"The Lost Generation: Can American Civilization Recover Without a Religious Revival and the Retrieval of the Natural Law?"*


My Italian American grandmother, long ago gone to her eternal reward, was someone I constantly sought out in my youth for guidance and advice. Formally uneducated and of peasant background, she was a wise, clear-thinking, no-nonsense woman. Put another way, and in contradistinction to the majority of academics and professionals who have wrought so much harm on American civilization since the mid-sixties, the natural law was evident in the way grandma thought and acted. Pondering the contrast between many of the working class, ethnic friends of my youth and the modern day gnostics that I am presently surrounded by in academia, I recall to mind the acute observation of the then Pastor Richard Neuhaus who stated that the "natural law comes naturally to all except those who’ve been culturally denatured by having their minds bent to the denial of the obvious." [National Catholic Register, April 19, 1987, p.5]. I’m pretty sure that if I had asked grandma a question about whether or not parental involvement and supervision were necessary to increase the chances of ushering forth sound, healthy, happy, productive, and moral children, she would have been puzzled and, perhaps, even a little irritated. She might well have blurted out in response something like “Are you crazy? Of course, parents are a must! You might as well ask if God exists!”

Mary Eberstadt’s lucidly written and profoundly important volume, *Home-Alone America: The Hidden Toll of Day Care, Behavioral Drugs, and Other Parent Substitutes*, provides a more sophisticated, but essentially consistent, response compared to that of my grandma. Mary Eberstadt makes a persuasive case that the increasing absence of parents (in both quality and degree) from family life as a result of such social trends as divorce, out-of-wedlock birth, and dual career and worker families—and a corresponding and increasingly heavier dependency on day care centers—has been a major (but not the only) factor in producing a host of mental and behavioral dysfunctions for children. Her proto-typical sociological analysis represents an application of the

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consequences for both the individual and society of the spread of what the classical French sociologist Emile Durkheim termed “anomie” or normlessness, that is, in its extreme form, suicide, and in its more varied and empirically likely forms, the self-destructive behavior he termed “partial suicides.” The volume contains brilliantly executed chapters on day care centers producing illness, aggression, and unhappiness among children; feral behavior including suicide and various forms of violence committed by children and teenagers; child obesity; the mental health catastrophe in terms of a significant increase in mental problems among the young but also a too-common misdiagnosis of individual behavior on the part of the mental health establishment; the promiscuous and harmful prescribing of “wonder drugs” for children; contemporary teenage music as representing a “primal scream” against the abandonment of children by their parents’ generation; the catastrophic spread of teenage sex; and the recent utilization among affluent parents of specialty boarding schools as an example of “parental outsourcing.”

This material is based on a careful distillation of various forms of empirical evidence and the application of logic that is presented in a writing style accessible to the educated person, all facts that will increase the impact of the author’s volume.

Throughout the volume, the author is careful, nuanced, moderate, and reasonable. She does not make the claim, for instance, that exposure to day care centers will, in all cases and under all circumstances, produce problems for children. Nor does she say that the intact family always produces salutary results. Nor does she deny that some children with serious mental problems require drug therapy. She acknowledges, also, that not all are equally responsible for the exodus of parental involvement in the lives of children; for instance, some single parents without extended family support are, practically speaking, forced to use child care. Without stating it as such, she is defending the sociological claim that certain social forces tend to produce observable patterns, generalities, and trends that are both truthful and vitally important to identify if civilization is to right itself.

Even though this is not her specific focus, her analysis stands as an indictment against the ideological formulations and individual rationalizations over the past 40 years offered by academics, radical feminists, health care professionals, and upwardly socially mobile citizens “on the make” who will conveniently ignore the reality that the time-consuming and difficult endeavor of parenting is essential for both children and, derivatively, society. (I’m here reminded of the pre-1960s sarcastic comment, not devoid of truth, made by a critic of sociology to the effect that a sociologist was one who required thousands of dollars
of research funds to discover the local house of ill repute. Eberstadt’s analysis now ups the ante; one can say that the social scientists of the last 40 years are typically those who required thousands of dollars of research funds to discover the local house of ill repute while simultaneously “re-symbolizing” it as a recreational center).

The ideological grounding of what Eberstadt terms the “separationist movement” (i.e., the separating of parents from their duty in child-rearing) is basically two-fold. One, it defends the freedom, individualism, and economic interests of people who don’t want their lifestyles and professional careers interfered with and interrupted. Second, (and this is mostly implicit in her analysis) following the work of people like Allan Carlson and Bryce Christensen, it justifies the uncritical acceptance and continual expansion of the status and economic interests of those involved in the therapeutic professions, a key subset of what thinkers like Peter L. Berger and Richard Neuhaus term the “new knowledge class” (or perhaps better yet, “new gnostic class”). The basis for the psychological rationalizing activity of individuals, on the other hand, as this reviewer sees it, is grounded in the very nature of the human being, a nature that includes a self-centered component that can be explained theologically through the reality of “original sin,” or humanistically through a philosophical examination of the non-rational and irrational component of the human psyche. Crudely put, on this issue, the realism of a Saint Augustine and the cynicism of the Italian sociologist Vilfredo Pareto converge.

This reviewer has one, relatively minor, suggestion for Eberstadt and one more potentially serious criticism of her analysis. The suggestion is that she could have more systematically analyzed changes in American culture that would have strengthened her analysis of why the deleterious exodus from parental responsibility has occurred. In this regard, she could have included the work of sociologists like David Riesman (the move to “autonomous individualism”) and Robert Bellah (the move from “Republican” and “Biblical” individualism to “expressive” and “instrumental” individualism). Similarly, I was surprised that there was no mention of James D. Hunter’s profoundly important 1991 analysis, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, and his discussion of the societal-wide change in the understanding of the locus of “obligation,” i.e., from the family to the self. Indeed, Eberstadt’s very significant work can be rightly seen as a specific application of Hunter’s more general analysis of present-day American civilization and society.

The potentially serious criticism of Eberstadt’s analysis is that there is almost virtually no discussion, sans a passing reference to the
Amish (77), of the role of traditional Christianity in her analysis of how we got to where we are and what we might do about it. Only the recording angel can answer whether this omission is philosophical and intellectual in nature (as with contrasting neo-conservative vs. traditional conservative worldviews) or is a matter of prudential judgment on the part of the author as she might want to make “plausible” her analysis and suggestions to a now largely secularized upper-middle class, professional-oriented American constituency. Neither does she incorporate any discussion of the role of “natural law” into her analysis; the closest she comes is to a passing reference about “what we know of human nature” (180).

Regardless of why religion and the natural law as analytical considerations are not incorporated into her book, the simple fact is that such omissions weaken what is otherwise a very sharp, important, and witty analysis. Traditional Christianity stresses duty and, more specifically, duty to one’s children out of duty to God. The natural law directs us “to do good and avoid evil.” The secularization of traditional religious commitments on the part of significant numbers of Protestants and Catholics and the denial of the reality of the natural law on the part of too many Americans is clearly crucial for a more complete understanding of the issues that Eberstadt investigates. Her proposals to reverse the present day neglect of children, much like that of another fine thinker, David Blankenhorn in Fatherless America, are (in this reviewer’s judgment) too incrementalist in nature and not radically challenging enough of the status quo. On the one hand, Eberstadt does state that “nothing is deterministically fixed” and “we Western men and women are not helpless victims of historical machinations beyond our control” (180). On the other hand, however, her basic call for “a change of heart, a new public consensus” built around the proposition that “it would be better for both children and adults if more American parents were with their kids more of the time” (172) is pretty thin gruel in attempting to replenish our present-day sick American body. In fairness to the author, there are plenty of bright scholars, influenced for instance by the sociologist Max Weber, who understood secular modernity as a permanent revolution—the end of the road, so to speak, in which social policy changes can make an impact only at the margins. If a Weberian-like analysis is correct, then this reviewer owes an apology to Mary Eberstadt; she is trying to accomplish as much as one can, to make, in essence, a half-decent chicken salad sandwich out of chicken scraps.

If this reviewer believed that Weber was correct, he would be even more sympathetic than he is already to the other-worldly orientation of a thinker like Saint Augustine. There are scholars,
however, like Pitirim Sorokin, who posit that civilizations can and do cyclically change, that our present day empirically based “sensate” culture is not necessarily here to stay, and, furthermore, a resurgence of traditional Christian religion and of natural law thinking with their sense of duty and obligation is possible. It is to that end—that of a Christian religious revival and the restoration of the integrity of the Catholic Church in the United States with its corpus of Catholic social doctrine and natural law thinking—that I implore the readers of this review to invest their minds and energy. Only a radical change in the cultural/religious ethos can produce a fundamentally different civilization, a proposition that would unite thinkers like Max Scheler, Christopher Dawson, and Benedict XVI. Minus such a cultural revival, I fear, the lost generations of children—and of scholars and other elements of the cultural elite—will continue into the indefinite future at the cost of much harm to themselves and social life. In any event, Mary Eberstadt has written an important volume that will serve as a catalyst of sustained reflection, discussion, and debate for years to come. It is deserving of your strong support.

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