

Decultured Paternity

David Blankenhorn, Fatherless America: Confronting our most urgent social problem, Basic Books, New York, 1995

Reviewed by Brian T. Trainor

THE orthodox view of fathers is that they are superfluous, dangerous to wives and damaging to children. But for David Blankenhorn, founder and president of the Institute for American Values, it is a matter of great concern that 'tonight, about 40 per cent of American children will go to sleep in homes in which their fathers do not live', and that 'before they reach the age of eighteen, more than half of our nation's children are likely to spend at least a significant portion of their childhoods living apart from their fathers' (p.1).

Blankenhorn sees the father as an irreplaceable caregiver, moral educator and family breadwinner. Fatherhood was once understood as — and in his view, in essence, it still is — an indispensable, intimate presence in the procreation and rearing of a child. But today, he complains, the 'good father' or 'model father' has become 'culturally invisible'; as an ideal to be emulated, he is conspicuous by his absence in today's anti-marriage, pro-divorce culture:

A decultured paternity necessarily fractures any coherent social understanding of fatherhood. As fewer children live with their biological fathers, and more live with or near stepfathers, mothers' boyfriends, or other male 'role models', biological fatherhood is being separated from social fatherhood. In turn, social fatherhood, once detached from any one man, becomes more diffuse as an idea and elastic as a role — less a person than a style of relating to children. (p.16)

Blankenhorn views with concern the rise of what he calls 'volitional fatherlessness'. Whereas the principal cause of fatherlessness was once paternal death, which does *not* undermine the idea and importance of fatherhood, today the major cause is paternal choice, which *does* undermine that idea and its importance. And the consequences, he holds, are socially and personally disastrous for children. The boy who commits crime, who has a deeply misogynistic sense of rage against his mother, women and society, and who exhibits an aggressive hypermasculinity or 'protest masculinity' is generally the fatherless boy who cannot become the son of his father. So 'if we want to learn the identity of the rapist, the hater of women, the occupant of jail cells, we do not look first to the boys with traditionally masculine fathers. We look first to boys with no fathers' (p.31). Yet discussions of youth crime simply ignore 'the elephant in the room called fatherlessness' (p.29).

The simple message or moral of this book is that each child *needs* a father, not a 'father substitute', not different men each performing a fatherhood role for a

child, not different men successively playing the role of father in the life of a child, not a biological progenitor reduced to the role of visiting his child or sending cheques in the mail, but a father who is there for his children. That is why fatherless children so frequently upset their mothers by persistently fantasising or questioning their mothers about 'my father'. According to Blankenhorn, 'we no longer focus on the objective situations of children. Instead, we discuss the subjective feelings of adults' (p.177). Likewise, against the view that living in a step-family with a 'new father' constitutes a 'new source of stability' or that it has no significant negative effects on children, Blankenhorn writes:

Step-families comprise the most unstable and volatile family form in our society. They are inherently fraught with bad outcomes for children. More specifically, the great majority of step-fathers are not — cannot ever be — replacement fathers or even extra fathers. In almost all of the most important ways they are not fathers at all. (p.190)

Unfortunately, while we have been regarding sexism, racism and 'homophobia' as the major evils of the late 20th century, Blankenhorn's analysis suggests that the chief and most real evil, namely 'adulthood', has been running rampant just beneath the range of our preoccupied adult gaze — quite literally, under our feet!

In the final chapter, the author turns his attention to the burning question, 'How is a culture shift in favor of fatherhood to be effected?'. But his answer is disappointing:

A culture shift in favour of the Good Family Man cannot draw its main strength from Washington politicians, Hollywood scriptwriters, Madison Avenue advertising firms, or the conferences of professional family scholars. Cultural elites can help or hinder social change, but their views, mercifully, are not all that matters. For fatherhood, the seedbeds of renewal must be local and immediate. The real shift must occur from the bottom up, around kitchen tables, less a reflection of elite fashion than a revolt against it. (p.225)

But if it is true that 'the fish rots from the head down', then the only way that a new cultural story celebrating fatherhood and motherhood as laudable gendered roles can emerge is if the current intellectual/cultural elite abandons as implausible its present cultural narrative or if a section of this elite (a new section or an old section with new ideas) gains a foothold in elite culture and begins the slow, laborious process of establishing a new, pro-fatherhood narrative or paradigm. The great achievement of this book is that it helps to establish just such a foothold.

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