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## Examining Family Policies for a Pluralistic America

*What's Happening to the American Family? Tensions, Hopes, Realities.* By Sar A. Levitan,<sup>1</sup> Richard S. Belous,<sup>2</sup> & Frank Gallo.<sup>3</sup> Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press. 1988 Revised Edition. Pp. xi, 228.

*While we sing hosannas to the family, this need not be to the Ozzie and Harriet model. The goal is to allow pluralism to flourish, but the challenge is to assure that parents assume responsibility for supporting and nurturing their children.<sup>4</sup>*

### I. INTRODUCTION: DEFINING THE AMERICAN FAMILY

At first glance the book's title might lead one to believe that the authors were offering a eulogy in behalf of a vanishing social institution. Instead, this book presents an illuminating collection of sociological data on a wide range of family issues and optimistically looks beyond the disturbing statistics to confidently predict the family's enduring place in the pluralistic America of the 1990s.

At the outset, the authors necessarily establish a workable definition of the term "family" to allow a meaningful analysis of the American family. The authors analyze the range of views as to the future of the modern American family. One extreme position adopts the view that American society is headed for total disruption if the traditional family continues to disintegrate. At the other extreme is the view that the dissolution of the traditional family structure will free American society from its historical bondage.<sup>5</sup> The authors reject both extremes which are pre-

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4. S. LEVITAN, R. BELOUS & F. GALLO, *WHAT'S HAPPENING TO THE AMERICAN FAMILY? TENSIONS, HOPES, REALITIES* 15 (1988)(emphasis added)[hereinafter S. LEVITAN].

5. *Id.* at 7.

mised on a highly normative definition on the one hand and on an all inclusive definition on the other.

The authors' view falls somewhere in between the extremes. They quote a definition of "family" used by the United States Department of Health, Education and Welfare which seems to largely coincide with the authors' pluralistic definition of "family." HEW defined "family" to include any "group of persons who share physical and emotional resources over a long period of time, and whose adult members have, had or will have, as one central purpose the rearing of children."<sup>6</sup> This pluralistic approach to defining "family" permits the authors in their analysis to depart from the strictures of a normative definition and simultaneously recognizes that defining "family" as "any possible relationship" cannot possibly allow for meaningful analysis of current issues.<sup>7</sup>

## II. OVERVIEW: FAMILY ISSUES AND POLICIES

With this pluralistic definition of "family" as a basis for discussion, the authors address several major family issues facing today's society. These issues include marriage and divorce; procreation, birth control, abortion, and family size; child rearing, custody, and support; family work roles; female-headed families; the welfare system; cash support and in-kind aid; and the labor market, the tax system, and the courts. The authors devote only one chapter to the relationship between the family and the law and occasionally explore legal aspects of family policy in other contexts; however, the thrust of the book is sociological and not aimed particularly at legal scholars or lawmakers. The book is nonetheless very helpful for legal scholars because it provides an illuminating understanding of the American family. This book note does not attempt to shift the authors' focus by discussing only the more legal dimensions of the book. Rather, this review seeks to give the reader a true flavor for the book.

Levitan, Belous, and Gallo have collected extremely valuable and useful data which they have set out in readable graphs and charts. In all their analysis, the authors have evaluated trends and movements in family structure and behavior over the past several decades. This lends credibility to their arguments.

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6. *Id.* at 10-11 (quoting DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND WELFARE, FORMULATING NATIONAL POLICIES ON CHILD AND FAMILY DEVELOPMENT 7 (1978)).

7. *Id.*

One of the most interesting insights in the book is their explanations of the influence larger historical movements have had in developing family mores. The authors argue that much of what are generally held today as traditional family and societal norms are largely the result of Victorian convention and form only one of numerous models of family behavior.<sup>8</sup>

They admit that "[a]ny predictions about the future of the family must . . . rely upon past and current data as well as some value judgments."<sup>9</sup> This is so because social scientists could never develop a statistical model which would accurately explain the complex behavioral patterns of individuals in their family life. It is therefore not surprising that the authors' own value judgments are readily apparent throughout the text. While they present an objective view that allows for differing family structures and moral values, they also present their own value judgments and advocate certain kinds of moral behavior within the family as inherently superior.<sup>10</sup>

### III. ISSUES FACING WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN THE MODERN FAMILY

Two of the several issues addressed in the book are of particular interest and worthy of additional discussion. The first issue concerns the role of women in the family and difficulties which women face in changing work roles in the home and in the labor market. The second issue is the place of children in the American family. The authors explore the changes in family size and fertility rates which they conclude are attributable in part to scientific and legal developments in the areas of birth control and abortion.

The book's discussion of these two issues demonstrates that while the typical American family has changed significantly over the past several decades, our response to this change should be neither despair nor rejoicing. Rather, we should recognize posi-

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8. *Id.* at 84-85, 196-97. In general, the Victorian nuclear family was built on the view that a mother's role was to oversee the physical and emotional development of her children. Politics and the marketplace were concerns only for men. *Id.*

9. *Id.* at 25.

10. For example, the authors assert, without any concrete or even anecdotal data, that premarital sexual experiences can build human capital which can foster a more stable and productive married life. *Id.* at 23. They advocate another subjective value when they reason that a smaller number of children per household can improve the quality of family life and may enable parents to provide better child care. *Id.* at 51.

tive changes and advocate reform that will strengthen families physically and emotionally, while allowing for greater diversity in family structure and family values.

A. *Perspectives on the Woman's Role in the Home and the Workplace*

The authors' discussion and analysis of the role of women in the family and society is refreshing and provides a helpful perspective. By reviewing family work roles through the past several centuries in the United States, Levitan, Belous, and Gallo demonstrate both that conflict about proper roles is not new to our day and that different patterns of work roles are viable.<sup>11</sup> The book outlines a historical perspective of the status of women in families, noting that specialization and segregation of work roles along sexual lines were largely the product of nineteenth century Victorian society and a highly structured bourgeois family system.<sup>12</sup>

The authors point out that the movement of women into the workplace was a natural consequence of industrialization. In the early stages of the industrial revolution, the shift from a predominantly agrarian economy removed the father from the home to an outside workplace, thus emphasizing the woman's role as caregiver and mother. Then in the earlier part of the twentieth century, the increase in industrialization and urbanization also began to draw mothers from the home. The authors explain the natural movement of women into the workplace.

While wives were subordinate to their husbands, an agrarian economy blurred the sharp work distinction between spouses. The realities of farming created an internal labor market within the household where chores were allocated and products were exchanged and consumed. There was no question that both the husband and wife worked to provide the means of household subsistence. As the work location was removed from the home, the movement of women into the labor force started to rise ever so slowly initially and accelerated beginning with World War II.<sup>13</sup>

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11. *Id.* at 77, 87.

12. *Id.* at 84-85 (citing C. LASCH, *HAVEN IN A HEARTLESS WORLD: THE FAMILY BE-SIEGED* 5-6 (1977)). The authors later remark that "[t]he notion that women had no place in the workforce rests upon an artificial distinction between work in or outside of the home, which was not drawn until the nineteenth century." *Id.* at 206.

13. *Id.* at 85-86.

Today, over sixty percent of married mothers are in the work force.<sup>14</sup> The authors, correctly, I believe, attribute this movement to several factors: (1) birth control has made it possible for couples to better determine the number and spacing of children; (2) technology in the home and supermarkets have made taking care of a family's physical needs less time consuming; (3) as opportunities for higher education increase, the cost of foregoing gainful employment has sharply risen; (4) society in general no longer sees a woman's participation in the work force as disgraceful; and (5) fathers have gradually begun to help in child rearing and household chores.<sup>15</sup> The practical realities of the 1990s have established that women will continue to make up a significant part of the American labor force.

The authors transform this objective historical analysis into a prescriptive model of family behavior based on their value judgments. They suggest that the shift in societal norms allowing a woman to escape the "caged in" feeling of the home and to enter the work place without any stigma attached may do much to "bolster her family's financial and *emotional* stability."<sup>16</sup> While this suggestion recognizes a sentiment many women experience, it overlooks the difficult emotional and psychological dimensions of the demanding role of a working wife or mother.<sup>17</sup> The "letting off" of emotional steam a woman may experience from getting out of the pressure cooker (the authors' metaphor) of being a homemaker may be in fact the beginning of emotional woes. Although women have seemingly achieved greater equality over the past decades, the equal rights movement has left the majority of women working longer and harder and earning less money than ever before. Mary Ann Mason has documented and explored this troublesome fact in her revealing book on the paradoxical effect of the equal rights movement on the modern working women.<sup>18</sup>

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14. *Id.* at 77.

15. *Id.* at 90.

16. *Id.* at 100 (emphasis added).

17. See Salholz, *Feminism's Identity Crisis*, NEWSWEEK, March 31, 1986, at 58 (women are "facing the agony of the double burden" of wanting career achievement and being the perfect wife and mother); see also Dowd, *Work and Family: The Gender Paradox and the Limitations of Discrimination Analysis in Restructuring the Workplace*, 24 HARV. C.R.-C.L. L. REV. 79 (1989).

18. M. MASON, *THE EQUALITY TRAP* (1988). Mason introduces her book by writing: Something has gone very wrong with the lives of women. Women are working much harder than they have worked in recent history, they are growing stead-

The authors perceptively assert that "changes in family work roles . . . will probably have some of the deepest and most lasting effects on the institution and upon American society."<sup>19</sup> Although these changes "offer real opportunities for improved, more stable, and richer lives within families," these changes may cause women and their families to experience difficult emotional and mental side-effects.

The authors have also addressed the problems related to the increase in female-headed families. Unlike women who pursue careers to "get out of the kitchen," single mothers often find themselves in the unenviable position of caregiver and provider.<sup>20</sup> In the authors' assessment, the rapid growth in the number of female-headed households may be attributed to divorce, looser restraints on premarital sex, ineffective contraceptive use, incentives created by the increased availability of welfare benefits, and the overall decrease in the earnings of young men.<sup>21</sup> Whatever the cause, female-headed families now account for more than one-half of all families living in poverty,<sup>22</sup> and forty-two percent of all black families.<sup>23</sup> The authors identify a number of serious problems faced by impoverished female-headed families.<sup>24</sup> Without question, governmental family policies must take into account the overwhelming presence of these disadvantaged families.

### B. *Providing for Children: Family Size and Child Care*

The second topic the authors treat concerns fertility rates and family size. While the authors mention the effects that birth

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ily poorer, and they are suffering the brutality of divorce at an unprecedented rate. The greatly publicized success of a very few women in high positions has created the illusion that the equal-rights crusade has dramatically improved the lives of all women. The reality is that the everyday quality of women's lives has gravely deteriorated.

*Id.* at 19.

19. S. LEVITAN, *supra* note 4, at 106.

20. See M. MASON, *THE EQUALITY TRAP* 171-78 (1988).

21. S. LEVITAN, *supra* note 4, at 117.

22. *Id.*

23. *Id.* at 111.

24. *Id.* at 119. Among the problems faced by these families are 1) single mothers are unlikely to complete an education, 2) single mothers are more likely to become dependent on welfare, 3) children of single mothers are more likely to exhibit school or behavioral problems, 4) nearly one-third of children raised by single mothers have no medical insurance, and 5) daughters of single mothers are more likely to become single mothers themselves. *Id.*

control and abortion<sup>25</sup> have had on the family, they carefully avoid any discussion of the more delicate pro-choice/pro-life debate. They are perhaps justified in leaving out this discussion and in taking a more descriptive than prescriptive approach. The authors maintain that a more appropriate discussion beyond the decision of whether or not to bear children is "the problem of who will provide for, and socialize, them once they are born."<sup>26</sup> Undoubtedly this is a crucial question in view of the increase in the number of separations, divorces and out-of-wedlock births.

However, the authors do not remain true to their objectivity when they suggest that smaller family sizes (four or fewer children) are preferable because a "smaller number of children per household can improve the *quality of family life*, and it may enable parents to provide better child care."<sup>27</sup> Of course any definition of "quality family life" necessarily varies with the individual's particular values. Although a certain minimum level of food, shelter and clothing is likely included in most definitions of "quality family life," the authors' suggestion slants toward the belief that wealth and formal education are of paramount importance in establishing a quality family life. The authors could have improved their discussion in this area by including differing views on quality family life.

For example, the notion that parents with fewer children may provide better child care<sup>28</sup> rests on the assumption that these parents will have more time and ability to devote to their children's development and well-being. But is it not just as likely that smaller families will result from or contribute to both parents' being in the work force? In such a situation, the hoped for "better child care" will often be provided by professional day care centers rather than the parents. Instead of a toddler being home with his mother and siblings, he may grow up in a romper room filled with children. The authors have not adequately addressed or explored the long-term emotional effects of professional day care. This is certainly an issue worth more examination in the context of quality of family life.

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25. Abortions in the United States rose from 750,000 in 1973, the year *Roe v. Wade* was decided, to 1.6 million in 1985. Currently thirty percent of pregnancies, not ending in miscarriage or still birth, end in abortion. *Id.* at 39.

26. *Id.* at 39.

27. *Id.* at 51 (emphasis added).

28. *Id.*



In discussing the fate of children growing up in day-care centers, Professor Siegel has remarked on the present narcissistic generation which prioritizes the need for self-fulfillment in a career above all else: "While most of us have two cars, a VCR, and a kitchen full of appliances, few of us have time left for raising children."<sup>29</sup> Siegel further argues that "before we . . . send an entire generation of children off to day-care centers, we need to reflect a little more deeply on what such a radical departure in child-rearing practices would mean for the family and society."<sup>30</sup> Most scholars agree that the exploding growth in the use of day care has been so rapid that its implications will not be determinable until sometime in the twenty-first century.<sup>31</sup> Most sociologists agree, nonetheless, that the quality of day care suffers from high staff turnover, health risks, and the long hours children spend per day in care centers.<sup>32</sup>

The authors also review several methods for determining fertility rates, each of which demonstrate that fertility rates have plummeted to an all-time low.<sup>33</sup> More effective contraceptive practices and abortion have resulted in a population in the United States that predictably will stop growing by the year 2025.<sup>34</sup> Birth control and abortion have allowed more women to enter the work place. With this new technology, couples are waiting longer before having children and are limiting family size.

Although the authors present the varying opinions of researchers, they dismiss concerns over declining population as unwarranted since smaller families will, in their view, result in better family life.<sup>35</sup> Ironically, even though they assert that the present challenge in family policies is to "assure that parents assume responsibility for supporting and nurturing their chil-

29. Siegel, *The Brave New World of Child Care*, NEW PERSPECTIVES QUARTERLY, Winter 1990, at 34.

30. *Id.*

31. Wingert & Kantrowitz, *The Day Care Generation*, NEWSWEEK, special edition, Winter/Spring 1990, at 87.

32. *Id.* at 89-92.

33. S. LEVITAN, *supra* note 4, at 39-52.

34. *Id.* at 43.

35. *Id.* at 52-56. Many scholars are troubled with the concept of "quality time" which working parents want to spend with children. See, e.g., Lasch, *The Crime of Quality Time*, NEW PERSPECTIVES QUARTERLY, Winter 1990, at 46; Siegel, *supra* note 29, at 40-41 (parents who want every moment of quality time with children to be emotionally positive are likely to suppress more complex emotions which will result in superficial relationships with their children).

dren," the authors embrace a family view which may have devastating implications for children.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

This book is well worth reading. Its humorous cartoons and useful graphs and charts make a cohesive and readable text. The authors have addressed many substantial problems facing the American family today and have given refreshing insight into a number of troublesome issues. In announcing their aspiration of "allowing pluralism to flourish," the authors espouse a view which considers the traditional American family as only one of many possible models. Their research and analysis does much to support this approach as the most workable path for meaningful family policy decisions in the 1990s and into the twenty-first century. The reader should be aware that the book suggests an objective and descriptive view of family structure and behavior, although the authors occasionally fill in the statistical gaps, as one would expect, with their own value judgments in preferring one model of family life over another without exploring other viable models.

*Reviewed by Daniel W. Lewis*