Parenting and politics: Giving new shape to ‘family values’

by Mart Stewart Van Leeuwen in the July 29, 1998 issue

By Sylvia Ann Hewlett an Cornel West, The War Against Parents: What We Can Do for America's Beleagured Moms and Dads. *(Houghton Mifflin, 302 pp.)*

It was a nice irony that Sylvia Hewlett and Cornel West came to Philadelphia to promote their book the night the last episode of *Seinfeld* aired. As 79 million viewers watched the last of a nine-year series about four notoriously self-centered young adults, some 150 people of various colors, social classes and political stripes spent three hours listening and talking to West and Hewlett about the crisis in American family life. West, who is professor of philosophy and Afro-American studies at Harvard, noted that the *Seinfeld* craze reflected “the de facto segregation of our society,” since it was the most popular sitcom of the ’90s among whites, but ranked 26th among African-Americans.

But West and Hewlett are less interested in rehearsing the specific concerns of African-Americans and women than in uniting beleaguered parents across race, class, gender and political affiliation. Their goal is to found a populist movement, spearheaded by the newly formed National Parenting Association, of which Hewlett is founder and president. The organization and its followers will press for moral and political reform to reestablish what West called the “nonmarket values” of loving and sacrificially nurturing the next generation--values that are “the glue that holds society together.” Parenting, he added, is the ultimate form of that caring activity. But contemporary American parents are so overworked, overtaxed, underpaid and undervalued that with the best will in the world they cannot easily provide the regular, hands-on nurturing their children need. This is what West and Hewlett are determined to change.

In terms of content, one could argue that there is not much new in *The War Against Parents*. The authors draw on the work of social analysts like David Popenoe and David Blankenhorn, Judith Wallerstein and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, Sara

McLanahan and Gary Sandefur to show that in general children thrive best in intact, two-parent families. The cumulative evidence from such sources is increasingly clear: children who grow up apart from a parent are one and a half to two and a half times more likely to drop out of high school, to become teenage mothers, and to be neither in school nor the workforce as young adults. Moreover, at best only half the variance associated with these effects can be attributed to the economic stresses that usually accompany single parenthood.

At the same time, the authors overlap with sociologists like Stephanie Coontz in demonstrating that intact families succeeded in the past not just by dint of better morals and rugged American individualism. As recently as the 1950s the parents of today's middle-class baby boomers had the benefit of welfare supports like the GI Bill, government-protected union activity, and various checks on corporate greed as they provided a stable economic foundation for the family. Moreover, all of this was sustained not by bleeding-heart liberals but by the Republican administration of Dwight D. Eisenhower.

This evenhanded treatment of sources is the refreshing feature of West and Hewlett's volume. Against liberal claims that it is only economic factors and not fluid family forms that predict child outcomes, they come down firmly against the culture of narcissism and sexual freedom. Children, they demonstrate repeatedly, are not left unscathed by their parents' pursuit of individual fulfillment, whether motivated by feminist dreams of complete autonomy or masculinist fantasies of serial monogamy. While praising the "rich tradition" of American liberalism and its practice of challenging "any authoritarian imposition of religious or ethical values," the authors assert that "we can't have our cake and eat it: unlimited choice and uncluttered freedom get in the way of family strength and community well-being."

But while praising the work conservatives have done in identifying the results of family decline, they fault politicians like Ronald Reagan, Dan Quayle and Newt Gingrich for failing to acknowledge the family-destroying properties of the market. "Free enterprise is singularly ill-equipped to deal with the nonmarket work that parents do. Even though . . . this nonmarket work is the fountainhead of our nation's social and human capital, it can be completely ignored by free enterprise, because it lies outside the cash nexus."

The authors point to the decline in job security and in wages and benefits for blue- and white-collar workers alike. Meanwhile, corporate executives, whose 1960

earnings averaged 41 times that of workers, now earn 209 times what workers make, even in times of brutal layoffs in the name of economic efficiency. There are fewer jobs for the less educated, and their wages are declining. Even middle-class couples often have to cobble together four jobs with few or no fringe benefits in order to make ends meet.

The authors point out that this all-too-common “wage and time squeeze” makes the establishment of stable and nurturing families a Herculean task. It is also at least part of the reason for the male flight from marital responsibility, especially among inner-city African Americans.

As a team, West and Hewlett have some rhetorical advantages over other writers on the family. She is a white female of moderate feminist sensibilities. He is an African-American male with a proven record of calling for black empowerment. They have set aside (without downgrading) their particular agendas in order to galvanize a larger constituency on behalf of reempowered parenting. That kind of combination is likely to catch the attention of people who have stopped listening to unnuanced feminist and Afrocentric arguments.

The British-born Hewlett adds a welcome international perspective. Most American writers on social issues simply assume that the U.S. is the center of the universe and that its problems and solutions set the standard for every other country. So it is enlightening to be told, for example, that France’s and Britain’s child poverty rates of 4 and 8 percent would be 21 and 26 percent respectively without government tax and transfer policies favoring families. By contrast, government action in America reduces child poverty by a mere 2 percent, from 22 to 20 percent--which is still the highest rate of all the rich nations. Such comparisons also mean that globalization pressures, which affect Western democracies more or less equally, cannot be invoked as the sole reason for America’s failure to help children thrive.

Another rhetorical strength lies in the authors’ avoidance of the self-righteous tone that pervades some books on the family by conservatives and liberals alike. They alternate argument and analysis with personal reflections and even confessions of weakness. West and Hewlett both grew up in the postwar era, he in a segregated black neighborhood of Sacramento, she in a Welsh mining village in economic decline. Both agree that racism, sexism and classism pervaded their young lives to varying degrees, and they have no desire to whitewash that era or return to it. But they insist on rescuing some essential wheat from the better-documented chaff of

the 1950s.

For West, the presence of intact, hard-working families and the network of clubs, churches and sports leagues made segregation easier to bear and gave him the education, vision and self-confidence to join the civil rights movement as a young adult. Moreover, the even-handedness of the GI Bill enabled West's father and many of his peers to buy a home, get a college education and obtain health insurance--all of which gave economic mobility to African-Americans even under segregation.

Similar supports helped Hewlett thrive amid food shortages and the decline of the Welsh mining industry--and under the stigma of having the wrong accent. While national rationing required British adults to endure a spartan lifestyle, children received food and health care and mothers were given allowances. Equally important, her parents' personal and academic attention helped Hewlett become the first student from her high school to attend Cambridge University. It is this combination of structural and cultural supports for child-rearing that the authors wish to recover, without losing the gains won in the past 30 years for women and people of color.

Unlike many champions of family values who are evasive about their own fractured families, West and Hewlett are frank about the difficulties of raising children. West lost custody of a two-year-old son when his first marriage broke down. His visitation rights were limited to three months in the summer and a few weekends during the rest of the year.

Rather than keep the child in the rarefied academic atmosphere of New Haven or Princeton, West decided to slow down his academic career in order to return to Sacramento with his child each summer. He reports that his parents' home "turned out to be a profoundly healing place" for his son and him, providing "the rhythms and routines of normal family life. Three meals a day; regular bedtimes; clean clothes; a bevy of cousins just around the corner on tap for casual play. . . . And hovering in the background loving, eagle-eyed grandparents." And yet, he knows that, for all his efforts, he has simply not been able to give his son the attention he had from his own parents: "I definitely haven't been the father or husband my father was," he states.

Hewlett speaks from the other side of the divorce equation. In parenting a stepdaughter, she experienced "the anguish of standing by helplessly as a seven-

year-old or a 13-year-old deals with the heartache of yet another Christmas of shuttling between two households and two four-course meals.” She had to decide whether to risk disappointing her stepdaughter by not attending events at which her biological mother and father would both be present, or to attend and risk making things awkward for the estranged parents: “I chose not to attend Shira’s high school graduation but to attend her college graduation. I am still not sure which was the better decision.”

The book contains no glib pronouncements about parental rights to self-fulfillment or the resilience of children in the wake of divorce. Any given divorce may be good for one or both of the adults involved, but it is seldom good for kids. Instead of acting as apologists for the divorce culture, West and Hewlett propose a Parents’ Bill of Rights, a kind of work in progress outlined at the end of the book and on flyers abundantly distributed during their book tour. The bill calls for both cultural and structural reform.

On the structural side, they advocate such things as paid parental leave, flextime in the workplace, an extended school day and year, housing subsidies, tougher divorce laws, and welfare benefits favoring two-parent families. On the cultural side, they call for parents to give daily attention to children’s homework and reading and to monitor and restrict television viewing, and they urge communities to participate in drug education and school safety programs. Above all, West and Hewlett urge parents to become political, uniting as workers and voters to ensure that these and other changes take place.

The National Parenting Association has followed the model of the American Association of Retired Persons in an effort to galvanize parents, a constituency so demoralized that only 32 percent of them voted in the last federal election. By contrast, the AARP, formed in the ’50s when 35 percent of the elderly fell below the poverty line, now represents half of all Americans over 50, or one in four registered voters. The result of such political clout is that today only 10.5 percent of the elderly fall below the poverty line.

“What we have really done over the last 30 years,” West and Hewlett point out, “is socialize the costs of growing old and privatize child-rearing.” They believe that it is time for a more evenhanded approach, and that parents and others concerned about children’s welfare are ripe for organizing.

Despite its sensible centrist program and accessible style, the book has certain weaknesses. To begin with, the authors are equivocal about what they consider the morally (as opposed to statistically) normative family form. On the one hand, they affirm all the research that shows the greater benefits to children of intact, heterosexual parenting, and they take a particularly strong stand on the need to reconnect fathers to families for the sake of both men's and children's welfare. On the other hand, they occasionally expand their goal of rallying parents across "race, class and gender" to include "sexual orientation" as well.

When I asked them to clarify their position, West replied that heterosexual co-parenting was the statistical, but not necessarily the only, moral norm. While reaffirming that intact mother-father pairs were best for children, Hewlett said that she and West were not prepared to pass judgment on other family forms. I suspect that this equivocation reflects their desire to reempower beleaguered but dedicated parents regardless of household configuration. But eventually they will have to fish or cut bait on this issue, given the intensity of political efforts to legalize gay marriage and the efforts within many churches to ordain gays and accept gay marriages. Moreover, this "big tent" approach to uniting parents could backfire with black and evangelical Christians, for whom agreement with the NPA's larger pro-parenting agenda may not make up for this equivocation on homosexual parenting.

A second weakness is that despite West's identity as a progressive black Baptist, this volume has little to say about religion. Even the chapter looking at the Promise Keepers and the Nation of Islam tends to portray those movements as the escapist activities of people whose energies would be better spent on progressive political causes. This may be connected to Hewlett's admission that "feminists--and I include myself here--have a deep suspicion of religion, because throughout history it has been used to control and terrorize women." Well, the same could be said of the church's treatment of African-Americans, but it didn't stop blacks from separating the essential message of the gospel from its warped cultural accretions.

West and Hewlett also have almost nothing to say about the sorry state of public schooling in America, or the possibility of using tax vouchers to widen educational possibilities for inner-city children, especially given the track record of urban Catholic schools. Nor do they take a stand on the recently enacted (but hotly debated) charitable choice legislation, which would allow religious organizations to compete equally for welfare contracts and to provide services without having to sanitize them of all religious content.

Finally, West and Hewlett don’t show us how the NPA and the AARP--the parenting and the “geezer” lobby--can avoid becoming adversaries in a world of finite resources. They say that parents of young children should not resent the gains made by those over 60, but should simply insist that their own interests be equally valued. They seem to be buying into special-interest politics by repeatedly pointing out that the squeakiest wheel gets the most grease. Given their concern for “nonmarket values,” surely it would be better to invite groups like the AARP to help envision a society in which all can flourish and to seek that society through emphasis on compromise and common interests (after all, most of those AARP folks are grandparents!) rather than focus on competition for tax favors and transfer payments.

Nevertheless, *The War Against Parents* remains a long-overdue call for liberals to embrace a more communitarian mind-set and for conservatives to support the structural reforms needed to make “family values” work. West and Hewlett are likely to be criticized from the left and right for failing to push one line unequivocally. That should not discourage them or their readers: it’s precisely such third ways that the people of God are often called to follow.