

American University Washington College of Law

From the Selected Works of Kenneth Anderson

July 19, 1996

Children Going West

Kenneth Anderson



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/kenneth_anderson/63/

Children going west

The Times Literary Supplement

Kenneth Anderson

19 July 1996

PIONEER CHILDREN ON THE JOURNEY WEST. By Emmy E. Werner. 202pp. Boulder, CO: Westview; distributed in the UK by Plymbridge. £16.50. - 0 8133 2026 7.

IT TAKES A VILLAGE - AND OTHER LESSONS CHILDREN TEACH US. By Hillary Rodham Clinton. 318pp. Simon and Schuster. £12.99. - 0 684 81843 4.

Faced with the horrors wrought upon children at Dunblane and Wolverhampton, it is tempting yet erroneous to think back to earlier times and forms of society that supposedly were safer for children. Children have always faced special perils, yesterday as today (even though the familial, cultural and societal resources available to defend them, and to raise them in the midst of danger, have varied enormously - so much so, indeed, that the current vogue in social science and the law for thinking about "children" as a separate social category, rather than as an "embedded" part of the family, obscures more than it illuminates). It is not well known, for example, that among the hundreds of thousands who emigrated west in the great American overland journeys from the Missouri River to the Pacific between 1841 and 1865, were some 40,000 children. Even a routine western crossing was daunting: family possessions were packed into a covered wagon or even a handcart, and all but the smallest children were obliged to walk most of the way. There was a lack of food which sometimes led to starvation: lack of water, disease, the loss of cattle and horses, attack by hostile Indian tribes, drowning during river crossings, death by exposure.

Emmy E. Werner has uncovered hitherto under-utilized materials written by the children of these westward journeys. Their eloquence is impressive, and Werner has edited the raw materials into a moving and readable volume, *Pioneer Children on the Journey West*. The voices of the girls are especially arresting, and there are many of them, for, as Werner notes, by the time the girl emigrants headed west, "the United States could claim one of the highest female literacy rates in the world".

Children going west were exposed not only to the risks that all, child or adult, faced, of death, disease and injury, but additionally to the risk that their parents might die and leave them abandoned. A young girl, Mary Ackley, wrote of her desperation when her father was lost from camp while searching for an ox, just a few weeks after her mother's death from cholera: I never felt so miserable in my life. I sat on the ground with my face buried in my hands, speechless. I knew well that if a [wagon] train did not overtake father the treacherous Indians would kill him. What would become of us children? I heard men talking in low tones, and I gathered from what I heard that the captain intended to send out a posse to search for father as soon as the men had supper. Then I heard cheer after cheer. I looked up and there was big, handsome father riding in front of a pack train.

The main lesson of *Pioneer Children on the Journey West* is that these children displayed not only astonishing fortitude facing some of the worst calamities that could befall a child, but

that they appear overall to have come through these adversities to live useful lives as competent and self-confident adults. Their adult lives were "long and productive": far from being crushed by their experiences, they gained from them.

Werner's book says relatively little about the lessons that might be drawn from the experience of her subjects for contemporary children facing modern calamities. Plainly, however, this is what motivates Werner, a psychologist at the University of California, Davis. Lurking just behind nineteenth-century narratives lies an anxious contemporary concern, the search for psychological principles to explain how it is that today's children "at risk" can similarly overcome adversity to become competent, confident and caring adults. Werner does not fully elaborate the argument, but she does think that "we can begin to discern a common core of individual characteristics and sources of support in the extended family and community that contributed to the pioneer children's capacity to overcome great odds". She shrewdly summarizes what some of those characteristics are: Survivor children were able to attract affection and encouragement from members of their extended family, from friends and neighbours, and from strangers. At some point in childhood or adolescence, they assumed responsibilities that were essential to the well-being of their family or community. This experience bolstered their self-confidence and strengthened their belief that they could surmount the hardships in their lives. They never lost hope - even when the odds were against them.

This assessment seems fundamentally sound. Yet Werner also seems sometimes to think that these characteristics are not only therapeutically available to contemporary "at risk" children, but that they are actually prevalent among them as well. If that is indeed her view, it seems wrong. Among other things, it is doubtful whether the experiences of Werner's pioneer children have very much to do with those in the grab-bag of contemporary children under stress that she lumps all together, at one point including children born and reared in chronic poverty; boys and girls who grew up in broken, disrupted, or troubled homes; the offspring of abusive, alcoholic, or psychotic parents; and children who experienced the horrors of the Holocaust and of contemporary wars.

Notwithstanding that the therapeutic enterprise invites a merger of these categories under rubrics of "vulnerability", "at risk", "stress", "trauma", and so on, there are plain differences between stresses that assault the family from without, such as war, and stresses that undermine the family from within, such as divorce. Were prevailing therapeutic paradigms not so morally obtuse, it would be evident that the pioneer children's ability to overcome calamity resulted in no small part from the fact that, coming from intact families in the first place, they had learned from their parents moral virtues that their own triumph over adversity confirmed. The therapeutic paradigm, by contrast, by emphasizing validation of the victim's experience, supposedly in order to empower the victim, has instead the perverse consequence of empowering the therapist.

It is likewise morally obtuse, although again consistent with the therapeutic paradigm, to lump together children of divorce with children who survived the Holocaust. It is not simply the scale of calamity that makes it untenable; subjectively, at least to a small child, they might well be comparable. It is, rather, that the families, whose culture and religion gave them the moral discipline to march even into the gas chambers chanting the morning prayer, "Hear, O Israel", had already transmitted to their children the moral virtues necessary to overcome almost anything. Divorce and other such experiences which dissolve the family from within, by contrast, undermine the generational transmission of the moral virtues that enable a child to overcome and thrive. The death of a parent in defence of the family consecrates these virtues; divorce betrays them. This is an otherwise obvious point obscured by the therapeutic outlook.

There is a further problem in finding these pioneer children relevant today. The paradigm of altruism has fundamentally shifted from the pioneers' localized mutualism (the travelling company, the frontier village) to a contemporary politics of pity, top down, in which altruism is kept preferably at arm's length, and confined to matters outside my community, to evils and sorrows that are abstract and far away from me. What Werner identifies as broad-based mutual support within a pioneer company grounded its altruism in the rough equality of its members, including, crucially, that death and disease were no respecters of persons. What orphaned others' children today might orphan yours tomorrow, and therefore let us love us one another.

Hillary Rodham Clinton's book, *It Takes a Village: And other lessons children teach us*, purports to reassert the mutualism of the pioneer company at the level of America as a whole, so to remind us all that we live in a "village" that stretches from sea to shining sea. In Clinton's book, society is a village, but society is also the state. The state creates conditions of mutuality among society's consumer-citizens and additionally between these consumers and the contemporary poor, whom Zygmunt Bauman once tellingly described as suffering from the poverty of "flawed consumers". The principal task of this supposed mutualism is the raising of America's children, because, Clinton solemnly assures us, "each of us" - every person in the village - "plays a part in every child's life".

Clinton appears genuinely to believe this overheated rhetoric and to regard it as the basis for actual governmental policy. But, as Jean Bethke Elshtain has pointed out: Clinton tries to justify the extension of her metaphor by arguing that the village is evolving: "[it] can no longer be defined as a place on the map, or a list of people or organizations, but its essence remains the same: it is the network of values and relationships that support and affect our lives." Since this encompasses just about everything one can imagine, depending on how strenuously one defines "affect," what is left of the village? . . . Not a whole lot, I fear.

Nor does it ever occur to Clinton that the various state institutions in which she purports to locate a revived pioneer-style mutualism and community are nearly all "mediating" institutions, "clearing" institutions, deliberately constructed to provide not identification, but anonymity, as between donors and recipients, consumers and "flawed consumers". Clinton's village is not a village of shared, face-to-face interactions, but a universal commodities exchange of face-less, anonymous transactions. Commodity exchanges have their virtues, as Clinton knows better than most, but affective bonds of the kind that matter to children are not among them.

Moreover, her world of institutions applied to children is not one of villagers confronting each other head-on about their gripes and irritations and disagreements, but instead an authoritarian world of strangers placing anonymous calls on toll-free hotlines to report alleged abuses of children to impersonal state authorities, who only by wilful suspension of disbelief and the complete elision of community and state can be counted as part of anyone's "community". The national consumer culture that Clinton mistakes for the national community does not want to deal directly with its neighbours, precisely because it is not a community: it wants an abstract authority (increasingly one to which it can report in secret) to do so and maintain order instead. Clinton's book is simply an elaborate way for her to raise her hand and volunteer for the job of chief authoritarian.

But if Clinton's flight to the fantasy of the village is meaningless, it is not unmotivated. She instinctively understands that while few would question the legitimacy of the state acting in its own name, for example, to fight a war, far more would question the legitimacy of the state, acting openly as the state, to determine how to raise their children, and to enter the home to

see how the programme was being carried out. Hence her reach for soft ideologies, kindlier and gentler names for the state: she does not attempt to conceal the role she envisages for the state inside every family, but she does seek for it a specious communitarian legitimacy that she hopes will slide by as unassailable. *It Takes a Village* is consequently, beyond the inadequacy of its central ideas, nearly unreadable, badly organized, platitudinous and noxiously pious. It would not be worth noticing - one wonders how, but for Clinton's exalted marriage, it would have found a publisher - except as a kind of index to the values of the bureaucratic-managerial New Class that Clinton embodies and which seeks in these kinds of inane materials a public ideology. It affirms everything and nothing, it is sensitive to everything but ultimately demands obedience from everyone. Clinton's barely disguised message is that parents are agents of the state in raising children who, at bottom, belong to the state. It is a ringing surrender of the traditional (but, in America, always marginal) Left concerned with class power to the only widespread radicalism the United States has known in this century, the radicalism of the helping professions, the social-worker cops who are eager to sign up for, in Alexander Cockburn's words, the "therapeutic policing" of America's families, so to heal and nurture the body politic. Religion and God Almighty, schools, after-school programmes, day care, health clinics, Planned Parenthood, the Boy and Girl Scouts, and every non-profit organization able to put out a policy report on any subject can all be useful to the state's task of raising its children, Clinton tells parents - and mummy and daddy can be useful, too.

Clinton begins by saying that "whether or not you agree with me, I hope it promotes an honest conversation among us". It is quickly evident, however, that she intends a conversation with the parents of America in much the same way that my mother, when I was a child, intended many conversations with me - the conversation was not "honest" or "over" until I came to agree with her. Clinton's most strongly held belief is that biological parents are incompetent - as she repeatedly says, "parents . . . need 'expert' coaching" - and that unless they receive the training in parenting that she got through studying child development, and live under the "guidance" of social workers, medical professionals, child experts, and all the various "authorities" that Clinton promiscuously cites in her book, they will damage their children in endless ways, big and small. Stated this way, of course, many parents are likely to object that, no, they feel perfectly competent to raise their children or, at least, feel they are no worse at it than the alleged experts. And so Clinton adopts the strategy of showing that she herself was hopelessly incompetent as a parent until she received the benefit of all these experts. The baldest example occurs when she recounts trying to breastfeed her daughter in hospital and being disturbed to find milk running out of the baby's nose: fortunately the kindly nurse intervened to point out that she was holding the baby in an "awkward way", ie, upside-down.

The consequences of Clinton's views for ordinary families are not trivial, and they ought to loom larger in the pre-election debate in America than they do now, especially given the increasing likelihood that Clinton will have four more years to lengthen her footnote in the history of the American family. For, relying largely on assertions of her own parental incompetence in order humbly to imply everyone else's, she proposes one state intervention after another directly into family life, such as mandatory home nurse visits to families with new babies. Ostensibly, such visits would be designed to offer unthreatening advice to new mothers and fathers: obviously the more fundamental purpose (which Clinton, with her characteristic economy with the truth, fails to mention) is to undertake surveillance directly within the home and report back to state agencies for possible further action. Such proposals, at bottom, are little more than passive aggression made public policy.

Doubtless Clinton would deny that she means any such draconian consequences, and, in any case, if a family has no shameful secrets to hide, then why should it worry about being

watched over? Should we not be pleased to know that by this means all our children are protected? It is striking that after a protracted discussion of Bill Clinton's dysfunctional family, even declaring it a "legitimate family", Hillary Clinton never says whether, under her schemes of intervention, that same family today would be professionally re-organized via foster care or what the effects would have been on Bill, for good or ill, had his alcoholic step-father been imprisoned for wife-beating. She also never considers whether her own father, who "was not one to spare the rod", might not have been prosecuted on child endangerment or similar charges under the anti-corporal punishment laws of several American jurisdictions, of which her children's rights movement has been a strong proponent.

Middle-class American parents thus ought not to take comfort that such surveillance and intervention are aimed at the poor, at mothers on crack and the like, and surely not at them. Certainly Clinton intends no such limitation, if for no other reason than that her friend and president of the Children's Defense Fund, Marion Wright Edelman, would consider it racist. The great breakthrough of social-worker radicalism in the past two decades, which sets it apart from its earlier ferments in the early twentieth century, and one in which Clinton can take pride, if she likes, is the acceptance in social policy that child abuse, both physical and sexual, is pandemic across all families, of all classes, and not just among the poor. This assumption of the risk of incest by fathers with their daughters is the largely unstated basis for much family policy in the United States today. Since, according to contemporary therapeutic ideology, virtually any measure is warranted to weed out child abuse, and since it might occur within any family, no matter what the outward appearances (and denial is the surest sign of abuse), then the state must act to dismantle the wall of privacy behind which the family in this century has existed. It has extended by an act of ideology the management of the poor to the management of the middle class: Clinton is unapologetic about wanting to extend it still further.

There is, of course, a residual appeal to constitutional liberties to which the courts still sometimes refer (often only after, however, children have been removed from their parents, sometimes for years, while the courts and the social service agencies that Clinton regards as the backbone of the family consider such questions as whether a three-year-old unweaned child is sexually abused by suckling). But, in fact, liberalism's wall between public and private is a waning paradigm.

With the loss of privacy, however, also goes the very possibility of family intimacy. Just as every serious religion knows that there can be no sacred without a veil between the world and the inner temple, so too intimacy requires that it not be visible to the world. Despite their lip-service to the preservation of intimacy, in the eyes of the therapeutic classes this loss appears to be no bad thing, being yet another step on the road to eradicating abuse.

Kenneth Anderson joins the faculty of the American University Law School, Washington, in the autumn of this year.