

***Book presentation : “Families – Beyond the Nuclear Ideal”. ed.  
Daniela Cutaş and Sarah Chan***

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The core concept of the book edited by Danila Cutas and Sarah Chan, “Families – Beyond the Nuclear Ideal” is without doubt, one about which most of us all, if not all, could have thoughts, opinions, predictions, standards, experiences and projections. In Romania, for example, the sintagm “the family – the vital cell of the society” is still very circulated, even tough, being associated with the Communist regime and the pronatalist policy of Ceausescu, it has also some pejorative connotations. Therefore, one can make a a simple correlation – people are social human beings, the family is the vital cell of the society, so people have to be engaged with this type of structure, cohabitation, thus with the nuclear, or traditional family. Therefore, it appears a form of desirability for connection, for being part of a wider social structure, which, furthermore, is being charged with a moral sense and finally becomes a norm. If we go further with this analysis and try to give a definition of “the family”, we will definitely use social norms and constructions imposed by the valorization/praising of a type of “family” – namely the traditional, nuclear, patriarchal one.

Referring to the state of the art in the field, the literature could be divided into two main categories: studies about the traditional family structures – usually associated with the nuclear family – “children should be conceived *naturally*, born to and raised by their two young, heterosexual, married to each other, genetic parents; that this relationship between parents is also the ideal relationship between romantic or sexual partners; and that romance and sexual intimacy

ought to be at the core of our closest personal relationships”(Cutaş, Chan, 2013); the studies that are approaching alterations in traditional family structures as a product of socio-cultural change - electively or circumstantially single parents, unmarried couples, homosexual partnerships and parenting by homosexual couples, life-long close friendships preferred over sexually intimate alternatives, polyamory, poly-parental families, electively or circumstantially childless families, families created with medical or social assistance, sexual families, the two parent family model, parental dimorphism, and so forth – category of the volume presented here. The desirability is then taking the form of a prescription, it becomes institutional, it becomes law and is setting out rights and obligations for the individuals: “whose private life is more, or less, scrutinized; who can be a parent and what sorts of organization of private and family life are encouraged, tolerated or even allowed at all; which associations will be supported, both socially and materially etc” (Cutaş, Chan, 2013);.

In essence, the Cutas and Chan’s study is putting under a magnifying glass every term used to define the traditional, nuclear, idealized family; it is adding some ingredients about the evolution of the medical technology, social dynamics and rights claim of some minority and marginal groups (LGBTQ, surrogate mothers, commissioning parents, financial, and social parents), sketching the complex view of what really means to throw into reality the concept of family.

I will shortly present some of the questions and themes that are being raised in this volume: What does it mean to be the mother of somebody? It means to be the one giving birth to that child? And if so, what is happening in assisted reproductive cases, artificial insemination, or surrogate mothers? A family should be formed with to parents? They have to be man and woman? The parents are the biological ones, or the ones that are giving the material and social support needed for raising a child? In this context, could we have families with more than two parents? What role could/ must they fulfill in a family and in relation to children resulted through assisted reproductive

technology? What is the meaning of the concept of “child interest” and the deciding authorities regarding this? What is the meaning of the concept of “parent’s interest”? Does the children raised only by mothers have some specific problems? Are the single, heterosexual women who are becoming mothers, contesting the role of men in the reproduction act, as far as single motherhood is no longer only the result of circumstance, but also actively created from the outset? Could this be understood as a radical feminist position or as “the feminist dream come true”? Which are the ethical premises of monogamy and how do these cultural practices perpetuate unequal relations between men and women? Through asymmetrical relations, does the polygamy is imposing tougher power relations than monogamy? What are the practical and ideological consequences when human cloning is used for having children?

In this volume are also caught the changes and challenges that are on going in the occidental world (United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand) regarding the understanding and rethinking of the family: the separation of genetic parenthood from social and legal parenthood; the formal recognition of non-heterosexual couples; the recognition of a couple and of parenthood outside the marital relationship; the acceptance of a second female parent (parental dimorphism); reproductive possibilities for transgender parents, promoting increased inclusivity of existing ART, not only on the basis of direct interest of children and their progenitors, but also by socio-political objectives as acceptance of diversity and pluralism, increasing tolerance; the increasing number of predominantly heterosexual women in their thirties and forties who are well educated and financially independent to achieve motherhood via attending fertility clinics for treatment with donor sperm; the greatly improvement of scientific research of cloning technology over past fifteen years that make possible for humans to reproduce by cloning in the near future and this fact is already rising substantive debates about moral and legal constraints of this act (the nonidentity logic and “no harm logic” vs alternative better route to come into existence etc) etc.

The book presented here becomes in this way a good attempt, not only of a critical analyze regarding the nuclear family as a social ideal, but also a model of reflection towards the social complexity and dynamics of relationships which have the scope and/ or effect the reproduction, affection, sexual intimacy, romanticism, the common management of resources, etc. Moreover, the novelty element comes from the fact that, “while there has been a proliferation of self-help literature that aims to inform, explain and provide practical guidance as to how to manage these ‘alternative’ relationships, and considerable work has been done in the fields of sociology, social anthropology and psychology in this area, much less exists in the academic literature by way of philosophical and ethical analysis” (Cutaş, Chan, 2013), the aim of the authors being to “re-examine and critically evaluate the norms and normativities surrounding personal relationships and families in Western societies, and to challenge the widespread assumption that nuclear families are the best, or even the only acceptable units at the core of personal relationships” (Cutaş, Chan, 2013).

In the end, a wider view over the volume distinguishes the consistency of the approaches which emphasize the formal-legal dimension of the issues presented, of the existing debates, and the ways in which they have been integrated within the legal system of the different analyzed countries. It could be created the image of a slightly arid volume, if the editors wouldn’t have integrated a consistent ethical and philosophical dimension to the chapters that is adding substance to the legal perspectives, always underlining the symbolic impact of such recognition in the context of the dominant traditional paradigm regarding family.