

Book Review

*Liberation's Children: Parents and Kids in a Postmodern Age* by Kay S. Hymowitz. Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 2003.

Reviewed by Mark Daims

*Liberation's Children* and Kay Hymowitz's earlier book, *Ready or Not: What Happens When We Treat Small Children As Adults*, are both social criticism; social criticism that seems to emanate out of a deep concern for children that causes, even necessitates that the author carefully examine our culture. Her concern is allied with deep insight and she looks through the academic and social life of children to focus on who they are, their innermost selves. She argues that our society offers little depth or meaning to the generations to come and dilutes what children might otherwise grow up to be.

*Liberation's Children* is a collection of essays that deserves to be knit together into the fabric of a book. The first essay, 'Fear and Loathing at the Day Care Center', follows the politics of research on day care. The author contends that many interests hold day care as a societal good even though most parents would prefer family leave and other options that would allow them to be with their children. The author points out that even now most mothers are either at home with their children or working only part time. Day care, to the author, is really vocational school. It's the first step towards a job and in a culture of "ecstatic capitalism" our job is what defines us as human beings, that and our sexuality. Feminists also support day care and the workplace as the place for women and attack any research showing deleterious effects on children while most of the researchers themselves apologize or explain away those same negative effects. Hymowitz quotes the psychologist Edward Zigler's admission that, "Our job isn't to dissuade mothers from using child care by sending up these horror stories. Our real task is to do a public education campaign with parents to get quality care." This among other arguments supports Hymowitz's contention that much of the research community backs day care as an established good. Day care, however, is good for neither children or parents. Kay Hymowitz states, "There is an emptiness in the soul of woman under ecstatic capitalism." Referring to day care as "collec-

tive care" she sites Bruno Bettelheim's studies on collective care on a kibbutz where all the infants were fed exactly the same as it was assumed they were all identical. Similar studies of Chinese nurseries found that the babies moved their bowels in unison. Hymowitz feels individuals require individual attention, "... the experience of self-hood finds continual reinforcement from family members who affirm the child as an individual like no other. Collective care, by its very definition, cannot do this."

Her next essay parodies the competition between parents trying to get their toddlers into the brand name preschools in Manhattan. In it she quotes the sociologist William Doherty who feels childrearing has declined to "parenting as product development." Americans pay too much attention to the child-product, how bright they are, how to forward their education (career) and come to know and judge children merely through what they achieve. Hymowitz would agree with the anonymous quotation that goes, "About all some parents accomplish in life is to send a child to Harvard."

The essay, 'Sesame Street: It's All Show', points out that the producer decided to use the tactics used in commercials to create a television show for children. The show, like a commercial, merely keeps the child's attention. It projects no meaning or guidance as to what life is about except to portrayal of life as separate infobits, as glib entertainment. Hymowitz is again convincing. "Sesame street is a triumph of appearance over substance." Schools, in another essay, in the matter of fact way in which they teach sex education, also impart knowledge without substance or meaning. Love, affection, and tenderness are not a part of the educational portrayal of sex. The author describes a AIDS prevention program that issued flashcards to students who were supposed to arrange them in the correct order (an example of the "robotization" of sex). The one labeled "Talk with Partner" was to go first. Another card of equal size to be placed last said, "Throw Condom Out." Older feminists also sterilize sex or as a younger feminist Katherine March who is quoted in the book puts it, "Sex is an easily obtained, feminist-approved goal. One that carries less stigma than admitting to loneliness or desperately wanting emotional connection with a man."

'Raising children for an Uncivil Society' finds more evidence that our children live in a medium without meaning. Some experts assert that young children have an innate moral sense perhaps hinting that we need not pass on morals to them. Carol Gilligan, the noted psychologist and author of *In a Different Voice*, likes girls who "refuse to take no for an answer." Gilligan, the author argues, has one moral principle, the self. "The capacity for these eight-year-olds to be openly angry--to be really mad--to be disruptive and resistant gives them an air of unedited authority and authenticity" says Gilligan. This is a statement the author feels displays a lack of respect for the larger context of the community, the classroom in this case, and a respect for the individual's, even a child's, momentary emotionality. The next essay continues the theme. Schools, under attack by

the legal system, are setting more rules and acting more and more like legal systems. This strips adults of their better role as leaders who project moral identities and appoints them as bureaucrats who merely administer codes.

'Twins: ten going on sixteen' finds parents to blame for the media's power over children and their provocative dress and attitudes. The book quotes the director of adolescent and young adult medicine at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, Robert L. Johnson, "Kids wear sexually provocative cloths at nine because their parents buy them provocative cloths not because of their hormones." The authors inquiries lead her to say that, "The one theme that comes through loud and clear in talking with educators and therapists, it's the blind leading the blind," and without parents to lead children their peers quickly respond to fill in the gap. Gilligan again is called to task for her assertion that parents and teachers are "silencing" girls and that girls are subject to a "tyranny of the nice and the kind." Hymowitz finds this tragic. Gilligan wants girls to be self-assertive but argues that to have getting one's own way as a central meaning to life is to miniaturize human beings. Life can be lived and children can grow larger than that. Gilligan, schools and parents provide no larger context for life than the self.

In her essay 'What's Wrong with Kids', the author is really asking what is wrong with adults as she explores several recent tragedies such as Columbine. Her answer goes to a lack of moral leadership in parents. Today's adults have no firm moral constructs of their own and cannot, therefore, impart them to children. This causes parents to become friends and "When adults turn into friends, childhood must disappear." Experts extol parents to keep the lines of communication open and maintain a good relationship with the kids but does that reflect any profound connection or influence with them. She closes the essay with: "Adults have no meaningful cultural nourishment for filling the empty imaginations of their children, nothing to give to order to their chaotic, unformed selves. For middle-class kids, a generation richer than any in human history, the predicament is grim. Setting out on the search for human meaning, they see adults staring vacantly at the ground. It's enough to make some of them pretty mad."

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