

# Why Are Debates Surrounding Family and Gender So Contentious? The “Principle of Deliberation” to Which We Must Return



The author says, “[...] the only principle we living today can derive from original conservatism is the stance of ‘making judgments only after calmly grasping the historical context and facts.’ [...] having redefined conservatism in a modern sense as the ‘principle of deliberation,’ I would like to call it *Knowledge First*.”

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## What Is Conservatism in the First Place?

The understandings of the concept of conservatism vary greatly from person to person. Historically, however, conservatism has represented a position that calmly asserts the impracticality of those forces that seek to sweep away an enduring society to construct a new one from a clean slate. Consequently, Edmund Burke (1729–1797), who expressed reservations on the voices praising the French Revolution, and Friedrich Hayek (1899–1992), who denied the feasibility of a socialist planned economy, are regarded as quintessential conservative thinkers. Both the French Revolution and the socialist planned economy were movements that attempted to fundamentally reconstruct society based on specific ideologies. Conservatism is what calmly pointed out the impracticality of such reforms.

From a conservative perspective, while the ideologies of reformists—such as social contract theory, the concept of human rights, and historical materialism—certainly possess a degree of logic, they are nonetheless insufficiently thought through.

In any case, a calm intellect supported by abundant and well-balanced knowledge was the primary weapon of conservatism. To the studious conservative, the enemy was that faction which, bypassing the process of deliberate reflection, wins public support by brandishing appealing ideologies and slogans, thereby frequently inflicting immense losses upon society.

### **Does Conservatism Exist Regarding Family and Gender?**

[Uno Shigeki](#), a scholar of conservatism, poses the question of whether conservatives in the original sense of the term ever existed in Japan in his book *Nihon no Hoshu to Riberaru* (Japanese Conservatism and Liberalism) (Chuko Sensho, 2023). Let us ask the same: have there been conservatives in the world of discourse and politics concerning family and gender?

To put it simply, it appears that conservatives, as defined earlier, did not exist anywhere—including Japan—when it comes to family and gender. This is because reformism, which advocates for reconstructing the systems of family and gender from a clean slate, never garnered widespread support. Certainly, there have been significant policy and institutional changes, such as the secularization of marriage in the French Revolution, the institutionalization of the “Ie” (household) system in the old Japanese Civil Code,<sup>1</sup> and the recent introduction of same-sex marriage in various countries. However, systems of family and gender are more deeply embedded in social structures and everyday practices than in any particular political regime. Moreover, since the advent of the modern era, they have been relegated to the private sphere, making them resistant to sudden transformation through intentional state intervention. Consequently, even for reformists, it is difficult to advocate for reconstructing them from their very foundations. Any forced attempt to do so would lead to extreme and destabilizing social outcomes. Because no movement to “sweep away the family system” ever gained momentum, conservative thinkers like Burke or Hayek had no occasion to emerge in this specific context.

Of course, this does not mean that an orthodoxy, comparable to constitutionalism in the political sphere, was entirely absent in the context of family and gender. However, one must properly understand what that orthodoxy entails in this case.

What has transformed family and gender more profoundly than any revolution or political regime is the massive tide of social change. That change is what sociology defines as the separation of the public and private spheres (public-private separation). While this separation has various meanings, here it refers to the process where operational elements, such as production and management, are detached

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<sup>1</sup> The institutionalization of the “Ie” system in the Old Japanese Civil Code—which unified the family under a single surname—was a hybrid design intended to project a “modern” image to the West while maintaining domestic order through a centralized register system.

from the family—or similar groups—and taken over by corporations and the state. By separating family and business, corporate organizations evolved explosively as rational entities centered on employment contracts—systematically excluding elements such as marriage, childbirth, and kinship ties. In turn, as these operational functions were stripped away, the family gradually transformed into a domestic sphere centered on love and care within a more egalitarian space.

It is unrealistic to resist this massive tide. Corporations can no longer embed familial elements within themselves. Organizations flexibly shaped by employment contracts generally prevail over those reinforced by personnel based on childbirth or marriage, or operated through paternal hierarchies and sibling solidarity.

What about the family? Attempting to reintroduce authority into the family is now inherently strained, as the productive and managerial roles that long underpinned such authority are absent. In many pre-modern societies, the male (the father) was the “CEO” managing the family estate and lineage; thus, it was rational for the father to hold authority. A father who has become a wage worker (breadwinner) might still command respect or exert power to impose his will based on his earnings. However, this is no longer the result of a rational allocation of power as an organizational leader. While being the breadwinner consequently increases his influence within the family, there is no longer a rational basis for a father to hold power specifically as a breadwinner rather than as a patriarch. Feminism has pointed out the lack of foundation for male authority in the private sphere, and within this historical current, that very observation holds orthodoxy.

The same applies to the gender gap in the public sphere. Gary Becker (1930–2014), a former Nobel laureate in economics, succinctly demonstrated that in modern corporations—given the right conditions—organizational management centered on merit and qualifications rather than gender is “stronger”; in other words, discrimination entails an economic loss. In the long run, the modern capitalist system possesses the potential to redress gender disparities—at least more so than pre-modern regimes.<sup>2</sup>

One orthodoxy that took root to some extent in the West and Japan during this process of change is the gender-based division of labor. This is a system that mitigates the conflicts arising from the public-private separation by assigning different roles to men and women. However, the sustainability of this orthodoxy has been eroded by long-term social fluctuations. There are several factors: over a long period,

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<sup>2</sup> However, as demonstrated by the Nobel laureate Claudia Goldin, the ‘child penalty’—the significant decline in earnings following parenthood—remains deeply entrenched. Consequently, closing the gender wage gap entirely remains a formidable challenge that cannot be easily overcome.

the ideals of liberty and human rights (liberalism) have taken root in society as orthodoxy even within the realms of family and gender. As productive and managerial roles were stripped away from the domestic sphere through the separation of the public and private, the private realm was restructured as a space for the pursuit of emotional fulfillment—or happiness—regardless of gender. Simultaneously, in the public sphere, the logic of capital, specifically meritocracy, has the potential to function in a way that transcends gender differences. These trends form the background.

Ultimately, what kind of system serves as the orthodoxy in advanced welfare states? It is, of course, not the pre-separation system where life, marriage, and reproduction were governed by the logic of organizational management. Nor is it the system of gender-based division of labor that assigns different roles to men and women. Rather, it is a centrist system that operates within the framework of capitalism and aligns with the principles of liberty and equality. It seeks to restructure the institutions of family and marriage while mitigating the child penalty—the ultimate hurdle that stands as the “final boss” of gender inequality—through various social support systems. In such a system, the family functions relatively well. For instance, fertility rates are relatively higher in societies that have shifted toward a system of gender equality.<sup>3</sup>

If conservatives are those who make judgments based on the overarching currents of social evolution, then those who obstinately resist these major trends appear not as conservatives, but rather as reformists. Attempting to deliberately reintroduce gender differences into corporate management or to forcefully reestablish patriarchal authority within family relationships may seem “conservative” at first glance. However, in contemporary society, these are difficult and unrealistic policies to implement.

### **“Conservatives” and “Conservatism”**

Debates surrounding the concept of conservatism are prone to confusion. It is not uncommon for a position that runs counter to the historical context and long-term fluctuations—elements prioritized in original conservatism—to be recognized as “conservative.” This is particularly conspicuous in issues concerning family and gender. Consequently, an apparently contradictory landscape often emerges, where “liberals<sup>4</sup> who look back at history” and “conservatives who disregard history” are seen catching glimpses of each other. Here, let us explain this twist while using the term “conservatives” in a sense that distinguishes it from true conservatism.

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<sup>3</sup> Tsutsui Junya, 2025, “*Choki-teki Shakai Hendo to Shoshika* (Long-term social change and the declining birthrate),” in [Miyamoto Taro](#) (ed.), *Kodomo ga Kieyuku Kuni no Tenkan* (Transforming a nation where children are disappearing) (Keiso Shobo).

<sup>4</sup> In Japan, the term ‘liberal’ primarily refers to political forces and intellectuals who are non-conservative and non-communist, often advocating for post-war democratic values, gender equality, and social welfare.

For instance, the familial ideal of “mothers being devoted to child-rearing” is regarded in academic circles as a quintessential feature of the *modern family*. In Ancien Régime France, the practice of wet-nursing was widespread, particularly among the upper classes; raising an infant with one’s own hands was not considered the ideal way of life for a woman. It was the Enlightenment thinkers—who envisioned themselves as the architects of a new era—who introduced the notion that “it is natural for women to possess maternal love and to raise their children with abundant affection.” As unmistakable reformists, they propagated the ideals of maternity and domestic education. The subsequent society based on the separation of public and private spheres did not take the form of “both men and women working in the public sphere and sharing domestic labor in the private sphere.” Instead, at least during early modernity, it accompanied a gender-based division of labor — “public for men, private for women.” These modernizing reformist forces played a significant role by propagating the novel ideology that it is “natural” for women to bear domestic responsibilities.

Given the above background, there are two inconveniences in the attitude of conservatives regarding the gender-based division of labor.

First, when conservatives invoke history to justify maintaining the gender-based division of labor, they are confronted with the inconvenient historical fact that the gender-based division of labor was preeminently *modern*. Second, according to various statistical facts, preserving the gender-based division of labor is unrealistic—in a sense, it is a “reformist” policy.

Demonstrating that the “traditional” family imagined by *conservatives* is actually a *modern* invention does not inherently validate liberal positions. In practice, however, it often has that effect. This leads to a paradoxical twist where liberals, in their push for contemporary family reforms, frequently adopt the strategy of looking back into history to counter conservative arguments.

### **The Complex and Elusive Tradition of the Japanese Family**

A similar structure emerges in the debate over the selective separate surname system.

The system of surnames developed in intricate entanglement with the family system. From a professional standpoint, the institutions surrounding family and surnames, especially in Japan, have undergone such complex transformations that they cannot be defined as a single, monolithic “tradition.”

The traditions of China and Korea are based on societies with powerful patrilineal norms. Those sharing the same surname belonged to a clear paternal lineage, and marriage within the same clan was strictly forbidden (Same-surname exogamy). These paternal lineages were large-scale organizations known as *zongzu* (lineage groups) that extended beyond individual households (families or *ko*) to

worship the same ancestors. While a woman would leave her natal group to join her husband's, she never changed the surname inherited from her father (mandatory separate surnames).

While patrilineal norms in Japan were not as rigid as those in China, the 1876 Dajokan directive (the Grand Council of State Edict) initially mandated that a wife retain her *Shosei-no-uji* (birth surname)—that is, the surname of her own parents (effectively, separate surnames for husband and wife). However, the later Civil Code of 1898 dictated the use of the “same surname as a household” (mandatory same surname for husband and wife). This reflected an ambition to “Westernize” (*Datsu-A Nyu-O* [Leaving Asia, Joining Europe]) by adopting the policy of couples sharing a surname,<sup>5</sup> while also basing it on the Japanese *Ie* (house) system that had permeated society since the mid-Tokugawa (Edo) period (1603–1867).

Through this inconsistent development of the surname system, one can already see that the Japanese family has walked a complex historical path. In the house system that spread through Japan during the Tokugawa period, it was difficult to emulate the strict patrilineality of China. While the Japanese house system was based on a stem family system (where only one child becomes the successor), it prioritized the continuity of the household above all else. To this end, it permitted options that would be inconceivable under strict patrilineality, such as adopting heirs from outside the lineage, *Ane-katoku* (female headship), and endogamy within the kinship group. Without such measures, the household would have perished. In contrast, Chinese tradition followed a community family system rather than a stem family system (assuming no hierarchy among brothers), where the survival of individual households or units was of less concern, while the continuation of the entire clan beyond those units was emphasized.

In any case, Japan's current surname system is the result of a mixture of patrilineality, the house system, and the government's ambitions for “De-Sinicization” and Westernization.<sup>6</sup>

At this point, it should be clear just how daunting a task it is to speak of the “traditions of family and surnames” in Japan. By examining history, it becomes clear that the Japanese family system developed through a complex intertwining of bilateral descent principles as a base, along with patrilineality, the house system, the stem family system, and Western principles. Thus, describing Japanese tradition in brief is impossible. Hence the profound irony: the very *Japanese* tradition that conservatives strive to uphold is, in point of fact, an element of *Western* origin.

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<sup>5</sup> Shi, Junfei, 2023, “Why did the civil code of Meiji Japan provide the same surname for couples? Westernization, de-Chineseization, and the construction of a national state,” *The History of the Family*, 28 (4): 760-778

<sup>6</sup> For further details, please refer to the Gendai Business article (2025) by Ochiai Emiko: <https://gendai.media/articles/-/146597> (in Japanese).

That said, contemporary conservatives are prone to linking themselves with nationalism and xenophobia. Regarding the selective separate surname system, claims are frequently made on social media that “the family register system will collapse, making it easier for those with foreign roots to infiltrate.” Here, too, if one stands from the position of conservatism, one would feel compelled to urge others: before making hasty judgments drawn toward xenophobic slogans, let us calmly study the basic mechanisms and history of the family register system—and if possible, let us read several specialized books by established researchers. It is not only history that cannot be understood without thorough study.

### **Confusion Surrounding “Gender Gap”**

A lack of thorough study is by no means a characteristic limited solely to certain conservatives.

There is an indicator known as the Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI), which media outlets with a certain liberal bent—eager to emphasize “Japan’s lag in gender equality”—bring up almost as an annual tradition. In this index, Japan (ranked 118th in the 2025 report) is positioned far below countries such as Nicaragua (18th in the same report) and Rwanda (39th). For those holding specific positions, this low ranking for Japan provided by a global organization (the World Economic Forum, WEF) serves as perfect material to push their own arguments—for instance, regarding Japan’s backwardness in terms of gender.

However, in Nicaragua, against a backdrop of widespread sexual violence against adolescent women, the adolescent birthrate and maternal mortality rate are incomparably higher than those in Japan. The reason Nicaragua ranks high in the Global Gender Gap Index, despite these serious issues surrounding women’s health and rights, is that adolescent birthrates and maternal mortality rates cannot be defined for men. Therefore, these issues are ignored by the Index, which only utilizes figures where a gap between men and women can be defined.<sup>7</sup>

It is true that Japan continues to face major challenges in terms of the gender gap, such as a very low ratio of women in management positions compared to countries at the same economic level and a large gender wage gap. Regarding these issues, there is merit in highlighting the Global Gender Gap Index for advocacy purposes. Furthermore, given the characteristics of its numerical data, the index is an indicator suited for economically developed societies; thus, activities such as calculating the Gender Gap Index for

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<sup>7</sup> Tsutsui Junya, “*Nihon wa Jenda Gyappu 125-i*” wo Sonomama Uketotteha Ikenai (2023) (Don’t take ‘Japan ranked 125th in gender gap’ at face value) (2023), President Online <https://president.jp/articles/-/71137> (in Japanese)

Japan's prefectures to inform policy are rational.<sup>8</sup>

However, accepting the index unconditionally just because it is convenient for one's own argument, without fully understanding its characteristic of being composed solely of gender disparities, could lead to averting one's eyes from the realistic and serious problems facing women. When considering human welfare, a reservation is necessary to calmly contextualize the gap.

### **A Proposal for “Knowledge First” to Transcend Conflict**

The true value of original conservatism is demonstrated when radical reformist arguments—those seeking to reconstruct society from scratch based on a specific ideology—gain popular support. In the contemporary society in which we live, such extreme radicalism rarely garners widespread backing. Ultimately, the only enduring principle we can glean from original conservatism today is a commitment to intellectual restraint: making judgments only after a dispassionate assessment of historical context and facts.” Nevertheless, when a position becomes dominant that is excessively dragged along by some ideology—whether it be “tradition,” “Japan First,” or “gender equality”—and skips the task of carefully contextualizing the current situation based on verified facts, the very pride of conservatism lies in maintaining an attitude of appropriate reservation, regardless of whether that position stems from “conservatives” or “liberals.” Here, having redefined conservatism in a modern sense as the principle of deliberation, I would propose calling it “Knowledge First.”

This may be partly due to the influence of the development of social media, which distributes and consumes vast amounts of short messages and fragmented videos driven by the logic of capital. However, the characteristic of current discourse surrounding conservatives and liberals lies in the slippage of information severed from the contexts that should originally be carefully linked, and the resulting failure of communication. Rigorous debate—grounded in the patient verification of facts and a meticulous parsing of each side's core arguments—is increasingly marginalized in the current climate. Instead of such painstaking effort, what drives engagement today are statements and snippets that offer a seemingly instant “triumph” over an opponent—a fleeting sense of visceral catharsis. Because the goal has shifted to the consumption of fragmented information for instant gratification, any chance for meaningful discussion is lost.

Yet the reality is that history and facts are seldom so conveniently satisfying. Learning about society is a constant process of encountering facts that challenge our initial, simplistic preconceptions. The gradual updating of that perception is precisely the fascination of the academic study of society. Yet, that

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<sup>8</sup> “Prefectural Gender Gap Index of Japan” (2025), <https://digital.kyodonews.jp/gender2025> (in Japanese)

fascination is an experience found only beyond the arduous task of understanding complex things as they are.

In all likelihood, even those who advance rigid arguments would, upon going through the experience of calm learning, frequently feel how much their initial assertions were based on a simple—and therefore powerless to explain reality—perception. I wish to emphasize that the policy of “Knowledge First”—pausing to know thoroughly before thinking and speaking—is precisely that of original conservatism.

*Translated from “Kazoku to Jenda wo Meguru Giron wa Naze Tairitsu surunoka: Tachikaerubeki ‘Jukuryo no Gensoku’ (Why Are Debates Surrounding Family and Gender So Contentious? The ‘Principle of Deliberation’ to Which We Must Return),” Chuokoron, February 2026, pp.74–81 (Courtesy of Chuo Koron Shinsha) [March 2026]*

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