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BOOK REVIEWS

Elizabeth Pleck. *Domestic Tyranny: The Making of Social Policy against Family Violence from Colonial Times to the Present*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987, 203 pp. + appendices and footnotes.

The history of the regulation of child and wife abuse in America is important partly because it addresses a continuing debate over the nature and extent of public policy with respect to "the family." Moral Majority members, such as Linda Pollack points out, still think of this type of regulation as the public nose poking into private affairs. Indeed, in reading some case descriptions, readers feel a bit nosy--a bit like we are peering into people's private lives. And yet, as Pleck so forcefully argues "it is precisely the family values that contemporary politicians so much affirm that permit, encourage, and serve to maintain domestic violence." Indeed--the only people's interests who are being protected by keeping the family private in these situations are those of the abuser--the husband, father, or mother. Unless children and women are given individual protections, protections which can sometimes undermine particular families--many more children will grow up being sexually and physically abused, and more women will be beaten or raped by their husbands.

Pleck focuses on three different eras in American History when she feels that protection of the weaker units (legally) in the family becomes more of an issue and public policy leaps forward: early Puritan England, the late nineteenth-early twentieth century, and the 1960s to the present. All were periods of reforming spirit, according to Pleck, and the last two, when most changes were made, appeared to focus on decreasing family violence as a means of limiting the growth of crime (i.e. abused or neglected children might grow up to be thieves or worse.) Such modern innovations as x-rays also helped to prove the existence of child abuse (i.e. former breaks, etc.) and this gave a boost to protective policies such as the reporting laws in the 1960s and 1970s.

In making this argument, Pleck mostly synthesizes and critiques work done by others. Her survey in this respect seems fairly comprehensive. Only three sections seem to be clearly based on her own research: chapter six, on "bringing back the whipping post" (in the late nineteenth century for wife beaters), and the contents of her two appendices (although the first appendix is obviously influenced heavily by Linda Pollack's work in *Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500 to 1900* (1983)). Pleck's synthesis of these diverse materials is instructive and useful as a guide to the literature, especially since this material had not been previously collected.

Pleck's work is also important because of her ability to synthesize larger intellectual trends with laws and court decisions. Her chapter on the effects of psychoanalytic theory on decisions with respect to wife and child abuse is extremely revealing and somewhat scary: psychoanalytic theory essentially undercut efforts at regulation of child/wife abuse by making women's and children's realities seem like fantasies. "One clear message from Freud's rejection of his seduction theory was that children or women who bring charges of rape or molestation cannot be believed."

The very strength with which Pleck makes her main argument, however, leads to the major flaw that I find with her work. With some exceptions, such as her discussion of the effect of Freud's theories, Pleck seems determined to see history in Whiggish terms (to see our American laws and institutions as slowly evolving as we become more and more aware of child/wife abuse) that this sometimes distorts her interpretation, or at least leads her not to question missing information. Pleck discounts, for example, Pollack's finding that none of the Puritan diarists mention spanking their children, as insignificant, concluding that they would not mention the physical punishment of their children in their diaries or that those who spanked their children would be the least likely to have kept diaries. Shouldn't the figures that she draws from today (only 1 in 5 parents admit to thinking that spanking with an instrument is appropriate) submit to the same interpretation (i.e. parents wouldn't admit to thinking that spanking is appropriate?)

On the whole, one is left with a sense that while Pollack's synthesis is important and instructive, it could leave the reader with more questions: she seems to assume that where the research has not been done there is no data--yet there are many gaps in the research on this subject. This seems especially obvious with respect to the earlier period, with which she seems much less familiar

with than the later period. The only studies done with respect to public policy towards abuse prior to the early nineteenth century concern the early Puritans. Is her conclusion that Puritans were unique in attempting to regulate abusive behavior therefore correct? Shouldn't she have examined laws from other colonies, or at least acknowledged this gap in the literature? Isn't part of the task of the synthesizer to acknowledge what we do not know yet?

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Louise Burkhart. *The Slippery Earth: Nahuatl-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico.* Tucson: 1989.

An ambitious book-length treatment of the evangelization of Mexico as "communication event" is Louise Burkhart's *The Slippery Earth: Nahuatl-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico*. Burkhart investigates the endeavors of several sixteenth-century missionary scholars who worked in central Mexico and who composed religious texts in Nahuatl to facilitate the indoctrination of their indigenous laity. Specifically Burkhart is concerned with the linguistic means by which they attempted to "translate" Christian ideas of morality and sin into Nahuatl. In addition, her innovative analysis enables her to assess the relative success by which they communicated these ideas across formidable culture and language barriers.

The primary sources upon which Burkhart bases her study are half-dozen or so religious texts of various types--several *sermonarios* and catechisms, one *confesionario*, and one *psalmodia*--written by friars usually with the assistance of native informants. This situation of collaboration has led Burkhart to coin the term "dialogical frontier." But Burkhart is quick to point out that the conditions of this dialogue were neither equal nor democratic. The friars were the *empowered*, and their objective was conversion.

In this "borderland" of communication (or rather, partial communication) between the two cultures, Nahuatl moral terminology was borrowed and greatly modified to express Christian notions such as sin, contrition, and absolution. Though there was no need or attempt to translate the complexities of Christian moral theology for the