CURRENT BOOKS

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Centuries of Childrearing

THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS: The Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance. *By John Boswell. Pantheon, 1989. 473 pp. $24.95*

Two hundred years ago, at the peak of the European Enlightenment and on the eve of the French Revolution, at least a quarter of all children born in Toulouse, France, were abandoned by their parents, given up to foundling hospitals, the forerunners of the Victorian orphanage. The reason for this astonishing number was not parental cruelty but a combination of high adult mortality and endemic poverty.

Today, both the foundling hospital and the orphanage have all but vanished, and in the United States only 1.5 percent of all children born are available for adoption. Adult mortality is now minimal, but poverty, while much reduced, is still with us; in America, four of 10 children are born into impoverished circumstances.

But what has changed the most is the understanding of parentage. Today's society, so horrified by notions of abandonment that it actively represses all memory of earlier practices, rules out all alternatives to the natal family, thus condemning a sizable proportion of its children to a life of class and race discrimination.

Given the current situation, this book by Yale historian John Boswell could not have come at a better time. His combination of exacting scholarship and lucid style gives us a look at alternatives, historically sanctioned and perfectly consistent with Judeo-Christian tradition, which could well serve as inspiration for new departures in family policies. Taking us through the long history of abandonment (which might better be called "placement"), he reveals practices which, however much they may be at odds with modern sentiment, were perfectly consistent with concern for children.

According to Boswell's cautious calculations, abandonment in the West probably increased from the time Rome was Christianized during the fourth century, A.D., up to the High Middle Ages of the 12th and 13th centuries. It then declined slightly, only to begin to rise again after 1300. While Boswell does not project this trend beyond 1800, one may safely say that abandonment, in the way he uses the term, did not really cease until as recently as the 1950s, when the doors of the modern orphanage were finally shut.

While Boswell wisely refuses to quantify—the evidence is too shaky—he does make it clear that the meaning and mechanisms of abandonment shifted radically over time. In the ancient Roman world, the system was informal and voluntary, with infants left at well-known sites to be picked up by strangers in need of heirs or laborers. While free-born children were not supposed to be enslaved, many were. On the other hand, many assumed the relationship of *alumni* to the strangers who picked them up. *Alumni* were not the same as natural children, but neither were they slaves. Instead, the term designated a spiritual relationship, one that still resonates in our academic usage of the term, but would seem alien to our family life in which even the adopted child acquires the status of the natural child.

The church fathers of early Christianity had no objections to abandonment. In fact, the church moved to formalize procedures in the practice of *oblation*, the giving of a child to a monastic order. This proved popular with both the rich and the poor during the early Middle Ages, and it provided surplus offspring a better future than they might have had with their natural families. The threat posed by divisible in-

heritances was one reason the rich gave up their own children; for the poor, the rationale was survival, of the parent as well as the child.

Later, during the High Middle Ages, the institution of primogeniture (by which all family wealth was passed on to the oldest son) and rising standards of living made it possible for both groups to keep more of their offspring. But ironically the regularization of marriage and family during this brief age of affluence brought sharper distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate children—"children of virtue" and "children of sin"—thus creating new reasons for abandonment.

When times turned bad again after 1300, a new institution, the foundling hospital, took over from the monasteries. Originating in Italy, such hospitals existed throughout Europe by the 18th century. They were largely secular institutions run by professionals. But despite the best intentions of those who ran them, they became known for their high mortality rates. Children, Boswell notes, "disappeared quietly and efficiently through the revolving doors of state-run foundling homes, out of sight and mind, into social oblivion, or, more likely, death by disease."

Orphanages remained lethal places until the late 19th century, but the diminishing mortality of parents, not of children, brought an end to the era that began in the 13th century. By 1950, there were simply too few orphans to justify the old institutions. So the age of the foster home was ushered in.

Yet demography alone does not explain why the memory and practice of abandonment has been repressed in recent times. More important is the changing definition of parental obligations. Unfortunately, Boswell gives insufficient attention to its social and cultural history. To refute the notion that Romans were indifferent, unfeeling parents, he argues that they did not hold views "fundamentally different from their modern counterparts." Boswell rehabilitates medieval and early modern parents in the same way, producing, in all cases, sympathetic but fundamentally anachronistic accounts of their actions.

Boswell's treatment of parents ignores gender differences, thus obscuring the very distinct histories of motherhood and fatherhood. And finally, Boswell makes no allowances for the difference between childbearing and childrearing, which is crucial to understanding why, until very recently, mothers have been willing to give up their newborns to the care of strangers. As long as motherhood meant only childbearing, there was no scandal involved in having others rear their children. But when, during the late 18th century, European and American educated classes redefined motherhood as childrearing, ancient practices suddenly came to be regarded as unnatural and immoral.

Among the working classes it remained perfectly respectable until the mid-20th century to be a good mother and give up one's child. However, today's child-care debate takes for granted the idea that the mother-child relationship is indispensable. And this exclusive feminization (or even "motherization") of childrearing has been a decisive factor in the feminization of poverty. The fact that 98.5 percent of children are condemned to their natal fate, and thus a substantial proportion to deprivation and discrimination, is the product of a

historical dead-end in which all alternatives to the biological family are seen as both immoral and unworkable.

By reminding us that the tradition of the spiritual family and nonnatal parenthood is perfectly consistent with Judeo-Christian tradition, Boswell helps us to revise our unnecessarily rigid notions of good parents, making a place once again for the kindness of strangers.

—*John R. Gillis, '88*

A New War on Poverty?

POOR SUPPORT: Poverty in the American Family. *By David T. Ellwood. Basic. 1988. 271 pp. $19.95*

STARTING EVEN: An Equal Opportunity Program to Combat the Nation's New Poverty. *By Robert Haveman. Simon and Schuster. 1988. 287 pp. $19.95*

If persistent poverty at the end of the 1980s and its implications for U.S. social policy are not sufficiently interesting to attract a wide readership, the spectacle of liberals revising their thinking may be. Haveman, an economist at the University of Wisconsin, and Ellwood, a professor of public policy at Harvard, are both specialists on social welfare policy. They are also liberals who, it seems, are changing their minds.

Writing in the wake of neoconservative indictments of Great Society welfare programs by authors like Charles Murray, Lawrence Mead, and George Gilder, Haveman and Ellwood also identify themselves as critics of the status quo. Both reject the argument of Murray's *Losing Ground* (1984) that welfare, as enlarged during the 1960s and 1970s, deserves greatest blame for a growing poor population and for a disturbing pattern of long-term dependency. But if the current welfare system does not, in their view, cause poverty, it does a bad job of lifting the able-bodied out of it. Treating symptoms rather than causes, it allows dependency and leads to the result that, in Ellwood's words, "everybody hates welfare."

By welfare, Ellwood means not support for the aged and disabled but aid to the "healthy non-elderly"—costing four percent of the federal budget, 1.5 percent of GNP. No gigantic sum, compared to outlays for defense or agriculture, it is still hated because it supports programs in conflict with "our values," defined by Ellwood as individual autonomy, work, family, and community. Ellwood thinks the government should promote individual responsibility and not be in conflict with work-oriented beliefs. He argues that long-term, cash-based support for the healthy young should be replaced with a system that "expects more."

Ellwood, it should be noted, limits his proposals to the problem of families with children. Single males require another yardstick, he believes. This confession reveals a refreshing candor in face of plain facts. Social and economic changes during the past three decades have tended to "increase the independence and economic position of women and decrease the economic status of men," and to make "marriage look less essential" to women. But this female (and, in a strange way, male) "liberation" has ended up plunging millions of children and young mothers into poverty. These poor, moreover, are disproportionately black, since "marriage declined massively in the black community."

Ellwood's policy proposals seek, among other things, to make marriage "look better." They include virtual elimination of income taxation among the poor, raising the minimum wage so that "work pays," expanding child-care subsidies and medical insurance.

But where enters responsibility? Ellwood proposes that fathers of illegitimate