and the bottom, meaning someone who is born poor will likely stay that way.¹⁵ When professional careers seem out of reach, "children offer a tangible source of meaning," leading to early parenthood

¹² Lerner, "The Real War on Families." A moving story of a new mother returning to work as an Uber driver is detailed in Danielle Paquette, "She Was Pregnant and Broke. She Signed up for Uber—and Fell into Debt," *Washington Post*, April 8, 2017, www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/she-had-a-newborn-and-no-money-signing-up-for-uber-drove-her-into-debt/2017/04/07/b5ee9510-05d1-11e7-b9fa-ed727b644a0b_story.html.

¹³ We expect the same of single moms, mothers of infants, receiving welfare: Heather Hahn, David Kassabian, and Sheila Zedlewski, "TANF Work Requirements and State Strategies to Fulfill Them," Urban Institute, March 2012, 2, www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/work_requirements_0.pdf.

¹⁴ Chen, "America, Home of the Transactional Marriage."

¹⁵ Kate Ward and Kenneth R. Himes, "'Growing Apart': The Rise of Inequality," *Theological Studies* 75, no. 1 (2014): 124, doi.org/10.1177/0040563913519045.

for many poor women.¹⁶ If a “culture of life” means one where babies are welcomed without counting the cost, as it often seems to in Catholic discourse, then a culture of life does exist in the United States. It exists among poor women who welcome children despite their own poor economic prospects and even with little social support, and who are less likely to practice birth control than their wealthier sisters.

While there is clearly a genuine openness to life among poor US women, it is also the case that poverty affects access to birth control, natural family planning, and abortion. In the US, without guaranteed health care, birth control may be paid for out of pocket or require copays for doctors’ visits even if covered by insurance. Abortion may be covered by insurance in some cases, but never for recipients of Medicaid or others whose health care is paid for by the federal government, for example through the military or Indian Health Services.¹⁷ In the case of abortion, depending on the circumstances, clinic fees, the cost of caring for other children or dependents, and lost wages and travel fees may be part of the economic picture. As legal restrictions post-*Dobbs* shrink the geographic areas where abortion can be obtained, many will face higher costs in order to access it.

Methods of family planning permitted by the Catholic Church also pose economic barriers to access. Catholic teaching permits heterosexual couples to avoid pregnancy through the use of fertility awareness or natural family planning (NFP) methods.¹⁸ Catholic author Simcha Fisher, perhaps the leading commentator on the social and spiritual realities of these methods, notes that the costs for training and practicing many types of fertility awareness place it out of reach for many couples: “Fairly or not, NFP in the United States is often perceived as a privileged spiritual lifestyle.” More reliable NFP methods require significant upfront and

¹⁶ Edin and Kefalas, *Promises I Can Keep*, 49.

¹⁷ Loretta J. Ross and Rickie Solinger, *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 80.

¹⁸ See John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, no. 97.

ongoing costs for medical devices or training and are often not covered by health insurance, leading to the sad irony that “couples who can least afford the most highly effective forms of N.F.P. can also least afford an unplanned pregnancy.”¹⁹

While abortion costs money, as mentioned above, many people who pursue abortion see it as a family formation choice driven by economic necessity. A significant majority (75%) of US people who seek abortions are poor or low-income, and most of those already have at least one child.²⁰ Sociologist Gretchen Sisson found that people pursuing abortion almost unilaterally preferred to parent their child and believed they would have been able to do so given a relatively small amount of money, less than \$5,000.²¹ Along similar lines, a Pennsylvania nonprofit offers abortion-seeking women \$3,000 to carry their child to term. The fact that they claim to have prevented over 100 abortions this way starkly demonstrates that family formation decisions are never as simple as individual choice, since that relatively small economic incentive can apparently empower or compel women who had intended to abort to instead bear the child.²² When women seeking abortion believe bearing another child will financially harm their current family, their views appear to be justified by a study that compared women who were turned away from a wanted abortion with those who were able to have the abortion they sought. “Women denied an abortion were more likely than were women who received an abortion to experience economic hardship and insecurity lasting years,” including the sobering finding that women who sought an

¹⁹ Simcha Fisher, “Natural Family Planning Can Be Hard and Expensive to Use. Can New Tech Help?,” *America Magazine*, January 24, 2020, www.americamagazine.org/faith/2020/01/24/natural-family-planning-can-be-hard-and-expensive-use-can-new-tech-help.

²⁰ Guttmacher Institute, “Induced Abortion in the United States,” May 3, 2016, www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/induced-abortion-united-states.

²¹ Irin Carmon, “Amy Coney Barrett’s Adoption Myths,” *Intelligencer*, December 3, 2021, nymag.com/intelligencer/2021/12/amy-coney-barrett-adoption-myths.html.

²² Jana Kasperkevic, “The Price of Being Pro-Life: Meet the Woman Who Pays \$3,000 to Prevent Abortions,” *The Guardian*, November 30, 2015, www.theguardian.com/money/2015/nov/30/pro-life-activist-pays-to-stop-abortions-laura-merriott-financial-support.

abortion and were unable to attain one were more likely, over the following years, to become the only adult in the household—that is, to lose the support of other family members or partners.²³

The cost of avoiding childbirth ranges between perhaps hundreds of dollars yearly for some NFP or birth control methods to several thousand for an abortion requiring out of state travel. However, with the US's limited social safety net for children, and many mothers forced to look for work rather than caring for children in order to receive any benefits in the first place, the cost of avoiding pregnancy obviously shrinks in comparison to the costs of raising a child to young adulthood. Poor US women do not involve abortion in their family formation decisions because they do not value life or do not wish to parent their children. They are making heartbreaking economic calculations.

We might think that limiting family size to fewer children than one prefers is a choice primarily made by poor parents, those whose economic calculations might turn on figures as small as \$3,000. However, the reality of limiting family size due to economic concerns reaches across the income spectrum in the US. Across income levels, many US Americans have fewer children than they prefer.²⁴ Demographers consistently find that US “ideal” fertility outstrips actual or completed fertility, meaning that falling

²³ This study, the Turnaway study, was conducted pre-Dobbs. Women were turned away due to restrictions on gestational age for obtaining abortion in their location. Diana Greene Foster, “Socioeconomic Outcomes of Women Who Receive and Women Who Are Denied Wanted Abortions in the United States,” *American Journal of Public Health* 108, no. 3 (2018): 407–413, doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2017.304247. See also Diana Greene Foster, *The Turnaway Study* (New York: Scribner, 2020), 21–22.

²⁴ Lyman Stone, “American Women Are Having Fewer Children Than They’d Like,” *The New York Times*, February 13, 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/02/13/upshot/american-fertility-is-falling-short-of-what-women-want.html: “As a result, the gap between the number of children that women say they want to have (2.7) and the number of children they will probably actually have (1.8) has risen to the highest level in 40 years.” Men tend to desire the same as women, per the article.

birthrates indicate unachieved dreams on the part of aspiring parents.²⁵ In a *New York Times* survey, scarcity of money and time, including little or no access to paid family leave, were the primary reasons respondents mentioned for having fewer children than they wanted or having no children at all.²⁶ Strikingly, the fact that birth rates for poor women remain higher than those for women better off suggests that scarcity of money and time is a contributing factor to having fewer children than one wants, even for women who are well off.²⁷ There are good reasons for this paradoxical situation.

First, in a country where health insurance and paid parental leave are contingent on employers, even relatively well-off couples hoping to welcome a child may have to time pregnancy and birth around an opportunity to change jobs or incur significant reductions in family income in order to bear and take time off with a newborn. A 2022 study found that the average out of pocket cost, with insurance, for giving birth in a hospital was nearly \$3000. Of course, uninsured patients risk incurring far greater charges, and all birthing people undergo significant bodily transformations that can incur future need for medical treatment.²⁸ With data suggesting that higher health care costs contribute to declining birth rates, and 10 percent of *insured* US adults reporting difficulty paying

²⁵ Lyman Stone, “How Many Kids Do Women Want?,” *Institute for Family Studies*, June 1, 2018, ifstudies.org/blog/how-many-kids-do-women-want; Karen Benjamin Guzzo and Sarah Hayford, “US Birth Rates Are at Record Lows—Even Though the Number of Kids Most Americans Say They Want Has Held Steady,” *The Conversation*, January 12, 2023, theconversation.com/us-birth-rates-are-at-record-lows-even-though-the-number-of-kids-most-americans-say-they-want-has-held-steady-197270; Stone, “American Women Are Having Fewer Children Than They’d Like.”

²⁶ Claire Cain Miller, “Americans Are Having Fewer Babies. They Told Us Why,” *The New York Times*, July 5, 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/07/05/upshot/americans-are-having-fewer-babies-they-told-us-why.html.

²⁷ Erin Duffin, “Birth Rate by Poverty Status in the US 2021,” *Statista*, December 12, 2022, www.statista.com/statistics/562541/birth-rate-by-poverty-status-in-the-us/.

²⁸ “Health Costs Associated with Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Postpartum Care,” *Peterson-KFF Health System Tracker*, www.healthsystemtracker.org/brief/health-costs-associated-with-pregnancy-childbirth-and-postpartum-care/.

medical bills, it is reasonable to assume that health care costs contribute to economic anxiety even for families in the relatively fortunate position of having employer-provided health insurance.²⁹ Even for well-resourced, educated and well-off parents to be, threading the needle of professional and educational commitments, the limitations and time frames of employer health care coverage, and stark calculations of the impact of time off on the family budget, can make a joyous event feel like a ticking time bomb.

For heterosexual couples experiencing infertility, and for many same-sex couples, welcoming children can incur significant costs, with fees for private adoption or certain fertility methods running into the tens of thousands of dollars. Same-sex couples in particular encounter significant financial constraints on welcoming children for reasons at the intersection of biology and bias. They may choose costlier fertility methods due to legal bias against same-sex adoptive parents in many US states and the obvious reason that while conceiving via intercourse may be an option for some, it requires sex with someone outside the couple. However, insurance may not pay for fertility methods for same-sex couples in cases where it does for heterosexual couples. A nonprofit study of family formation methods being considered by LGBTQ+ couples found stark disparity in the methods considered by couples who desired to welcome children, with only couples in the top income bracket feeling able to consider private adoption.³⁰

In contrast with their poorer compatriots, wealthier parents often delay children for many years as they complete their education and establish careers. This engenders different anxieties, including pressure to marry and

²⁹ Arleen Leibowitz, "The Response of Births to Changes in Health Care Costs," *The Journal of Human Resources* 25, no. 4 (1990): 697–711, doi.org/10.2307/145672; "Problems Paying Medical Bills," *Peterson-KFF Health System Tracker*, www.healthsystemtracker.org/indicator/access-affordability/problems-paying-medical-bills/.

³⁰ Family Equality, "Building LGBTQ+ Families: The Price of Parenthood," www.familyequality.org/resources/building-lgbtq-families-price-parenthood/.

concerns with later-in-life fertility.³¹ A couple can be fortunate enough to be well-educated and married and still find that starting a family demands excruciating attention to timing. The demanding schedules required to build careers in medicine, politics, business or law accommodate poorly if at all to the physical and mental needs of bearing and caring for young children, so women with the privilege of considering a professional career confront a different set of dilemmas. Some leave their professional track to care for family, perhaps never to return, whereupon what John Paul II called the “indispensable contribution” of women’s professional work is forever diminished in US society.³²

When both parents do stay in the labor market, they need childcare, another source of economic pressure that may result in couples having fewer children than they intend. In 30 US states, according to the advocacy organization Zero to Three, center-based child care costs more than public college tuition.³³ Nearly two-thirds of US people have limited their family size below what they see as ideal due, among other factors, to the high cost of child care.³⁴ While that study did not break out reasons for limiting family size by income level, it is reasonable to assume that many families gain higher incomes, in part, by sending two parents to work, making child care costs a very real concern for higher income families. Furthermore, US families at the upper end of the income spectrum engage in more intensive parenting practices compared to poorer families now and to wealthier families in previous generations, another likely contributing factor to choosing family size below what the parents regard as ideal.³⁵

³¹ Jean M. Twenge, “How Long Can You Wait to Have a Baby?,” *The Atlantic*, August 2013, www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2013/07/how-long-can-you-wait-to-have-a-baby/309374/.

³² John Paul II, “Letter to Women,” June 29, 1995, www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_29061995_women.html.

³³ Madeline Daniels Benderev, “Infant-Toddler Child Care Fact Sheet,” *ZERO TO THREE*, www.zerotothree.org/resource/infant-toddler-child-care-fact-sheet/.

³⁴ Miller, “Americans Are Having Fewer Babies. They Told Us Why.”

³⁵ Robert D. Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015).

While both poor and middle-class parents are affected by US economic constraints on family formation and rearing, the burden absolutely does not fall equally. College-educated parents are often praised for their “wise decision” to delay parenthood, and they reap financial and professional rewards as well. While it is undoubtedly stressful to balance two professional careers with the demands of young children at home, parents in poverty face tougher challenges and starker choices. Struggling to raise children on limited resources, they can expect not praise, but often derision, for accepting the life-changing commitment to raise a child.³⁶ To our shame as a society, stigmas of poor parents carelessly reproducing persist.³⁷ In 16 states, this stigma is written into law in the practice of welfare “family caps,” where additional children in a family beyond a certain number have no right to receive state benefits.³⁸ Reproductive justice theorist and legal scholar Dorothy Roberts writes that such laws “enforce the view that childbearing by poor women is pathological and should be deterred through social policy,” pointing to statements by lawmakers that articulate this view openly.³⁹ Our culture proclaims, through economic structure and regrettably, through explicit public discourse, that children are only gifts and blessings if their parents are well-off.⁴⁰

³⁶ E.g., Kevin Williamson at *National Review* describing working-class white Americans “whelping of human children with all the respect and wisdom of a stray dog” in “The Father-Führer,” *National Review*, March 28, 2016, www.nationalreview.com/nrd/articles/432569/father-f-hrer.

³⁷ Kenneth J. Neubeck and Noel A. Cazenave, *Welfare Racism: Playing the Race Card against America's Poor* (New York: Routledge, 2001), chap. 5.

³⁸ Jamelle Bouie, “The Most Discriminatory Law in the Land,” *Slate*, June 17, 2014, www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2014/06/the_maximum_family_grant_and_family_caps_a_racist_law_that_punishes_the.html.

³⁹ Dorothy Roberts, “Welfare’s Ban on Poor Motherhood,” in *Whose Welfare?*, ed. Gwendolyn Mink (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 152–170, 153.

⁴⁰ Ross and Solinger, *Reproductive Justice*, 171–172.

Critical Realist Social Theory and Economic Constraints on Family Formation

Critical realist social theory offers a way to understand the relationship of economic realities to family formation that evades the twin errors of erasing personal agency or closing our eyes to societal impacts on individual choice. To begin with, there are many wrong ways to understand the relationship of social factors to moral agency. We sign individual agency over to social factors with linguistic framings such as “Economic concerns *drive* couples to choose smaller families.” While it’s a common enough way to express a correlative relationship, it is too deterministic. Human persons are not cars or livestock to be *driven* without any agency of their own. A more accurate framing which retains personal agency might be, “Weighing economic factors, couples choose smaller family sizes.” Unfortunately, Church leaders fall into the same trap—not merely a linguistic error—when they urge families to have more children, or to remain “open to life,” without taking economic and social factors into account.⁴¹ This presumes a world in which individual choice and agency is all that matters, denying the reality that when humans with free will weigh their options, they may be adding up very different lists of factors which will contribute to their decision.

Critical realist social theory offers a way past these naïve and inaccurate framings. Formulated by sociologist Margaret Archer, critical realist social theory aims to describe the influence of social factors on human choice

⁴¹ Such blithe dismissal is seen in the USCCB’s letter *Love and Life in the Divine Plan*, where “serious economic and social burdens” on couples are contrasted with implicitly graver “fundamental challenges to the nature and purposes of marriage,” including contraception and cohabitation (17). Pope Francis received criticism for comments that seemed to ascribe the choice to have fewer children in wealthy Western societies to selfishness, although philosopher Sam Rocha pointed out that in context he seemed to be commenting on the comparatively luxurious treatment of pets in a world of human poverty. “What Did Pope Francis Actually Say about Having Pets or Kids?,” *America Magazine*, January 7, 2022, www.americamagazine.org/faith/2022/01/07/pope-francis-pets-kids-242164.

while retaining individual agency and acknowledging the real ways social factors influence decisions. As described by theologian Daniel K. Finn, critical realist social theory sees *social structures* as systems of relations among social positions which emerge from human individual and collective activity.⁴² Social structures do not control individual choice or behavior, but they do influence individual choice and behavior through the opportunities, incentives and restrictions generated within the system of relations among social positions that makes up every social structure. Decisions made within a given social structure will usually tend to reproduce the structure as it is, but social structures can be changed through human action, whether the action is expressly intended to change the structure or not intended to at all.⁴³ Finn concludes that “people are, of course, the cause of their own decisions, but this claim is incomplete without acknowledging that the decisions may have been made differently had no restriction or opportunity been present.”⁴⁴

Therefore, we can clearly articulate how people respond to economic factors in their family formation decisions. The US political economy is a social structure that offers few opportunities and incentives to have children. Financial support for children is rarely available. Most US people obtain the majority of their children’s necessities through the market, including formula, diapers and paid child care. These necessities are expensive for working families and subject to shortages that may place them out of reach.⁴⁵ In contrast, the United States offers few incentives for family formation, such as the generous paid leave and financial support for

⁴² Daniel K. Finn, *Consumer Ethics in a Global Economy: How Buying Here Causes Injustice There* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019), 68.

⁴³ Finn, *Consumer Ethics in a Global Economy*, 71–74.

⁴⁴ Finn, *Consumer Ethics in a Global Economy*, 69–70.

⁴⁵ PBS NewsHour, “Simultaneous Shortages of Formula, Tampons and Child Care Hit Parents Hard,” June 16, 2022, www.pbs.org/newshour/economy/simultaneous-shortages-of-formula-tampons-and-child-care-hit-parents-hard.

parenting available in most other developed nations.⁴⁶ As we will see, both reproductive justice theory and Catholic thought advocate for economic support to families to enable parents to realize their family formation goals. Critical realist social theory helps us see why such supports are, indeed, likely to work as incentives. Some would argue that there are few restrictions on having children in the US social structure. To be sure, there are not blatant penalties such as China's one-child law, and forcible government sterilization is a thing of the (tragically recent) past.⁴⁷ However, restrictions generated within US social structures include the "baby penalty," which affects working mothers' wages and employability, and the aforementioned welfare "family caps."⁴⁸

Using critical realist social theory to assess US family formation helps us understand the paradoxical finding that poorer US parents are often more willing to welcome children: the incentives and opportunities educated, well-off adults enjoy when they delay parenthood are much less available to poor US people. Certainly, people remain free to choose and many continue to form families and welcome life even in the face of strong economic headwinds. But using critical realist social theory to envision restrictions, opportunities and incentives makes it clear that the US political economy, as a social structure, strongly disincentivizes forming families and welcoming as many children as one may want. In this light, findings of falling US fertility should come as no surprise. Moreover, consumerist framings of family formation as a personal choice obscure the real restrictions on this meaningful life pursuit that critical realist social theory helps reveal.

⁴⁶ Kalee Burns, Liana Fox, and Danielle Wilson, "Expansions to Child Tax Credit Contributed to 46% Decline in Child Poverty Since 2020."

⁴⁷ Rickie Solinger, *Pregnancy and Power: A Short History of Reproductive Politics in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 192–200.

⁴⁸ Shelley J. Correll, Stephen Benard, and In Paik, "Getting a Job: Is There a Motherhood Penalty?," *American Journal of Sociology* 112, no. 5 (2007): 1297–1339, doi.org/10.1086/511799.

Reproductive Justice Theory and Economic Constraints on Family Formation

The present question of how economic realities affect family formation, and how to make normative claims about that reality, is one reproductive justice has asked and answered from its inception. Far from uninformed claims that “reproductive justice” is disingenuous code for abortion rights, Loretta Ross wrote of the 1994 gathering where she and other Black women framed reproductive justice theory: “While abortion was a crucial resource for us, we also needed health care, education, jobs, day care, and the right to motherhood.”⁴⁹ This is much broader than the agenda of white feminism in which reproductive rights begin and end with legal abortion. Ross and Solinger rightly critique this white feminist framework for viewing reproductive justice as secured with *Roe v. Wade*’s legal guarantee of a negative right, rather than focusing on “enabling conditions” for family formation, including ending racial discrimination and broadening the social understanding of “legitimate motherhood.”⁵⁰ In contrast with individualist rights accounts, “Reproductive justice rests on claims for both negative and positive human rights,” asking whether people are genuinely able to live into their “reproductive possibilities” “without coercion and with social supports.”⁵¹ Thus, the framers of reproductive justice describe it as defined by three pillars: “(1) the right not to have a child; (2) the right to have a child; and (3) the right to parent children in safe and healthy environments.”⁵² They advocate for “enabling conditions” that would allow all women to realize those rights.⁵³ As a normative goal, Ross wrote elsewhere: “Reproductive Justice is the complete physical, mental, spiritual, political, social and economic well-being of women and

⁴⁹ Ross and Solinger, *Reproductive Justice*, 64.

⁵⁰ Ross and Solinger, *Reproductive Justice*, 120.

⁵¹ Ross and Solinger, *Reproductive Justice*, 169.

⁵² Ross and Solinger, *Reproductive Justice*, 65.

⁵³ Ross and Solinger, *Reproductive Justice*, 121.

girls, based on the full achievement and protection of women's human rights."⁵⁴ As the framers of reproductive justice consistently express, whether or not one can realize the rights to form a family and parent a child is profoundly affected, in each case, by economic factors.

On the face of it, the framing of "the right to have a child" strikes me as problematic.⁵⁵ Parenting is a relationship with a specific, unique other individual; it strains the mind to think about enjoying a "right" to a relationship with a specific, unique other individual.⁵⁶ For example, feminists rightly reject proposals of "rights" to sex among adults, on the grounds that one cannot have a right to interact with the body of another

⁵⁴ Loretta Ross, "Understanding Reproductive Justice: Transforming the Pro-Choice Movement," *Off Our Backs* 36, no. 4 (2006): 14.

⁵⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2211 and the Yogyakarta Principles articulated by international human rights experts both articulate a right phrased differently: "the right to found a family." "Relating to the Right to Found a Family (Principle 24)," yogyakartaprinciples.org/relating-to-the-right-to-found-a-family-principle-24/. I am grateful to Agnes Brazal for introducing me to the Yogyakarta Principles, which assisted greatly in clarifying my thinking on this question. This framing can be used to describe a variety of family structures and clarifies that adoption may be a means of founding a family. However, in my view, it does not escape the questions I raise above about the appropriateness of articulating a right to relationship with a specific other person. Envisioning adoption as a means of founding a family also raises additional concerns about the duty-bearer of rights. For example, if there is a right to found a family, can there be any just restriction on who is eligible to adopt a child? A recent case in Washington state, where a woman is suing after being rejected as a foster parent when she would not agree to support the identity of a potential LGBTQ+ child, raises this question. While "the right to found a family" may be regarded as protecting the right to form kinship networks among adults, it is not clear that this practice is threatened in a way that needs articulation as a right in order to protect it.

⁵⁶ Mary Doyle Roche and Cristina L. H. Traina have both contributed important bodies of work to thinking about the rights of children related to, but not totally identified with, the rights of parents within a Catholic theological perspective. As representative examples, see Mary Doyle Roche, "Children and the Common Good: Protection and Participation," in *Prophetic Witness: Catholic Women's Strategies for Reform*, ed. Colleen M. Griffith (New York: Herder and Herder, 2009), 123–131, and Cristina L. H. Traina, "For the Sins of the Parents: Roman Catholic Ethics and the Politics of Family," *Prophetic Witness*, 114–121. My thinking here is informed by their contributions on children's rights, but I do not mean to imply that they would agree with what follows.

person. Another objection is one raised in the case of economic rights: if speaking of a right implies a “duty-bearer” whose job it is to ensure that persons can realize that right, who occupies that role for the right to have a child?⁵⁷ It is true that reproductive justice does not only frame its analysis in terms of individual rights. In fact, Ross and Solinger thoroughly criticize the limited US vision of personal, negative rights in *Reproductive Justice*.⁵⁸ In keeping with the movement’s recognition of the power and limitations of rights language, I investigate what the framework achieves and what it communicates less successfully through its description of reproductive justice through three key rights.

Reproductive justice insists on “the right to have a child” because of specific, historical events in which societies have used the power of their criminal justice systems to interfere with the healthy fertility and desire to parent of women that society judges inadequate, usually related to patterns of unjust oppression. Reproductive justice points a finger at the state and the ways it uses its militarized power to prevent people from forming and raising their families, including forced sterilization of incarcerated US women, removal of Native American children from their parents’ homes, and other force-based interventions in which the family members in question would agree they have no choice.⁵⁹ Framing “having a child” as a right also highlights the truth that, in these violations of rights, persons have been stripped of goods that are not fully protected via appeals to other rights. For instance, sterilization is a violation of bodily autonomy, as would be, for example, permanently severing someone’s finger. However,

⁵⁷ Darryl M. Trimiew, “The Economic Rights Debate: The End of One Argument, the Beginning of Another,” *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 11 (1991): 90. Catholic social thought has demonstrated beyond a doubt, in my view, that communities are “duty-bearers” for the economic rights of their members and that states are legitimate agents of communities in realizing those rights through taxation and redistribution, if necessary.

⁵⁸ For example, they criticize the Constitution for focusing on “intentions, not effects,” which means that rights are not effectively guaranteed. *Reproductive Justice* prefers to focus on “enabling conditions” (22–23).

⁵⁹ Ross and Solinger, *Reproductive Justice*, 89–90, 92.

unlike the loss of a finger, sterilization removes a unique *future, affective* possibility for that person—the possibility of carrying and nurturing a relationship with her child—against her will. While any bodily violence denies human dignity, forcible sterilization is uniquely derogatory of human dignity, as it is done intentionally to enforce stereotypical ideas of unfit motherhood on the body of a particular, unique individual.

That said, what reproductive justice successfully establishes by articulating “the right to have a child” is the idea of children and childrearing as positive goods. To name something as a right is to claim it as a good worth defending, including for those not currently able to achieve or access this good. As earlier mentioned, neither mainstream consumerist choice models of family formation nor the merely descriptive critical realist social theory is able to articulate family formation as a human good in this way. By so doing, the reproductive justice movement achieves a goal articulated by Linda Hogan as retrieving human rights traditions to better respond to “the obligating features of human nature” in light of the feminist realization that earlier rights traditions’ assumption of an independent, autonomous human self excludes many important aspects of human experience.⁶⁰ I agree with this project and with the insight of reproductive justice that welcoming and raising children is a positive good, and in this spirit I retain the framework’s language of “the right to have a child” despite my concerns mentioned above.

Once we understand the reproductive justice articulation of the right to have a child, interventions of government force—including removing children from their parents’ protection or eliminating women’s fertility against their will—are easily recognized as signal examples of violations of this right.⁶¹ However, I believe this language is not best suited for describing our topic at hand, which concerns economic constraints on

⁶⁰ Linda Hogan, *Keeping Faith with Human Rights* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2015), 94–95, 31.

⁶¹ Dorothy Roberts describes such rights violations in *Torn Apart: How the Child Welfare System Destroys Black Families and How Abolition Can Build a Safer World* (New York: Basic Books, 2022).

family formation. The young couple who decide to remain childless for economic reasons, or the mother who has an abortion in order to continue to support her other children, are exercising choice in a way that is simply not the case for Native American women whose children were ripped away into boarding schools, for parents separated from children by the family courts system, or those sterilized without their knowledge or consent. Critical realist social theory again offers a more accurate framing. A society that accepts high rates of childhood poverty, provides no paid family leave or childcare assistance, and one where simply giving birth to a child can cost tens of thousands of dollars, certainly *disincentivizes* and *constrains* the choice to found a family and raise a child. Certainly, the right to have a child continues to be violated within the US sociopolitical system, but this particular right is more often directly violated by government action than by economic constraints.⁶² At the same time, we have seen the repeated evidence and multiple reasons that both higher- and lower-income people have fewer children than they want for economic reasons. This demonstrates the complex nature of family formation decisions when constrained by poverty, even if economic realities do not constrain choice to the same degree as government interventions through force.

Rights language, however, connects directly to economic constraints in another right proclaimed by reproductive justice: *The right to parent the children we have in safe and healthy environments*. This expression of the rights of parenthood encompasses two desiderata: the right to parent the children we have, that is, the right to continue raising one's child without unjust disruptions to that relationship; and the right to raise one's family in safe and healthy environments. The Reproductive Justice framework correctly draws attention to violations of parental rights by government systems that remove children from families for reasons that can be racist, biased in other respects, and that can systemically mistake poverty for

⁶² Examples include removing the children of women who give birth while imprisoned or family separation policies for immigrants to the United States enforced by both Republican and Democratic administrations.

neglect. Most reports to child welfare are not about physical or sexual abuse but rather about neglect. Physician and public policy expert Mical Raz comments,

Reporting a family for not having what a child needs to thrive essentially amounts to reporting a family for being poor. Often children are removed and placed in foster homes where foster parents get funding from the government. Had that funding instead been given to the original family, they would have been able to provide what their child needs at home.⁶³

Reproductive justice would call for a social safety net to provide financial health care and other material supports in way that support parents in raising their own children without recourse to the traumatic disruption of child removal when more consistently accessible material support would have addressed the issue.

By calling for the right to raise children in safe environments, the founders of reproductive justice highlight the fact that many dangers to children are disproportionately present when children live in poverty. For example, while parents at all income levels worry about bullying and anxiety, low-income parents are much more likely to worry that their neighborhood is a poor place to raise kids, that their children will be the victim of violence, get in trouble with the law, or even be shot.⁶⁴ Pollution is another source of danger in children's environments that disproportionately affects poor families, for example, contributing to elevated rates of dangerous asthma in children.⁶⁵

⁶³ Sandra Knispel, "Child Services Targets Poor Families for Biased Reasons," *Futurity*, December 16, 2020, www.futurity.org/child-protective-services-welfare-parents-poverty-2488042-2/.

⁶⁴ Pew Research Center, "Parenting in America: Outlook, Worries, Aspirations Are Strongly Linked to Financial Situation," December 17, 2015, www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/12/17/parenting-in-america/.

⁶⁵ Philip J. Landrigan, Virginia A. Rauh, and Maida P. Galvez, "Environmental Justice and the Health of Children," *The Mount Sinai Journal of Medicine, New York* 77, no. 2 (2010): 178–187, doi.org/10.1002/msj.20173.

We have discussed above how poverty can affect people's ability to access birth control, abortion, and natural family planning, affecting the ability to exercise what Reproductive Justice articulates as the right *not to have a child*. I do not elaborate this further here because it seems to me that the Reproductive Justice approach is unique in its desire to lift up the goodness and desirability of parenting children, even amid multiple intersecting oppressions. While few US thought leaders promote the right to have children and raise them for Black and Brown, disabled, or poor would-be parents,

Reproductive justice maintains that people should be able to have the number of children they want, when they want, in the way they want to have them. Individuals must have the ability to raise their children with the social supports they need to provide safety, health, and dignity. ... Since feminists of color have historically fought population-control strategies... in the United States and worldwide, reproductive justice underscores the crucial and complex matter of safe and dignified parenthood.⁶⁶

The Reproductive Justice framers rightly highlight that, in fact, the right not to have a child has often been twisted into eugenic impositions on the desires for parenthood and family among communities of color.⁶⁷ The need remains to insist on the goodness of welcoming and parenting children, not simply as an individual consumerist choice, but as a critical, foundational part of personhood which society has a duty to support for each of its members.

⁶⁶ Ross and Solinger, *Reproductive Justice*, 170–171.

⁶⁷ Roberts, "Welfare's Ban."

Catholic Tradition and Economic Constraints on Family Formation

Catholic thought on society and the family would strongly oppose the framing of family formation as a private choice. Rather, children are a good to all of society and raising them a significant way to contribute to the common good. Equally, society has a responsibility to support parents in doing so. The fact that many US people continue to start and raise families amid significant economic headwinds and a profoundly workaholic culture is reason to observe that US people affirm the many goods, joys and responsibilities Catholic thought discerns in family life (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 47–52). However, this theoretical perspective finds much to lament in the economic realities that interfere with having children, with having as many children as parents hope for, and with raising them in secure and stable comfort.

Papal Catholic teaching on the family has always seen the goods and duties of the family and of society as intertwined. Raising a family is a means of participating in society, which is both a right and a duty of every person. If the family is “the first and vital cell of society,” where parents raise children to become responsible community participants, so too societies, and in particular the state, have a duty to support families in fulfilling their purpose of raising children in health, safety and security (*Catechism*, 2208–2211). When this support is lacking, the Church laments the situation and charges societies with failing to fulfill their duties to families. As Pope Francis observed in his apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*:

In many ways, the present-day economic situation is keeping people from participating in society. Families, in particular, suffer from problems related to work . . . Workdays are long and oftentimes made more burdensome by extended periods away from home. This situation does not help family members to gather together or parents to be with

their children in such a way as to nurture their relationships each day (no. 44).

Cultural factors, such as the idolization of “market logic,” can “prevent authentic family life and lead to discrimination, poverty, exclusion, and violence” (no. 201). Market-based thinking on the economic responsibilities of parenthood leads to stigma and exclusion of children from poor families, a great scandal. Francis writes, “There are those who dare to say, as if to justify themselves, that it was a mistake to bring these children into the world. This is shameful! . . . How can we issue solemn declarations on human rights and the rights of children, if we then punish children for the errors of adults?” (no. 166).⁶⁸

Catholic papal teaching consistently holds that a society that claims to value children should provide the necessary material resources to help each child flourish and never be content for children born to impoverished parents to suffer worse outcomes than children from wealthy families. In earlier teaching by popes and theologians, the method advocated was a family-supporting wage paid to a presumably male breadwinner. Recently, Christine Firer Hinze updated the economic teaching of John A. Ryan to call for economic policies guaranteeing “sufficiency” to families, whether they have one, two or no wage-earning adults.⁶⁹ Given the tradition’s strong support for women’s engagement in public life, I have argued that government-supported child care is another method of societal support for families that the Catholic tradition can and should support.⁷⁰ Pope

⁶⁸ Some of the broader context discusses the family’s welcome of a child, but society’s responsibility is clear in that poor parents generally do not issue human rights declarations. One might in fairness say that this scorching critique fails to indict the US for hypocrisy, since the sole non-signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child at least does not accompany its disdain for children’s needs with declarations of their rights.

⁶⁹ Christine Firer Hinze, *Radical Sufficiency: Work, Livelihood, and a US Catholic Economic Ethic* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2021).

⁷⁰ Kate Ward, “America’s Child Care Crisis and Catholic Social Teaching,” *America Magazine*, October 2021, www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2021/09/16/childcare-work-catholic-social-teaching-241381.

Francis is on record as supporting universal basic income, not a policy limited to families, obviously, but one with significant potential to alleviate the economic challenges that affect freedom in family formation. Broadly speaking, the Catholic tradition would advocate any method of social support that provides families material assistance without unduly constraining parents' freedom to welcome and raise children as they see fit.

The Catholic tradition recognizes the complexity of decisions surrounding family formation and the insight, expressed above through critical realist social theory, that social structures incentivize, restrict, and reward decisions, but never fully take away agency. For example, in *Evangelium Vitae*, John Paul II wrote:

Decisions that go against life [that is, contraception and abortion] sometimes arise from difficult or even tragic situations of profound suffering, loneliness, a total lack of economic prospects, depression and anxiety about the future. Such circumstances can mitigate even to a notable degree subjective responsibility and the consequent culpability of those who make these choices which in themselves are evil (no. 18).

“Mitigated responsibility” is another way of expressing constrained freedom, a way the Church understands and describes our ability to exercise choice amid the constraints, incentives and opportunities of social structures which may themselves be sinful. “Mitigated culpability” refers to the person’s guilt for sin before God. In a document that has become totemic for opposition to abortion and birth control and popularizing the phrase “culture of death,” John Paul II expresses notable empathy and understanding that people choose abortion and birth control because they feel they, functionally, have no other choice. By speaking of mitigated culpability, he makes it clear that God understands this, too.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to locate this empathetic, contextual understanding of families who make the difficult choice to avoid pregnancy or even have an abortion due to challenging economic circumstances in the public communications and actions of the

contemporary United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). In its lobbying activity, the USCCB has opposed multiple attempts to provide universal health care in order to oppose public funding of abortion; applauded the elimination of access to abortion even in cases that endanger the mother's life; and fought with equal vigor against legal requirements for employer-provided health insurance to cover contraception.⁷¹ If their public action focuses on eliminating individual choices, so do their public communications ignore the pressures of economic restrictions while framing family formation as a matter of individual choice and dispositions.

An example is their treatment of "openness to life," a disposition mentioned only twice in *Evangelium Vitae*, where it clearly means openness to all of human life, not simply welcoming children.⁷² In contrast, the USCCB's most recent pastoral letter on marriage and family discuss a disposition called "openness to children."⁷³ A stance that opposes euthanasia, inequality, and loneliness and connects the goods of the family with defense of life on all these grounds has become shrunk into opposition to birth control and abortion and pressure to welcome children into a marriage at all costs. By transforming "openness to life" to "openness to children" and removing it from the context of social structures in which it originated, the US bishops buy into American ideas of personal striving to overcome obstacles and obtain merit. Regardless of your personal challenges or circumstances, they seem to be saying, you can be open to life if you just try hard enough.

⁷¹ Jeanine Kraybill, "Catholic Church Advocacy and the Affordable Care Act," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, 2019, doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.823.

⁷² In no. 24, "love, openness and service to human life" are contrasted with materialism and economic self-sufficiency which rejects the vulnerable and suffering, as discussed in no. 23. In no. 97, a couple's "openness to life" is even compatible with "choos[ing] to avoid a new birth for the time being or indefinitely," provided they use NFP methods of avoiding pregnancy.

⁷³ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan," nos. 4, 18.

Another example of disregard for economic restrictions impacting family formation decisions is found in the treatment of cohabitation in the same USCCB document. As we saw earlier, cohabitation (a couple living together without being married) is a family formation choice more frequently made by lower-income people, while marriage is increasingly becoming an upper-middle-class lifestyle practice in the US. Without addressing these realities, the bishops label the family formation choice pursued by many US people, disproportionately poor ones, “gravely immoral” and warn that it “can have a negative impact on children.”⁷⁴ With their continued emphasis on individual choices and dispositions to the exclusion of structures surrounding them which may lessen the free exercise of agency, the US bishops sadly buy into the US cultural understanding of family formation as solely a matter of individual agency. This individualist view of family formation feeds consumerist attitudes such as viewing more children as a status symbol.

Catholic thinkers who disagree with the extremist positions of the USCCB on access to abortion and birth control do so through the analysis of the broader Catholic tradition that freedom is not removed, but can be significantly constrained by social factors, including economic ones. Cristina Traina diagnoses how both “pro-choice” and “pro-life” advocates in the US context adopt individualistic framings that obscure the need for structural solidarity with women facing unwanted pregnancies. “Structural evil, not necessity, is the primary driver of forced pregnancy choices that injure women and their children both materially and morally.”⁷⁵ Seeking “Catholic common ground” on abortion, Julie Hanlon Rubio suggests the possibility of contraception as a “cooperation with the good” strategy, in that contraceptive use obviously reduces the need for abortions. On the other hand, the presence or absence of access

⁷⁴ USCCB, *Marriage*, nos. 26–27.

⁷⁵ Cristina L. H. Traina, “Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Unwanted Pregnancy, Mercy, and Solidarity,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 46, no. 4 (2018): 658, doi.org/10.1111/jore.12240.

to contraception is not the final word on whether one uses it or later chooses abortion or not, so this strategy may ultimately be “insufficient.”⁷⁶

For Catholic thought, family formation is a positive good through which parents have the opportunity to shape the common good and grow in virtue. Catholic social thought strongly disagrees with consumerist framings of family formation as an individual choice. As a positive good, family formation should be available to all regardless of income, and society has a duty to support it through affirmative material assistance. However, the leadership of the Catholic Church does not succeed in expressing this socially embedded view of family formation decisions in its public communication and actions, embracing an individualist view which fails to affirm the good in family formation models, such as cohabitation, that fall short of the married, middle-class ideal which many low-income US people find to be an opportunity out of their reach to choose.

A Positive Vision

I will now offer some reflections on what our three strands of thought can contribute to a positive vision for family formation amid US economic realities. As I mentioned above, critical realist social theory is primarily descriptive; it does not attempt to offer a vision of the way things should be, but simply to help us see the way they are. To the extent that it contributes to our positive vision, it will be with the reminder that social structures can be changed by the actions of the people choosing within them. Critical realist social theory can assist in articulating the social and economic structures which constrain, incentivize and restrict forming and raising a family so that our society can offer different opportunities, restrictions, and incentives that better support all people in founding the families for which they long.

⁷⁶ Julie Hanlon Rubio, *Hope for Common Ground: Mediating the Personal and the Political in a Divided Church* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2016), 172–174, 179.

The reproductive justice framework links family formation decisions to bedrock human identity and makes visible the fact that challenges to family formation do not stop with the decision to have or not have a child. In particular, reproductive justice is able to understand economic constraints on family formation, even those that affect the well-to-do, better than common US rhetorics of “choice” or popular Catholic frameworks of “openness to life.” The movement advocates not only for removing barriers to accessing reproductive health care and welcoming children, but also for robust financial supports that might enable women in poverty to raise their children in stable comfort, including paid maternity leave for the poorest workers.⁷⁷

The reproductive justice and Catholic traditions of thought find surprising common ground on a positive vision for the family. Both begin with similar basic definitions, naming family foundation as among the rights of human beings. By asserting that “the political community . . . has a duty to ensure...the freedom to establish a family” (no. 2211), the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* echoes the framing chosen by Reproductive Justice and the Yogyakarta Principles, naming family formation as a right. By naming something as a right, each framework defines human goods which persons must be free to pursue and locates a duty of communities and authorities to protect persons in seeking and achieving that good. Thus, there is a clear anthropology expressed in naming something as a right. Another area of agreement is that both the reproductive justice framework and Catholic teaching on the family regard the family as a unit as possessed of economic rights and view economic well-being as part and parcel of the well-being of the family unit.

Reproductive justice, Catholic thought, and even critical realist social theory all highlight the fact that family decisions are not made in a vacuum, and the first two theories propose a positive vision of the family supported by the broader society. Exercising one’s rights to have a child and raise them in safe and secure conditions requires a robust network of social

⁷⁷ Ross and Solinger, *Reproductive Justice*, 161.

supports to caregivers and children, including medical care for pregnancy and postpartum, financial assistance, safe and healthy living conditions, and quality public education. Furthermore, when we evaluate the restrictions, incentives and opportunities facing US family formation in light of the positive moral vision furnished by reproductive justice and Catholic thought, we realize that supporting family formation ought to lead to a re-evaluation of work which recognizes family care as work and involves society in supporting it financially. Given that child care costs and income concerns are the two biggest reasons US people cite for having fewer children than they aspire to, policies which make it possible to pay parents to stay home with young children or provide free child care would address both of these restrictions.⁷⁸ The fact that each tradition promotes the importance of economic support to enable raising children in dignity and comfort makes the lack of such support for most US families an especially stark omission.

Placing our three theories in conversation, we also notice that Catholic thought pays attention to opportunities, incentives, and restrictions framed by critical realist social theory when it comes to economic realities around family formation, urging support to promote the opportunity to have as many children as one wants. However, when it comes to limiting the number of one's children through birth control or abortion, the US Church only pursues restrictions, and those quite stringently—fiercely opposing not just abortion, but even the most remote material cooperation in providing birth control, for example, through taxpayer-funded health care.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ See Ward, "America's Child Care Crisis," for an evaluation of some recent proposals.

⁷⁹ It is true that when social safety net legislation is discussed, the USCCB will post messages on its website endorsing it in terms of support for the family. However, I believe any honest observer of the US Catholic Church's public messaging would admit that its public opposition of abortion and birth control, from the 1970s to the present day, exceeds by orders of magnitude in volume, passion, and use of ecclesiastical power its promotion of economic family support policies. For example, bishops encourage and even require their priests to denounce legislation related to abortion and birth control (in the case of the Affordable Care

The restrictions-only approach pursued by the US Catholic church is a problem for the Church's credibility and for its effective promotion of family formation as a positive good. Most obviously, it falls short of proclaiming the full truth of the Church's teaching that society has a positive duty to support family formation through reliable material resources—and indeed, it undermines this vision. It seems that Church leaders do not trust the communitarian vision of family formation to bear the fruits they want it to by encouraging people to welcome children and forgo abortion. Instead, in public rhetoric and activism, the bishops fall back on an individualistic framework that treats complex, socially structured decisions as nothing more than the result of individual choice. It is now a truism to point out that limiting access to abortion does little to ensure an environment where a woman confronted by economic or other constraints will feel herself able to bear and raise that child. Critical realist social theory helps us better articulate why that is.

While advocating better economic supports to incentivize avoiding abortion has reached the level of truism, new ideas from within the Catholic tradition articulate limits to the good achievable by a restriction-only approach to abortion. Kathleen Bonnette incisively observes that while the Catholic tradition considers abortion an intrinsic evil—an action that can never under any circumstances be done for a good purpose—it applies the same moral category to violations of bodily integrity. “If violating bodily integrity is an intrinsic evil, then it is never permissible to use a woman’s body against her will, regardless of the good we hope to attain,” Bonnette writes. “This is precisely why it can be logically consistent to be ‘morally but not legally’ opposed to abortion: laws prohibiting abortion may violate a woman’s bodily integrity and thus, be

Act) in Sunday homilies. I am not aware of a similar mandate in any diocese regarding support for an economic family support policy. See Timothy Byrnes, *Catholic Bishops in American Politics* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), chapters 6 and 8, for discussion of the 1980s environment that established abortion as the preeminent political issue of the USCCB.

seen as intrinsically evil.”⁸⁰ Catholic attorney Jacqui Oesterblad similarly worries that restrictions on when abortions can be performed in emergency cases unjustly impose government restriction on the safety of women’s bodies.⁸¹ And jurist and theologian Cathleen Kaveny observes that the current legal framework of abortion in the US falls short of standards for good law in the Anglo-American tradition, where bodily integrity is a highly prized value, and those set forth by Thomas Aquinas, who observed that law must be “possible to nature” and avoid imposing unequal burdens, even in pursuit of the common good. For Kaveny, “prioritizing the creation of the social safety net [over restricting abortion] puts pedagogical priority on nurturing the positive gift of family life, which requires care and commitment that cannot be forced by law.”⁸²

The restrictions-only approach pursued by the US Catholic bishops in their public lobbying and communications against abortion clearly conveys that human life is precious and worthy of defense from its very earliest stages. Less credible has been an equally vociferous restrictions-only approach pursued with regard to birth control, which most US people not only use but also regard as entirely compatible with family formation.⁸³ In my judgment, these restrictions-only approaches have not succeeded in communicating the positive vision that Catholic teaching shares with reproductive justice: that family formation is a positive good for persons which society should materially support. Moreover, the intense public focus on the choices of individual mothers rather than society’s duty to support all families participates in what reproductive

⁸⁰ Kathleen Bonnette, “Holding the Tensions: Female Bodily Integrity as an Intrinsic Good,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 12, no. 1 (2023): 114, doi.org/10.55476/001c.66245.

⁸¹ Jacqui Oesterblad, “We Need to Talk about ‘Life of the Mother’ Exceptions in Abortion Law,” *America Magazine*, June 27, 2022, www.americamagazine.org/faith/2022/06/27/abortion-dobbs-catholic-exceptions-243163.

⁸² M. Cathleen Kaveny, “Abortion and the Law in the United States: From *Roe* to *Dobbs* and Beyond,” *Theological Studies* 84, no. 1 (2023): 134–156, doi.org/10.1177/00405639231153868.

⁸³ Guttmacher Institute, “Contraceptive Use in the United States by Demographics,” January 22, 2020, www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/contraceptive-use-united-states.

justice identifies as stigma around “legitimate motherhood,” in which mothers who are poor or nonwhite or who welcome children outside marriage are depicted as less competent mothers and targeted by punitive state policies.⁸⁴ While lodging a defense of unborn children, therefore, the restrictions-only approach fails to convey the full truth of the goodness of family life and family formation.

In several ways, the restrictions-only approach participates in an individualist anthropology which is not accurate to the Catholic Church’s teaching about personhood. It presumes an individualistic, atomized understanding of family formation which sees abortion or birth control not in their complex social context informed by restrictions, opportunities and incentives, but rather as a simplistic choice. If the choice is removed, this logic suggests, the incentives to pursue it will no longer trouble or restrict the person. But critical realist social theory shows us why this belief is false. Reproductive justice, by framing having children and raising them as rights, effectively communicates that welcoming children is a positive human good which society must materially support. While Catholic social thought shares this identical belief, the restrictions-only approach of the US bishops, by treating family formation as an individual choice, conveys the view of the dominant US culture in which family formation is a good *for those individuals who choose it*, imposing no responsibilities and conveying no benefit to society at large. The failure of the leadership of the US church to convey the truth of its belief that family formation is a positive good for parents and for society as a whole is not simply an oversight, it is a tragedy.

By pursuing restrictions without using their power and platform equally to promote incentives for family formation, US Catholic leadership falls prey to the dominant US view of family formation as solely an individual choice. The same view, at different extremes, regards more children as a status symbol for wealthy parents or refuses to acknowledge that a woman might grieve an abortion that was, after all, “her choice.”

⁸⁴ Ross and Solinger, *Reproductive Justice*, 42–43, 122, 171–172.

Applying our three-theory approach to economic constraints on US family formation recommends a new approach to practice for the US Church. A vociferous defense of economic supports for families in any form, coupled with a clear explanation of the anthropological and social justifications for such support, will more effectively communicate this positive vision. Most importantly, examining economic constraints on family formation through the lenses of critical realist social theory, reproductive justice, and Catholic social thought should bind anyone who comments on family formation, including Catholic leaders, to intellectual honesty in our understandings of moral agency. According to Catholic thought, the family teaches each of us, from the beginning of our existence, that at the core of our being we are constituted by others. We depend on others and they on us. To treat discussions of family as if this were not true—as if people engage in family formation as rugged individuals—harms women, their families, and the proclamation of the Catholic faith.



Kate Ward, PhD, is associate professor of theological ethics at Marquette University and the author of *Wealth, Virtue and Moral Luck: Christian Ethics in an Age of Inequality* (Georgetown University Press, 2021). She is completing a book on work in Catholic social thought.