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# “I will arise and not go to my father”: The New Child Citizen

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**Jay Fliegelman**, *Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American Revolution Against Patriarchal Authority 1750-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

**James Block**, *The Crucible of Consent: American Child Rearing and the Forging of Liberal Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

In the parable of the prodigal son, the repentant son returns to the house of his father having exhausted his inheritance and having found his new freedom in the world wanting. The killing of the fatted calf and the ensuing celebration underscore the father's love for the son and his joy over the son's return to his rightful place in the father's house. This parable was popular in late eighteenth-century Anglo-American literature and iconography. But, as Jay Fliegelman explains in *Prodigals and Pilgrims*, it adopted a modern twist in the early years of America, one that reveals a profound shift in the dominant understanding of fatherhood, childhood, authority and family.

New prodigal sons and daughters graced the pages of the best-selling novels of eighteenth-century America. They were the heroes and heroines of such works as David Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748) and Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*. Each of these novels portrays the prodigal child in rather optimistic terms: even if life away from the father's home is difficult, previous dependence on the father has to be rejected at all costs (113). “As the American colonies had chosen to escape tyranny and moral corruption, declared their independence, and fled to God's protective embrace,” explains Fliegelman, “so, too, had a generation of sentimental heroes and heroines, prodigals and pilgrims similarly fled. To understand properly the history of one set of rebels is to understand better the history of the other” (516). Mediating structures such as the family and society are perceived as tyrannical, and therefore these prodigal sons and daughters reject all claims to their obedience, profess dependence on God alone, and set out to become pilgrims in the New World rather than return home under the authority of their fathers (71). This shift evokes the question: What is it that makes the prodigal son become a pilgrim child at the beginning of the American nation?

All that said, there are instances where the hero does return home—but only if he can do so on his own terms, and as equal to his father and mother, with whom he becomes a fellow pilgrim. In the newly constituted family that results, we can see the icon of what Fliegelman calls the Lockean ideal of the “voluntaristic family” (51). Here, Locke's political ideal of contractual relationships remakes the family in its own image: mother, father and child are above all equal citizens who freely bind themselves together. The ties that bind the family are no longer based on birth or blood, which are now perceived

as merely accidental, but on voluntary association. This elevation of the will as the ideal basis of human relationships challenges the very essence of the traditional notion of the family, where the biological bonds represent a personal order to be valued and cherished precisely in its mysterious *unchosenness*,

Fliegelman's *Prodigals and Pilgrims* and James E. Block's *The Crucible of Consent* both seek to shed light on the nature of this familial transformation and in particular its effect on the understanding of childhood. They argue that there is an intimate, yet often unnoted, relationship between the political developments in early America on the one hand, and, on the other, the re-imagining of basic family relationships and the notions of authority, dependence and education to which they are closely linked. Fliegelman's focus is on the late eighteenth century while Block explores these political and cultural ideas as they mature and become firmly established in the political, pedagogical and family-rearing policies in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Both authors adopt an interdisciplinary approach, blending politics with theology, pedagogy and philosophy, in the hopes of achieving a holistic and nuanced perspective on the development of what they perceive to be the American rejection of patriarchal authority as well as the uniquely American understanding of what it means to be a liberal citizen. In a word, they describe this liberal citizen as an individual who is radically responsible for his own self, bound to others only through his will and at the same time, someone who is to develop his potential within the guise of the greater community. He is someone who is both radically alone and bound together with others. While this ideal of liberal citizenship was portrayed in the late nineteenth century as being the mere fulfillment of man's intrinsic biological and psychological forces, both authors seek to undermine this assumption (Block, 32). They do this by showing how liberal citizenship was carefully crafted into dominant political and educational theories, as well as national programs for childhood socialization that shaped school curricula at the state level. In addition to bringing all of this to light, both authors press the questions about what this ideal of the liberal citizen entails for our understanding of authority and dependence as well as adulthood and childhood, insights that they argue have often remained implicit.

Despite some similarities, each book makes a unique contribution to our understanding of childhood and paternity in early America. Fliegelman tells us he set out to understand the literary and political traditions that gave rise to "filial autonomy," which he perceived to be the "quintessential motif" of this age (3). The task of *Prodigals and Pilgrims*, he notes, is "to clarify the crucial thematic connections between key historical events and important literary pedagogical, theological and political texts of the period" (6). Noting the radical changes in the form and self-understanding of the family in the founding of America, Fliegelman seeks to understand who transmitted the Enlightenment ideals that were at the root of this transformation and how they were communicated so successfully within the family.

The political novelty of filial autonomy as found in America also motivates Block's research. He is particularly interested in understanding the origins of the ideal of freedom in childhood in what he calls the political program of childhood socialization. Block's main argument is that children are not born as liberal citizens but that they *become* liberal citizens through intense socialization within the family, schools and other institutions which make up the child's social fabric. While this claim may seem obvious to some, Block argues that the relationship between childhood, pedagogy and the particular form of liberal freedom has not yet been made explicit: While Americans may believe that they are born free and that liberalism is merely a matter of man's natural development, in fact, the liberal understanding of freedom has been shaped by diverse means of childhood socialization that have thus far gone unheeded. In other words, the "consent" upon which liberal society is founded, argues Block, has been forged in the "crucible" of early childhood.

Why has the significance of childhood been overlooked in the political discourse on the origin and nature of American liberalism? “The dependence of childhood represented the very type of disability that free and modern subjects wished to leave behind,” explains Block. He continues:

In America, whether youth became free individuals in a free society as celebrated in the national narrative, and if so, how, was an inquiry better left alone. As a result, the ways Americans became specifically liberal subjects—hardly a matter of inadvertence—have remained inaccessible ever since. Instead Americans have looked to the idyll of an earlier Eden, a land where children form themselves out of their own ribs, becoming individuals self-conceived in the primordial land of the self-made. (ix)

If childhood and early education have been typically regarded by scholars as apolitical processes, as Block suggests—where “childhood is draped in an aura of innocence, and child development is systematically cloaked in the rhetoric of inevitability”—then a major achievement of Block’s research is to bring to light just how much the interpretation of child development in America is anything but neutral (24). In his discussion of the heated debates in the formation of a common national curriculum, Block shows how our understanding of childhood and of child development are deeply steeped in political, cultural and theological implications (194ff).

In this rich and varied reflection on the icon of the new voluntaristic family model, Block and Fliegelman do not shy away from discussing what they perceive to be its philosophical origin as well. Both authors attribute John Locke with being the inspiration behind the changes in the understanding of childhood and family in early America. Specifically, they point to his new sensationalist epistemology and subsequent pedagogical theory. Fliegelman and Block clearly make the case for the profound influence of Locke’s lesser-known work, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, in addition to his political works and explicitly philosophical writings in the shaping of the unique American interpretation of fatherhood and childhood, in both the political and familial realms. As Block explains, in *Some Thoughts*, “Locke redefined the path to voluntary adult membership in society by relocating it in the controllable confines of childhood” (19). He continues:

The progression from natural freedom to contractual obedience was reframed as the shift each child makes under the pressure of socialization from potentially anarchic impulses to conformable social practice. ... In relocating the site of liberal agency formation, Locke would in critical ways anticipate American practice. American liberalism after the revolution placed the future of its national project in the hands of the institutions of childhood socialization. This turn to socialization to surmount the crisis of its founding thus confirms the United States as it has always believed itself to be: the land quintessentially of Locke—not of his *Second Treatise*, with its political idyll of adults who live peacefully and contract rationally, but of his original *Education*, with its systematic shaping of children into citizens who would be able to engage in the adult liberal behavior in the *Treatise*. (19)

In a word, Locke’s new epistemology emphasized the development of the child’s reason, freedom and eventual self-mastery. He held that the child’s mind was like a blank slate, amenable to receiving impressions through the senses which would go on to form the child’s character. For Locke, the “bonds of birth and blood” which are found in the natural, given family relations are to be distrusted. The sentimentality and affection, which reflect such bonds, are seen as a threat to the proper formation of the child’s character. Rather than taming the child’s unruly will through force and the demand of obedience as in older models of education, in this new pedagogy, the parent’s task was to nurture the child and facilitate his self-mastery and the development of his reason.

According to Fliegelman, what resulted was the “revolutionary insight” that “the title of the father was

transferable” (197). “A true parent” was now understood to be the “one who forms a child’s mind rather than one who brings that child into the world” (ibid). “Less a father in his own right than an agent of nature’s paternity, the ideal parent cultivates ‘his crop’ by silently watching over his charge, neither obliging nor constraining specific obedience” (202). The notion of childhood underwent a similar revolution. The republican, liberal child, argues Block, arrives in nature as a bundle of potentiality waiting to be activated in order to achieve self-definition (163). He is dependent only for a time on the guiding influence of his parents who facilitate his arrival at a level of self-mastery necessary to assume his responsibility as a liberal citizen. A mature child is then free to join a new political or religious “family.”

What results from this new understanding of father and child is a new parent-child bond “rooted in a positive, affective attachment” expressive of reason rather than nature. The new voluntaristic family is therefore sustained not by “patriarchal obligation” but filial agreement” (57). Having “eliminated the father as a political presence,” society is no longer likened to a family but rather a “collective of free people who think for themselves” (59). Fliegelman makes the point that this new pedagogy did not have as its aim the dissolution of the family or the creation of autonomous individuals; the family remained an important spiritual and civic institution but was transformed into a more liberal and intentional community. “The granting of filial independence permitted the family to reorganize on a voluntaristic, equalitarian, affectional, and, consequently, more permanent basis,” explains Fliegelman (33). The intention to create individuals who would be more amiable to freely participating in society was what dominated.

There is tremendous value in Block’s research. He has carefully gathered and made cohesive the various literary, pedagogical, philosophical and governmental sources dealing with the notion of childhood and the relationship between parents and children as they relate to the formation of a mature liberal citizenship. Block brings to the fore the particular challenge that childhood, as the “last vestige of unnatural ungovernability,” poses to the liberal project (161). His research into the development of a “science of education”—making it a domain for trained experts rather than the wisdom of parents or local communities—and the interest of the state in forming public “common schools” for the dissemination of liberal principles in the early nineteenth century is also very illuminating. He demonstrates how the public school system was launched with the explicit agenda of forming child citizens who could both conform to and flourish within this form of government (216ff).

Together these books shed light on the complex history that has shaped the understanding of the family in modern America. Anyone wishing to understand the fate of the family in our current cultural situation would benefit from the careful exposition that these works offer of the political, educational and literary paths that led us where we are today. These transformations of the meaning of childhood, fatherhood and authority shed light as to why, in modern interpretations of the parable of the prodigal son, the child does not return home in the hopes of putting himself back under the authority of the father; rather, he strikes out as a fellow liberal pilgrim to make his way in the world.

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