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Usable History?

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Ralph LaRossa, *The Modernization of Fatherhood: A Social and Political History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997, 287 pages).

Ralph LaRossa, a professor of sociology at Georgia State University, deals in this book with what he calls the “social construction of New Fatherhood” (p. 13). The reader must contend, then, with the particular parameters of modern sociology. On the other hand, there is a wealth of historical detail concerning attempts to shape fatherhood in the 1920s and the 1930s, and this latter is the book’s strength. However, the author’s agenda goes beyond merely recounting this “social and political” history, as the title suggests; LaRossa aims to provide a history that is *usable* (pp. 3-5). What he means by “usable” is the crucial question in evaluating this book.

LaRossa asserts that during the 1920s and 1930s “the current image of the father as economic provider, pal, and male role model all rolled into one became institutionalized” (p. 1). As he sees it, economic and cultural factors constructed a notion of fatherhood which became “America’s ideal” (p. 1). How and why this took place is, he says, the subject of the book (p. 18). He proceeds to take the reader on a fascinating tour of how fatherhood changed during the decades in question. He examines, in great detail, the roles of the popular press (especially magazines like *Parents Magazine*), books, radio shows, advertisements, baby doctors, parent education associations and clubs, and the Children’s Bureau, a government agency which produced a hugely popular manual for parents called *Infant Care*.

All of this material is quite interesting to anyone interested in the institution of fatherhood, or indeed, American history generally. What was the transformation of fatherhood in question? First of all, the father-child relationship was brought to life in a new way. This can be seen in the infant care manuals which became more father-inclusive. LaRossa notes that these manuals abandoned the “mothers-should-do-it-all” approach during these years (pp. 193-4). The ascendancy of child-care experts turned parenting into a learned activity, and fathers as well as mothers could access the basics of parenthood. Behaviorist child-rearing philosophies were influential because, since child training had to be consistently applied by all caregivers in the family in order to achieve the desired effect, fathers, too, “had to be persuaded to abide by the systems that had been set up” (p. 195). The evidence (including the marvelous reproductions of postcards and advertisements) in the book supports LaRossa’s contention that fathers were more than playmates to their children. He paints a convincing picture of more fathers involved in taking part in “the heavier demands of child care work” (p. 195).

The book succeeds, then, in drawing attention to an undernoted history. LaRossa describes how research has focused on how histories of fatherhood have concentrated on the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, or from the 1940s to the present, while the 1920s and 1930s have been either ignored or “erroneously classified as a deceptively uninspiring and cartoonlike phase in father annals”

(p. 2). Failure to recognize the importance of the development of fatherhood in these decades, says LaRossa, leads to the misunderstanding of the state of fatherhood today. It is necessary, he argues, for this history to be told. Contemporary fathers need to know that they are not “the first generation to change a diaper or give a baby a bath.” He adds, “Lost in the artificially generated excitement of being around when the first caring men happened on the scene is the debilitating effect of not having what historians call a *usable past*.”

It is as well to pause, at this point, to consider this concept of a “usable past.” LaRossa goes on to cite Gerda Lerner’s book *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness* which argues that the advancement of women in society has been hindered by the loss of a usable past. That is, although struggles for women’s rights have been going on for many centuries, most will trace the struggle to the early twentieth century or to the 1960s. Without a true history of their ancestors, women tend to write and act for advancement as if they were the first to do so. LaRossa’s point is that something like this has happened to the history of fatherhood with the loss of those significant years, the 1920s and 1930s. Thus, “Caring and loving men have been denied the value of knowing that there were others before them, others who shared their concept of what good fatherhood meant” (p. 4).

What might this denial look like? LaRossa describes a contemporary father who writes an article about taking responsibility for the children while the wife is out of town. What will likely be lacking, argues LaRossa, is any sense that this is not really news, that many fathers faced this same situation before and have already written about it decades earlier. LaRossa sharpens his point further, “There is little recognition, too, that writing about having sole responsibility for the kids while one’s wife is away reinforces the gender-based division of labor” (p. 4). Here, the social and political agenda of the book begins to become apparent. This is clearer still as LaRossa draws out the implications of the lack of a usable history of fatherhood for women. They are “negatively affected” because “when they ask men why the division of child care is so one-sided, with the mothers doing most of the nitty-gritty work” they are told they should be happy to live in such a time when men are doing so much more. LaRossa describes this as telling a “subordinate” group to be patient, and adds that this is a way to “put the brakes on a revolution” which is what he says has happened to the contemporary “gender revolution.” He concludes that despite all the celebration of new ways of fatherhood, “mothers continue to shoulder most of the child care burden.”

Thus, LaRossa’s goal is not to provide a simple historical account, but rather to help take the brakes off the gender revolution. To do so, he uses the language and methodology of modern social science. This gives us a definition of fatherhood which, he says, “Should be conceptualized as a social role and a sociological institution”, with attendant norms that fathers are expected to follow (p. 10). The historical period LaRossa examines, and which he finds so important, is one in which this institution and its norms were subjected to a unique Machine Age combination of economic and cultural factors resulting in “the social construction of New Fatherhood” (p. 13). Indeed, fatherhood, social science has shown, is also “a product of people’s collective imagination” (p. 14). Given these assumptions, LaRossa can quite easily say: “It is not uncommon for people to assume that there is a natural distinction between fatherhood and motherhood. And on a biological level, there may very well be” (p. 14).

He goes on from here to assert that attention to the distinctiveness of fatherhood and motherhood is to be traced to “gender politics,” because the “concepts of masculine and feminine are not accidentally constructed, but are politically motivated for the simple reason that money, status, and power itself are often distributed along gender lines.” He concludes this line of reasoning with, “In a nutshell, men, who have been in the position to control definitions of masculinity and femininity, generally have done so to their own advantage” (pp. 15-16). All of the above has been established, purportedly, by social science.

However, the “science” is rather thin. For example, the statement that social science has shown fatherhood is “a product of people’s collective imagination” is supported by a single source (Gayle Rubin) in a single brief endnote. The single source’s evidence for how fatherhood should be understood is an assertion that gender identities arise not out of natural differences but from “the suppression of natural similarities” (pp. 215).

But these questionable anthropological assumptions are not the subject of the book. LaRossa focuses instead on recovering the usable past in service to a stalled gender revolution. There is much of interest in the book, and LaRossa’s larger purpose does not seem to distort this narrative of an interesting period of American history (although this may remain a question for a specialist in the field). Other histories of fatherhood in this period written with a different purpose in view could tell a different story. In any event, it seems reasonable to surmise that the research LaRossa has accomplished could be of service to other social projects (for example, one which seeks to build a civilization on the premise that men and women really are different and that this difference is vitally important). One could very well agree with LaRossa’s conclusion that it is important to acknowledge that there have been a *variety* of fathering styles in the past” (p. 195) which deserve reexamination, without agreeing with his assessment of “what we perceive of the present” (p. 200).

