

**PAST, PRESENT, AND
PERSONAL: The Family
and the Life Course in
American History**

by John Demos
Oxford, 1986
215 pp. \$17.95

educator Charles Willie: "By idolizing those whom we honor, we fail to realize that we could go and do likewise."

In eight crisp essays, Demos, a Yale historian, looks back at difficulties that continue to beset the American family. This perspective allows him to dismiss a number of popular notions. One is that child abuse is an enduring problem in our society. In truth, he finds, it was rare in Colonial New England; when it occurred (as, for instance, in the brutal treatment of servant children), the local populace reacted with alacrity. Ways existed to locate and discover abuse.

Similarly, in the study of adolescence, which Demos says is just entering "its own adolescence," academic specialists naively assume that turmoil is a universal feature of passage into adulthood. Adolescence may not be as stressful, or important, a stage of development now as it was only decades ago. Indeed, many young Americans today seem to have "skipped adolescence entirely." Stages of life, Demos reminds us, are largely human inventions.

As for fatherhood, Demos demonstrates that "men's experience of domestic life has changed more deeply than that of all the other players combined." Pigeonholing the roles (pedagogue, caretaker, companion) that fathers have variously played since the 17th century, he concludes that paternal involvement in raising children has steadily risen.

Can knowledge of the past serve family policy today? Demos's concluding essay suggests, modestly, that it can.

**THE FOUL AND
THE FRAGRANT:
Odor and the French
Social Imagination**

by Alain Corbin
Harvard, 1986
307 pp. \$25

Like other historians of the French *Annales* school, Corbin explores what might seem to be a negligible matter in order to uncover the *mentalités* of an age. Odors, and people's attitudes toward them in 18th- and 19th-century France, lead Corbin through realms as diverse as scientific thought, social theory, medical practice, bedroom mores, and civic reform.

Smell, he relates, was central to 18th-century notions of disease. Doctors busily collected and

classified air to identify what were considered to be dangerous, even deadly, odors. A strong whiff of "excrement, mud, ooze, and corpses provoked panic," says Corbin, particularly among finer folk. As for the stench of the poor, it merely offended the gentry, who, in their effort to create a well-scented "personalized atmosphere," supported a growing perfume industry.

Cholera epidemics during the 1830s brought home the urgency of "cleaning up the wretched." But the common man, long attached to strong, foul odors, resisted: The use of the newly discovered disinfectant chlorine in water was seen by the fearful "as evidence that the elite were bent on mass homicide." Unlike London (which began building sewer systems during the 1860s), Paris in 1911 still stank. Incompetent officials were only partly to blame; French antipathy toward sanitation stemmed from an ingrained "collective attitude toward the body, organic functions, and the sensory messages."

Contemporary Affairs

RIVAL VIEWS OF THE MARKET SOCIETY and Other Recent Essays

by Albert O. Hirschman
Viking, 1987
197 pp. \$18.95

Hirschman, an economist and emeritus professor at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton, is justly respected for boldness of thought in a field increasingly known for its narrow focus on quantification. As these 10 essays show, he is a philosopher about matters monetary.

In four retrospective pieces, Hirschman, after 30 years of experience, reexamines conclusions drawn by a younger self. Serving as financial adviser to the Colombian government from 1952-54, he found that decisions made *al reves* (the wrong way around) often had "hidden rationalities." Unbalanced growth could prove desirable, as when tensions between various sectors led to overall economic growth.

Elsewhere, he examines the meanings of basic economic concepts. "Interest," for example, synonymous with usury in the Middle Ages, came to signify to 18th-century thinkers the glue holding civilized society together. Another related notion is self-interest, and Hirschman applauds the current tendency among more perspicacious economists to question its place as the primary motive