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Who Cares for Our Children? The Child Care Crisis in the Other America (Book Review)

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Polakow, Valerie. *Who Cares for Our Children? The Child Care Crisis in the Other America*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2007. 186pp. ISBN 978-0-8077-4774-2. Reviewed by Erin Olson, Instructor of Social Work, Dordt College.

When the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 was passed, the former Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) was changed to Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). One of the major repercussions was that millions of mothers were required to get jobs and or enroll in welfare-to-work programs increasing the need for quality child care. But as Valerie Polakow uncovers in her book, the result has proved to be difficult to access, unregulated in many cases, generally very expensive, and unfortunately very detrimental to the children of the poor.

Polakow has spent much of her career advocating for the rights of women and children through her writing and her work as a Professor of Educational Psychology and Early Childhood Education at Eastern Michigan University. In *Who Cares*, she uses the voices of sixteen women from four states to explore the problems with the existing system. Their stories demonstrate what it is like to navigate a fractured, maze of a system to access subsidies and adequate childcare in order to fulfill welfare-to-work requirements. To put their situation into perspective, in a chapter near the end of the book Polakow contrasts these women with five women for whom quality childcare is both accessible and affordable. Finally, Polakow describes three proposals to fix the current system, analyzing both their strengths and weaknesses.

To open, she uses the story of Jasmine, a young mother from Michigan, to explore the problems with the existing system. Jasmine's story exemplifies the experiences of many poor, single mothers. She was pushed out on the streets by her family at the age of fifteen and then progressed through the foster care system until age eighteen. A pregnancy during her junior year of high school led her eventually to drop out of school and move in with her boyfriend and his aunt. When her boyfriend became violent, she wanted to end the living arrangements and the relationship, but finding a job and housing proved difficult with her baby. Jasmine sought independence by applying for housing assistance and child care subsidies, but she didn't qualify because she had no job. She attempted to enroll in Michigan's Family Independence Program (FIP) but was dropped when she failed to attend the mandatory Work First training. She didn't attend because she had no reliable child care.

Finally, through the tireless advocacy of a former caseworker, she was able to get subsidized housing and food stamps and a twenty-hour-a-week job. But because she was not working the required forty hours, she was again denied entry into the program. In desperation, she temporarily reconciled with her abusive ex-boyfriend so that he could watch their son while she continued to work

in order to finally qualify for the program and secure safe, quality childcare. But when she eventually did qualify, another stumbling block stood in her way. Before she could receive the child care subsidies, she had to have a childcare provider secured. Jasmine had found a licensed in-home provider who assured her that a spot would open up within a few weeks, but when the in-home spot did not open up before her subsidies expired she was left with no childcare and no subsidies. The subsidies she had qualified for were given to another recipient on the waiting list. She struggled to hold onto her job and her apartment while patching together whatever form of childcare she could find. Soon Jasmine was facing job loss, eviction from her apartment, and possible homelessness. The welfare-to-work program did not work for Jasmine.

As said before, Polakow goes through the stories of fifteen other women trying to make a better life for themselves and their children. Interestingly, this struggle is not unique to single-parent, poor women but is also experienced by two-parent families. Polakow also spends considerable time focusing on uniquely challenging situations. For instance, parents can often struggle to maintain their childcare placements if their children are labeled "difficult" especially if child care providers have very little if any early childhood education. These mothers and families "confront innumerable obstacles as child care arrangements break down time after time" (89). Disruptions in childcare arrangements usually mean job absences and often job loss. In other cases, immigrant women, either documented or undocumented, have an especially hard time accessing services due to language barriers or unclear documentation status (106-126).

The stories of Jasmine and those like her exemplify what we in our field have seen as a result of the welfare-to-work legislation changes. People are quick to deem the changes a success because of the drastic reduction in the number of people on the welfare rolls from 12.2 million people at the start of reform to 2.1 million in 2001.¹ These statistics, however, don't take into account the stories of the women of this book and millions more. During the late nineties we saw an economic boom and a rise in employment rates and lower poverty rates, but with the economic downturn of the new century, there has been a significant increase in poverty, especially child poverty. The U.S. Conference of Mayors from 2001 reported a rise in the percentage of homeless women and children. The homeless rate for this group had been 9 percent in 1987, but rose to 40 percent in 2001.² Calling this program a success fails to recognize the realities of its effects on poor families and children. Women and children again have taken the brunt of what has been called one of the greatest

pieces of welfare-reform legislation.

Christians should be concerned, as we are called to care for the “least of these” (Matthew 25.40) and more specifically called numerous times to care for the “widow and the orphan” (James 1.27). Those involved in Early Childhood Education as well as those concerned with all issues relating to social justice should be spurred by Polakow’s book to advocate for women and especially children suffering from a system that leaves them without the help they need.

While Polakow is explicit about what is currently wrong with the system, she neglects to follow a particular rule that is familiar to many of those who conduct needs assessments—searching for strengths that currently exist in the childcare system. Is there something in our current system worth salvaging and building on? Perhaps the reason she mentions no strengths is that there are none.

Polakow does discuss three current proposals in response to these shortcomings, but she herself admits that these proposals are expensive and difficult to get through the legislative process, especially when it comes to financing (177-184). Though the three proposals she mentions may have their flaws, they are a good starting point for all of us to begin the discourse on this topic. It is hard

to imagine that the childcare system is or will be handled by the current administration any time soon, with issues of healthcare, defense, and homeland security seeming to dominate much of the time and money available. It is not difficult to see, however, how investing money in our country’s children will actually save taxpayers money down the road. But more importantly, ensuring that every child in this country has safe, stable, and quality child care and early-childhood education may have ramifications for health care and security for us all. *Who Cares for Our Children?* secures not only the health and well-being of that society but also its heart.

Endnotes

1. See S. Hays, *Flat Broke with Children: Women in the Age of Welfare Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).
2. See “Hunger and Homelessness Up Sharply in Major U.S. Cities” in *The United States Conference of Mayors*. U.S Conference of Mayors, 12 Dec. 2001 Web. 1 Feb 2010.

Christian People Across the Centuries. Richard A. Horsley (editor), *Christian Origins*; Virginia Burrus (editor), *Late Ancient Christianity*; and Derek Krueger (editor), *Byzantine Christianity*, Volumes 1, 2 and 3 of *A People’s History of Christianity*, Denis R. Janz (General Editor). Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2005, 2005 and 2006, respectively. ISBN: 0-8006-3411-X, -3412-8, and -3413-6. Reviewed by Keith Sewell, Professor of History, Dordt College.

In 1874 John Richard Green (1837-83) published his *Short History of the English People*, which he promptly followed up with his multi-volume *A History of the English People* (1878-80). Green’s work was an influential landmark in the emergence of modern social historiography. “The people” certainly emerged more fully in the nineteenth century. William Ewart Gladstone (1809-98) became known as “the People’s William.” For his part, Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) referred respectfully to the “ordinary people” (*de kleine luyden*), who gave him their support, and he was not beyond learning central truths from a resolute Pietje Balthus, an unaffected farmer’s wife.

There was something new in this emergence of “the people.” The great historical writers of the Italian renaissance—such as Leonardo di Bruni (1369-1444) and Francesco Guicciardini (1483-1540)—although they referred to “the people,” perhaps inevitably concentrated on the holders and users of power. Among such writers the influence of classical Greek and Roman models reigned supreme. Only in the succeeding centuries, and not least arising from the subtler influences of Protestantism, did something like “public opinion” and “the voice of the people” become more pronounced. However, it is at just

this later stage of the story that we must pause to make two cautionary points.

Firstly, much history-writing, following in the footsteps of giants such as Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886), has continued to focus on the actions of elites. This was and is understandable because historiography addresses how we use (and misuse), generation by generation, the power that has been given us to form and shape human culture, and rightly or wrongly, a great deal of that power is in the hands of elites.

Secondly, the old-style scholastic theologies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, both Catholic and Protestant—with all their architectonic-systematic refinements—were not equipped to address the great unfolding of science and society that took place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The result was an absence of an adequately articulated Christian view of society. Therefore, when a historiography of society and the so-called “ordinary people” emerged, it tended to reflect the ways in which secularist and materialistic ideologies of the Enlightenment and French Revolution had come to shape social and economic thinking.

This tendency helps to explain why, although