

# REVIEW ESSAY

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## Nepotism for All Times

Adam Bellow, *In Praise of Nepotism: A Natural History*. New York: Doubleday, 2003. 576 pages.

By Alexander H. Joffe

First, the obvious: Adam is Saul's son. They have some issues, which certainly could not compare with those of, say, Norman Mailer and his progeny. As Bellow sees it, the 2000 presidential election affirmed the centrality of nepotism in American politics, as scions of two famous families squared off, one dutiful, and the other prodigal. This merely highlighted the apparent resurgence of families and dynasties in other spheres of American life. The 'proliferation of family ties' or 'new nepotism' is everywhere from politics to publishing to stock car racing. The question he poses is, is this healthy?

Nepotism's challenge to the American meritocratic ideal seems clear. Are not we Americans judged on the basis of our own abilities and achievements, rather than by advantages conferred through accidents of birth? Is this not something that distinguishes us from the Old World, with its kings and princes? But as Bellow shows, in its many forms nepotism has always been the norm. Even in America, where merit is established as the theoretical social goal, family remains deeply pervasive. Just ask the Corleones.

Bellow takes the *Godfather* as a point of departure and easily extracts the core logic of nepotism—family is everything. The 'traditional mafia family' is comprised of 'concentric rings around a dense biological core,' and authority is derived from position in the hierarchy. Violence

defends and advances the family, which is protected further by the abstract projection of honor. But where honor is a bad tempered kind of passive-aggressive defense, with a hair trigger, patronage builds friendships and networks of mutual obligation. Bellow conducts an exceptionally wide-ranging tour of Sicilian and American organized crime; remember when Carlo Gambino's nephew Manny was kidnapped and killed by James McBratney's gang from Hell's Kitchen? An obligatory paean to *The Sopranos* follows as well. The first chapter suitably introduces the book's basic thesis, nepotism is everywhere, but also demonstrates its literary weakness, thoroughness bordering on the obsession. It also hints at the relative erosion of nepotism in modern America, where those young punks no longer respect the old ways.

To situate his discussion in science Bellow's second chapter is devoted to the biological foundations of culture, more or less from the vertebrates through hunter-gatherers. Ants, pilot whales, and ground squirrels are enlisted but our much debated 'cousins,' the kindly bonobos, are absent. Nasty baboons and suave chimps appear briefly, courtesy of their literary agent, Jane Goodall, but the latter's dark side (the chimps', not Goodall's)—war, cannibalism, infanticide, and so on—remain tastefully obscure. By the end Tlinglit moieties are ex-

changing marriage partners and other northwest Indians are potlatching to a fare thee well. The chapter contains a flood of information; Hamilton's Rule on kin selection (the evolutionary value of conserving one's relatives), voluntary celibacy in the green-fronted bee eater, cooperative behavior among West Indian guppies, and the hormonal basis of the maternal instinct.

For humans the key appears to be 'paternal nepotism and the consequent emergence of the family.' Were it not for the greedy demands of our large brains and the unfortunate shrinking of the female pelvis as a consequence of trotting about upright, we lads could have gotten off scot-free. Alas, one thing led to another and before you know it pair bonding turned into the crazy thing called love. This ultimately resulted in the Borgias and the Kennedys.

Culture and all that does not get started until chapter three. Here things start to get interesting. Human social evolution is, after all, a matter of adaptation, problem-solving, learning and teaching (hence Lamarckian, not Darwinian) but biology plays its role. Never mind why we love our families—we just do, whether we like them or not. This is probably a variation on what is called in foreign policy "they may be bastards, but at least they're our bastards."

Bellow's middle chapters present a whirlwind tour through history as seen through the eyes of nepotism. Every legend, every folk tale, and every historical figure is thrown into Bellow's centrifuge and its nepotistic fraction removed. From Biblical figures such as David and Solomon, Bellow discerns the often tragic three generation cycle of greatness, maintenance, and dissipation. Greek history and mythology sharpen the conflict between the family and the state, as the Men of

Marathon yielded to the wisdom of Pericles and the high level idiocy of Alcibiades. The Roman republic showed a key problem, families and the state in uneasy balance, but with Caesar and the Augustines the latter became an extension of the former.

Christianity introduced new complications into the relationships of families and wealth, mucking things up with distinctions between the 'spiritual nepotism' of Augustine, where charity made sure the church got its cut, and traditional family nepotism. The church's insistence on clean-cut families and patriarchal authority were, and in some senses remain, at odds with the real and freewheeling practices of divorce, remarriage, out of wedlock birth, and adoption. The implosion of clans and tribes was nepotistically compensated for by feudalism, in which hereditary groups managed to lord it over serfs, but at the cost of wide and generous definitions of family. Bastards were out and lesser sons tromped around on Crusades in metal outfits. And let's not even get started on Bellow's discussions of India and China.

The new European dynastic states were relatively weak but commercial elites were strong, and thus the 'golden age of nepotism' was born. From the 16<sup>th</sup> through the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries families were the driving force behind capitalism and Bellow is on rich ground discussing the Borgias, Rothchilds, and Bonapartes. It is good to be the Pope, and being the Pope's son was pretty good too.

Part of the problem is that Bellow seems undecided whether he's writing an extended treatise in historical anthropology on a kinship form, or something people might actually want to read, on a subject of relevance to contemporary society. He never loses track of his sub-

ject, but he treats the reader to over-long digressions, backgrounds, and qualifications. His chapter on the Borgias begins juicily enough with Caesare, his syphilis eaten face masked, but dries up instantly with a history of the papacy (and do not forget the Donation of Pepin!), the Contis, Savellis, Orsinis, Avignon and the Great Schism, not to mention the Colonnas. Alonso de Borja is born in 1377 but we still need to make it through Martin V, Cardinal d'Este and his famiglia of 136, Calixtus III, Pius III, Paul II, Sixtus IV, Innocent VII, and probably some others. Caesare's father becomes Alexander VI in 1491—seven pages after we first meet Caesare. The Rothschilds and the Bonapartes make out a little better, but not much.

The real question is American nepotism. The second half of the book is almost at obsessive as the first, but is more tightly focused. Following David Hackett Fischer, Bellow points to four waves of 17<sup>th</sup> century English emigration; Puritans from East Anglia going to the northeast, the Cavalier migration of defeated Royalists from southeast England to Maryland and Virginia, Quakers from the Midlands to the Delaware valley, and Scots-Irish border folk to the western margins of Pennsylvania and Virginia. "In each of these regions a distinctive local culture emerged, characterized by a nepotistic formula that reflected, and perpetuated, its own unique patterns of marriage, reproduction and child rearing, and inheritance. Each region also embodied a somewhat different conception of personal and political liberty: equality in New England, sovereign individualism in Virginia, reciprocal altruism in Pennsylvania, and "natural liberty" in the southern highlands."

This fairly splendid formulation manages to ignore completely the

Spanish, French, and especially Dutch contributions. In New York, always the true epicenter of the American experiment, the latter was characterized by both old-fashioned if truly vast estates, and new-fangled joint stock companies before and after the coming of the British in 1664. Nonetheless, Bellow's quadripartite geography proves an elegant framework for American politics, in particular as seen through the leading figures of the 18<sup>th</sup> century who originated in these various regions.

Benjamin Franklin, a Bostonian escaped to Philadelphia, was welcomed into a Quaker society that rejected the hierarchical, even tribal, concepts of its counterparts. Bellow credits their principle of reciprocal liberty with transforming American social relations after the Civil War, along with their dedication to small government, low taxes, and frequent elections. Quaker children were raised to be independent and contradictory but moral and community minded. With the legally enshrined concepts of freedom of religion and property rights, the virtues of Quaker society offered instant advantages to Franklin. His rise from penniless refugee printers apprentice, to printer, newspaper publisher, paper dealer, scientist, and ultimately patriot, has of course been recounted many times, not least of all by Franklin himself. His is the first American success story, and each step was characterized by his enthusiastic patronage of family and friends.

Unlike Franklin, Jefferson, Adams, Henry, Lee and others were the first true Americans, torn between country and family. Like later college educated radicals, they bitterly resented the privilege brought about by mere genealogy, and which mostly eluded them. They relished liberty but the meta-

phors of their dispute with England were those of family; overbearing mother, disobedient child, all set in the context of patriarchy. And a new father figure was found in Washington. Home schooled, the self-taught surveyor turned soldier had been repeatedly disappointed by his own patrons. Childless, he was the faithful but stern patron to stepchildren and junior officers alike. At once he sought to maintain republican virtue but was divided by affection and loyalty to adoptive family.

While Washington lived his presence suppressed turmoil between the siblings, but with his death came politics as we know them. Each of the other fathers embodied some dimension of the American future. The relentlessly public minded Adamses represented a new twist on nepotism, with four generations bred to serve. The appearance of advancing family interests, specifically the career of young John Quincy, tormented the puritanical John, although not Abigail. But their son-in-law, Colonel William Smith, though a fine aide to Washington, turned out to be a lousy husband and a 'profligate cur.' Other sons were pretty much losers. Charles was a licentious drunk, and the youngest, Thomas, at first distanced himself from the family and then returned to its smothering embrace, where he 'subsided into quiet self-loathing.'

Jefferson was a walking contradiction, the freedom loving slave owner, the meritocratic elitist, but in the absence of a son, he patronized his sons in law and young men from other powerful families. His patronage of the Muhlenbergs of Pennsylvania, the Livingstones of New York, and the Burrs of Maryland was a sort of national dynastic nepotism. Bellow regards these 'nepotistic clusters' as the 'deep grammar' of the early American

politics that echoed the Tidewater-planter world from which Jefferson emerged.

But a measure of how far American politics had progressed from old school nepotism was Alexander Hamilton, West Indian-born bastard, Columbia educated, and Treasury secretary. His Anglophilic and expansive national vision collided with Jefferson's Francophone agrarianism. Jefferson also feared, with some justification, that a strong federal government would become a 'fount of patronage that would corrupt the yeoman virtue on which liberty depended.' But Hamilton was far more threatening and important, for as Bellow puts it "he was the harbinger of a future in which the liberated ambition and energy of upwardly mobile men would continually remake and overturn the social order." Hamilton was perhaps the first modern American.

Bellow's chapter on the nineteenth century is ample, but many of its supporting characters are far from compelling. The New England commercial elites, for example, melded old and new families but remained ruthlessly nepotistic. Cabots and Lowells and the other brahmins were certainly wealthy, and occasionally civic minded, but hardly matched the greatness of the Founders, either in their grandness of vision or depth of failure. With each brahmin generation nepotistic control gradually broadened from the manufacturing and trading companies into law, politics, and culture. Institutions like the Massachusetts General Hospital were founded for the public, and schools like Harvard reinvigorated for the breeding of more brahmins, some of whom, like Oliver Wendell Holmes, made something of themselves. Power and wealth to be sure, but in the

main not especially interesting people, and their story was quickly overshadowed by new immigrants.

But much of Bellow's account focuses on American presidents, such as the Jacksonian challenge to party politics shot through with family ties. Lincoln alone commands almost 30 pages. Although Lincoln's uncles were all wealthy and influential his success was not due to his ne'er do well father but his angelic and long suffering mother, who encouraged him to read. The Bible and Aesop's *Fables* were central for the young Lincoln, and along with his Quaker heritage inclined him toward a spirit of reciprocity and trust, egalitarianism, and a strong sense of justice, features that also characterized the rough environment and ethos of the Illinois frontier. Lincoln had a social genius, an ability to befriend the individual and enthrall the crowd. All these attributes drove him forward in his path from militiaman to storeowner, state legislator to lawyer, and congressman to president. Along the way friendship and reciprocity were central to Lincoln, and when these principles were defied, most supremely with secession, it represented the 'failure of symbolic nepotism.' With that failure fraternal appeals were suspended, even as Lincoln's paternal stature grew.

But Lincoln's reciprocal philosophy meant dividing the spoils evenly, in effect spreading patronage around as widely and as 'fairly' as possible. Loyalty to family and friends produced a nepotistic mess of unqualified officeholders, but in turn re-cemented the remnants of the republic. And Bellow notes that this became even more vital with the waves of European immigrants who did not share America's recent history. He points to Lincoln's pivotal speech of July 4, 1858, a statement that "sweepingly redefines

American citizenship as a matter not of blood or descent but of 'fidelity to our country and its institutions'...*universalizing* kinship by redefining it as a moral and intellectual commitment to the founding premise of American democracy: 'All men are created equal.'"

This definition, to be sure, was limited to Euro-Americans, and Bellow attributes Lincoln with the invention of 'whiteness,' and with the Morrill Act that suppressed polygamy, regards him a force in the Victorian homogenization of the family. From here Bellow's discussion of Lincoln unravels into 19<sup>th</sup> century threads of the frontier, religious minorities, train robbers and Victorian family norms. But Lincoln's achievement, liberating "the reciprocal altruism latent in the radical doctrine of equality enshrined in the Declaration of Independence" was a signal conception upon which all would subsequently based.

Much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is devoted to the immigrant and ethnic politics of the Roosevelts and the Kennedys. From a political point of view the focus may be apt, but their nepotism, like their stories, has been told of many times. How much better would it have been to mention them in passing and focus decisively on the waves of immigrants after the Civil War, their transformations, and impact on America? As ever, these data are all present; there is much detail about political machines, labor movements, and economic sectors, including of course, the movie business. Carl Laemmle Junior's artistic successes with his father's studio (Universal) are praised, but his business acumen as the depression hit, is not. As always both family and state adapted to changing circumstances, and nepotism shined through. The shattering of the

American family by the Depression was met by reaffirmed family bonds and FDR's New Deal. The relentlessly tangled web of Joe, Jack and Bobby is presented as a Greek tragedy that gave way to the cold technocracy of the Great Society and the Vietnam War. But here too Bellow's narrative fractures, with the welfare state, campus radicals, the Civil Rights Act, feminism and the sexual revolution. The families themselves, as we know, fizzle out and fade from view. Elliot Roosevelt was elected mayor of Miami. And John Kennedy Jr. ended up crashing into the Atlantic on a summer's night.

Bellow ends his book by deducing all the lessons into a handy chapter 'The Art of Nepotism.' Taking *King Lear* as his departure, he shows there are right and wrong ways to practice nepotism. Love is the strongest bond, but reciprocal duties of parents and children are what make societies work. Joining two families together through marriage is obviously a good strategy, as is having lots of children and enlarging the family through adoption, marriage and patronage. Diversification and flexibility are crucial, but arranged marriages are lately out of style. Bellow boils it all down to three convenient rules, which should be laminated for budding dynasts. First, don't embarrass me. Second, don't embarrass yourself, or you have to work harder than anyone else, and third, pass it on. It is hard to argue with these, except perhaps to point out that 'embarrassment' is a cultural construct with wide latitude. 'Survivor,' 'The Real World,' Paris Hilton and Michael Jackson all prove, as generations of Kennedys did before, that if one is impervious to 'embarrassment,' then there is no such thing as bad publicity.

It is also hard to argue with Bellow's perception that modern

America is "a riot of old and new kinship forms, a nepotistic Petri dish in which signs of a return to a pre-modern view of marriage co-exist with the postmodern insistence on defining families as entirely voluntary." He suggests we have been 'liberated from kinship' which returns us to the ancient and free-wheeling ways of extending families outside of blood descent. More ominously, flip side of this is the atomizing of the modern family in the name of the individual, which reduces it to the 'primitive atom of kinship-the unit of mother and child,' with fathers out of the picture, and with the 'avuncular state' the last line of defense for many. Advocating for strong families, shucking off the Freudian demonization of the family as 'a setting for repression and denial' and restoring other strategies such as apprenticeship all seem sensible.

His call to continue Lincoln's project of extending the national family seems entirely apt, even if he sets it in the rather *au currant* terms of the multiracial children of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. In the end, however, Bellow returns to New Nepotism, where status is passed down as along with wealth, thanks to nepotistic monopolization of breeding and education, and the question of whether it is healthy for America. But is this threatening, or even new? Look at what all that breeding did for the Lowells, the Vanderbilts, and the Roosevelts. Where are they now?

The fact that you have to look around for traces of these highly educated, culturally significant, high status families, suggests the New Nepotism is not so new. The upper/upper middle class obsession with getting children into the right preschool might seem a new twist, along with chocolate martinis, but weird fads of progressive education

and overpriced drinks were also features of the Gilded Age. The instinct to set one's self and one's family apart through affectation is as old as the instinct to accumulate. Bellow's concludes with a catalog of American dynasties in politics, entertainment, sports, business and the like. But be forewarned, such a Who's Who doesn't capture nepotism's ever-changing successes and failures. This book arrived on my doorstep the day after Qusai and Uday Hussein met their maker. Since that time, having driven Vivendi into the ground, Edgar Bronfman Jr. has decided he wants to be a music mogul. Roy Disney was nominated for an Oscar, but William Bulger resigned as president of the University of Massachusetts, and James P. Hoffa Jr. backed the presidential bid of Richard Gephardt.

Bellow's book is conceptually similar to Joseph Epstein's recent but vastly more entertaining *Snobbery: The American Version*. One of the many virtues of Epstein's book is that it elegantly brings out how contradictions and attitudes are debated in literature, something desperately missing from Bellow historical anthropology. A discussion, for example, of the intergenerational and psychosexual dynamics of Brick, Big Daddy, and Cat, would have enlivened Bellow's recitation, although he likely would have approached in from the perspective of reproductive failure rather than bourbon fueled passion. Overall the volume is in great need of some Tennessee Williams, or at least Truman Capote, as a counter-balance.

What does all this mean for America in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? If nepotism is as old as the family itself, and deeply rooted in American society, does this defuse Kevin Phillips' fear and loathing of the

Bush dynasty as expressed in his recent book *American Dynasty: Aristocracy, Fortune and the Politics of Deceit in the House of Bush*? Well connected crony capitalists they are, the Bush grasp on the twin pillars of political and economic power hardly rivals that of 18<sup>th</sup> century planters, 19<sup>th</sup> century robber barons, or 20<sup>th</sup> century Kennedys. Perhaps it is the lack of a Bush ethic of *noblesse oblige* that really troubles Phillips, although it might be argued, as John Lewis Gaddis does in his new book *Surprise, Security and the American Experience*, that since 9/11 George W. Bush has evolved demonstrably from Prince Hal to Henry V.

More troubling than the mere concentration of political and economic power in the hands of dynasties is the changed America in which this now occurs. Phillips correctly notes that the wage gaps between workers and chief executive are vast, more so at least than during the post-war era. Along with the tendency for ethnic and economic groups to partition themselves off from one another and the decline of various communal tendencies, the 'bowling alone' phenomenon, inequality and power have new significance in America. These may be more threatening than Phillips' rather recycled *bête noires*, including international banking, the military industrial complex, and religious fundamentalism.

Will three generations of Bush be more detrimental to the republic than three generations of Adamses or Kennedys? American politics has yet to see the last of Jeb, but George and Laura's twins seem disinclined to pursue politics, not to speak of their felonious cousin. And in Marvin we have a splendid example of how the cross-generational dynamics of nepotism and dissipation still hold. Entropy dispatches nepotism almost as ef-

fectively as a revolutionary scourge.

But waiting for entropy obviously does not satisfy everyone. Are American meritocracy and democracy broken? If Bellow's book demonstrates anything it is that while individual nepotistic arrangements rarely last, the concept is as much a human constant as any. But the corollary of this is that society based on pure merit, and hence pure equality of access and equanimity of outcome, is utterly chimerical. Appeals to human nature raise cries of defiance from totalitarian democrats, but the biological preference for kin is an empirical fact. Ripping out the past and starting history again at Year Zero was tried repeatedly during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, with inescapably similar results. The corruption of family crept or flooded in, invalidating whatever egalitarian principles were espoused, and miring society after society in even worse nepotistic corruption than before, among other tragedies.

Here it is a pity that Bellow did not expand his cursory discussion of Communist societies. The Ceausescu family alone is ample demonstration that efforts to defy nepotism through ideologies of engineered equality are vastly worse than what is experienced in liberty-oriented societies. The engineers have proven themselves far more ruthless and tenacious than leaders in liberty-oriented societies who have ascended only to lose their grasp or be surmounted by the more fleet. But Jefferson's concerns over Hamilton's vision must be restated; what sorts of balances are we to strike? In America, thanks to Progressive era some of the structural advantages nepotistic elites enjoyed were undone by legislative remedies, for example, inheritance taxes, which were in turn circumvented and new remedies applied.

These are imperfect checks on nepotism to be sure all the while entropy takes it toll. There may still be wealthy and influential Rockefellers, but Bill Gates could have them for breakfast. And a visitor to his parents' garage in 1978 would not have been able to predict this outcome.

Giving to our children and family means accumulation. Altruism tempers but does not reverse this instinct. Efforts to defy this in the name of equality, through dramatic constraints on personal liberties, confiscatory taxes, restrictions of property rights, or pervasive redistribution, are both profoundly at odds with the fundamental American legacy and with the human nepotistic instinct. The American genius has been to learn to live with this, and to do *some* of what is necessary to check avarice, encourage generosity, provide access, and spread the wealth around—sometimes through nepotism itself. But that the persistence of nepotism and inequality continues to prompt worries about the health of American democracy, two centuries after Jefferson's fears of Hamilton's

republican vision, one century after Teddy Roosevelt proposed a progressive income tax, forty years after the Great Society, and twenty years into the intellectual-led chorus of cultural self-flagellation and celebration of all things non-American, suggests instead that democracy is probably in pretty good shape.

American society shows the contradictions between the family and the individual, between nepotism and merit, writ larger than life. But it a remarkable feature of American society that these persistent contradictions are at once in full sight and the object of perpetual debate and debate, not class or revolutionary violence. The fundamental inheritance of England, the centrality of liberty, is castigated by those anxious to manufacture equality. But families are always there, at least as a biological starting point and springboard for self-definition, for it or against it. Some, like Andrew Warhol, leave home and never look back. And as often as not, even iconic individuals still drive home to Queens every day before they make it big and plaster their names over everything.

Just ask Donald Trump's father Fred.

Life, it is said, is full of contradictions, no more so than in America. But not all contradictions can or even should be solved. As Isaiah Berlin pointed out, liberty and equality exist in a perpetually uneasy balance, demanding continual recalibration, subject to numerous contingencies. The American ideology of liberty, and the social and legal environment it created, the outlets for debates found in politics, media, art and scholarship, tip the scale decisively toward the individual, and his or her family. The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution are the biggest contingencies of all, the knife's edges on which all else balances. We monkey with this at our peril, especially in the name of defending something as dynamic yet enduring as family. In the end, Bellow performs a salutary service by reminding us that no man or woman is an island. Everybody comes from somewhere. So would it hurt to call your mother?

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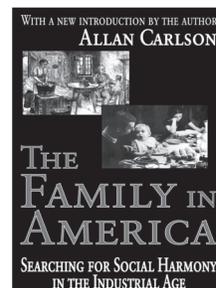
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