Family Affairs

Domestic Tyranny. The Making of Social Policy against Family Violence from Colonial Times to the Present. ELIZABETH PLECK. Oxford University Press, New York, 1987. viii, 273 pp. + plates. $24.95.

Since the 1960s, increasing public concern about family violence has generated a variety of social programs to identify and aid its victims. Yet domestic violence is not exclusively a modern phenomenon. As Elizabeth Pleck shows in *Domestic Tyranny*, it has been a troublesome problem throughout American history. By comparing the contemporary reform movement with two earlier periods of intense concern with family violence—in the 17th-century Puritan colony of Massachusetts and in late-19th-century America—she shows that a persistent tension between protecting the victim and preserving the family has plagued the formation and implementation of effective social policy in this area.

Repeatedly, reformers' zeal to eliminate domestic violence has foundered on what Pleck terms the "Family Ideal": a set of beliefs that the family should be an inviolable sphere of privacy, safe from outside interference; that the husband has the right to his wife's sexual services, as well as physically to discipline her and their children; and that the family must be preserved no matter what the cost to its individual members. To the extent that their work involved counseling divorce or increasing state intervention in family life, policy-makers concerned with domestic violence have frequently been accused of trying to "destroy" the family. Not surprisingly, those reformers who have been most successful in achieving their goals have avoided direct attacks on the Family Ideal and instead couched their efforts in terms of family preservation and crime prevention.

Pleck's historical narrative begins with an examination of the Puritan colonies of Massachusetts and Plymouth Bay, which in the 17th century became the first governments in the Western world to pass legislation prohibiting the beating of spouses. They also enacted laws against "unnatural severity" toward children. The Puritans' unusual attention to domestic violence reflected the importance they accorded the family in preserving the religious and social order. Their protective stance toward women and children represented not a belief in individual rights but rather a desire to preserve family unity. From examining the records of both church and civil courts, Pleck concludes that "Puritan courts placed family preservation ahead of physical protection of victims" (p. 23).

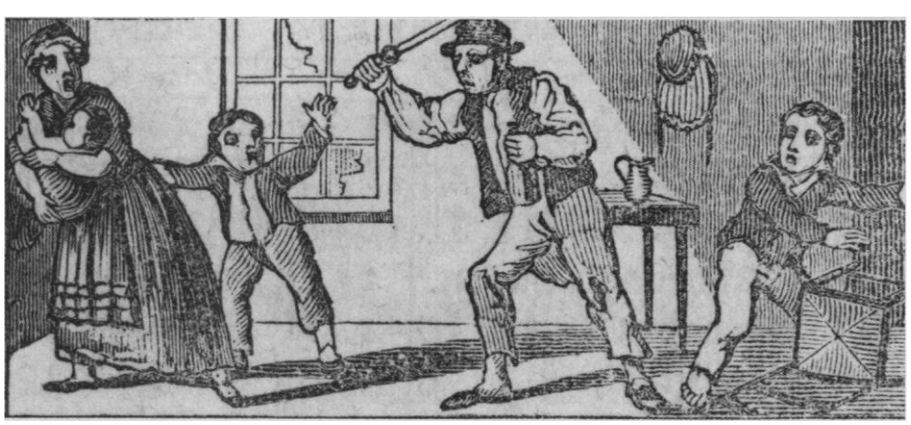
As communal life eroded in Puritan New England, so did vigilance concerning family discord. Not until the mid-19th century, after profound changes in child-rearing practices and gender roles, did the problem of domestic violence once again become a focus of concern. Drawing on the new "cult of domesticity," antebellum temperance advocates invoked images of the brutish male and the pure woman in portraying the "drunkard's wife," the first popularly recognized victim of male aggression. After the Civil War, the "social purity" movement took up the case of "crimes against women": within its ranks, different groups advocated moral exhortation, criminal prosecution, and even a return to the whipping post as measures to control the abusive husband. But ultimately these efforts to aid battered wives failed, Pleck concludes, because they refused to countenance (as did more radical women's rights activists) the most effective solution to the problem: legal separation or divorce, followed by maintenance of female-headed households.

The late-19th-century child protection movement enjoyed somewhat more success. Societies for the prevention of cruelty to children, some 500 of which were founded between 1874 and 1900, avoided challenging the Family Ideal and justified child rescue as a form of crime prevention. By enforcing specially enacted laws against child neglect and abuse, the SPCCs' agents claimed that they were saving battered children from future lives of crime. Analyzing the records of the Pennsylvania and Massachusetts SPCCs, Pleck found that most anti-cruelty work involved prodding drunken, neglectful parents to take better care of their children: "In enforcing a variety of laws concerning children, the child cruelty societies operated in a manner similar to the police—they carried a big stick, but rarely used it" (p. 85).

In the early 20th century, reformers turned to other social problems. "Stigmatized by its association with old-fashioned moralism," family violence became "a problem of the past," writes Pleck (p. 126). Of course, the problem did not disappear: cases of wife and child abuse came increasingly to be tried in special juvenile and domestic relations courts that attempted to resolve conflicts and keep families together, no matter what the cost. Beginning in the 1930s, the influence of psychoanalytic theory, particularly its emphasis on female masochism and seduction fantasies, further contributed to the silencing of abuse victims.

Not until the 1960s did domestic violence once again become a focus for reform. Significantly, it was pediatricians and radiologists, who could provide "objective" proof of child abuse, who first drew attention to the "battered child syndrome" in 1962. A decade later, the women's movement popularized the "battered wife syndrome." In the last two decades, legal remedies for domestic violence have been greatly strengthened and programs to help the victims of family violence have proliferated rapidly. Compared to their predecessors, contemporary policymakers have been much more willing to provide physical protection and economic support of abuse victims; yet sometimes they, too, have been overly eager to stress the preservation of the family unit.

From her comparative historical analysis, Pleck concludes that espousing the Family



"The first American depiction of family violence, from a temperance almanac, 1835." [From *Domestic Tyranny*]

A mother uses the shingle on her son, about 1897. [From *Domestic Tyranny*; courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society]

Ideal, as do so many conservative politicians today, will only "permit, encourage, and serve to maintain domestic violence." The only real solution to the problem, she asserts, is to "affirm the individual liberty of women and children within the nuclear family and legitimize and expand the alternatives to it" (p. 203). To this end, Pleck recommends improving fostering and adoption programs for abused children and offering legal aid, economic support, and job training to battered wives.

While stating her own convictions clearly, Pleck is scrupulously fair in assessing the motives and accomplishments of past reformers and avoids simplistic dichotomies between the goals of humanitarianism and social control. Her work also possesses the great merit of incorporating legal developments with the history of welfare and reform. But readers should be forewarned that this is indeed a study of social policy toward family violence, and not an analysis of its causes. Pleck rarely speculates on why domestic abuse occurs, but rather concentrates on how society responded to that violence in its moral and legal codes.

In an interesting appendix, Pleck does examine the incidence of family murder, the only form of domestic violence for which reasonably reliable statistics exist. Her data suggest that the rates for family murder began to rise in the 19th century and have increased rapidly in the 20th century. These figures seem to contradict Pleck's assertion that "reform against family violence has mainly occurred as a response to social and political conditions, or social movements, rather than to worsening conditions in the home" (pp. 4–5). Leaving the Puritans aside, one might well argue that the late-19th-century and late-20th-century reform initiatives were in some measure a response to the rising volume of domestic discord.

The devastating consequences of the current "epidemic" of family violence makes Pleck's analysis all the more timely. Her thoroughly researched and carefully argued study should be required reading for all those concerned with the problem today.

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A Brief Arousal

Beyond the Laboratory. Scientists as Political Activists in 1930s America. PETER J. KUZNICK. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 1987. x, 363 pp. $29.95.

C. P. Snow, the physicist who became a novelist, pictured scientists as restless inquirers concerning politics as well as particles. *The New Men*, his tale of the wartime effort to make an A-bomb in England, contrasts engineers, who "buckled to their jobs and gave no trouble," with scientists, from whose ranks came "heretics, forerunners, martyrs, traitors." Not long before Snow died I had the chance to ask him if he recalled writing that and if he still believed it. He instantly remembered and repudiated it. Scientists, he had decided, were mostly like engineers in their political docility. He may have been helped to that change of mind by Alice Kimball Smith's study of the A-bomb scientists in America. When she asked veterans of Los Alamos what they had thought and said to each other about the political implications of the weapon they were inventing, she drew a blank. They had to rack their brains to remember a few offhand comments; Oppenheimer had stopped the one man at Los Alamos who wanted to organize discussions of the bomb's political significance.

Peter Kuznick tries to put American scientists in a different light. He pictures the Great Depression as "politicizing" them, shifting "the prevailing norm within the scientific community" from complaisant "identification with the existing power structure" to demand for "an ethic of social concern and responsibility." Events of the late '30s conspired to undercut that new activism, but even "during the war the scientists consistently argued for sharing atomic secrets with the Soviet Union, warning . . . that . . . the U.S. atomic monopoly would be short-lived, . . . that only international control of atomic energy could avert a disastrous arms race." In fact, as Kuznick must surely know, only a handful of scientists argued that way before Hiroshima. He makes the careless generalization anyhow, implying that the active handful were somehow representative of their passive colleagues.

In the introduction Kuznick declares that he is not attempting "an intellectual history of the entire scientific community"; he is presenting only that small portion that was involved in leftist activities during the 1930s. But he quickly forgets that prefatory caution and extrapolates freely from the exceptional individuals and ephemeral organizations he has studied to the mentality of the majority or even "the scientific community" as a whole. He pictures them as radicalized not only by the Great Depression but also by exciting news of scientifically guided progress in Soviet Russia and by alarming news of racist tyranny in Nazi Germany. Very soon, however, news of mass repression in Russia was reinforced by the 1939 Soviet agreement with Germany, and the "progressive" coalition in America broke apart. Outspoken anti-Communists (such as the philosophers John Dewey and Sidney Hook) confronted Communist sympathizers, leaving the people who loom largest in Kuznick's account (the anthropologist Franz Boas and the physiologist Walter B. Cannon, most notably) in the untenable middle, unable to stem the "red-baiting" that disorganized the left and turned the scientific community back toward its characteristic docility.

Kuznick has combed private papers as well as the public record to give a very detailed account of left-leaning scientists, their organizations, petitions, and campaigns during the '30s. The detail is often excessive, but even so the book is not very large, for there were not many left-leaning American scientists even in that decade of acute distress, and they did not do very much or think very deeply about the world's distress. I suppose Kuznick's book will stand as the definitive account of the topic, and we should be grateful that it has been done by a conscientious scholar in sympathy with his subjects, not by a zealot bent on exposing villains or creating mythic heroes. Kuznick's subjects are recognizable American academics with their familiar milk-and-water ideology. An occasional zealot—such as H. J. Muller in his Communist and eugenicist years—is an ephemeral mutation, quickly swamped by the population's commitment to cautious moderation even when taking a stand.