



Book Reviews

Defiant Dads: Fathers' Rights Activists in America. By Jocelyn Elise Crowley. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. 2008. 320 pp. \$27.95.

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Heidi M. Berggren

University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth

In this book, Jocelyn Elise Crowley offers the first broad-based and systematic account of fathers' rights activists. Her goal is to gain an understanding of the "fathers' rights" movement, to evaluate it with an eye toward addressing the grievances of divorced fathers, and, at the same time, to help their ex-partners and children. Crowley uses two distinct perspectives. First, she looks at the public policy goals of these groups and associated activities, and finds serious flaws and potentially damaging consequences for women and children. Second, she examines the services that fathers' rights groups provide to divorced and divorcing fathers, and finds much of value in them for these men. Through extensive interviewing, she documents the viewpoints of group leaders and members who perceive that public policies in the areas of child support and child custody are "feminized" and, therefore, stacked against fathers. Their strongest ire is directed at judges, who are thought to be instinctively biased in favor of women's interests in their custody and support decisions.

Despite extensive evidence that child support provides essential help in equalizing finances between divorced fathers and custodial mothers so that the lives of children are improved, many fathers' rights activists seek virtual abolition of existing custody and support policies. Crowley's interviews indicate that fathers' rights supporters believe that if children were required to spend equal time with each parent, except in cases of abuse

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or neglect, then there would be no need for income transfers. While patently inaccurate, this is nonetheless the strongly held conviction of many activists who lobby state legislators, track voting records, run petition campaigns, stage events to attract media attention, and engage in other activities aimed at changing the law in this area. In addition, activists sometimes attend divorce and custody proceedings and monitor judges' behaviors for evidence of bias toward women. Occasionally, they directly confront interested parties in court lobbies and entryways.

Crowley sees and gives fair recognition to the very real heartbreak and desperation experienced by many divorcing fathers who are, to some extent, "losing" their children when their access to them is severely curtailed and regulated. However, she emphasizes that neither these feelings of despair nor the resistance to the substantial, clear evidence of the benefits of support and custody decisions justify activists' purist, antistatist rhetoric. The interviews make clear that fathers' rights activists view any state interference in their families' lives to be unjust, abusive, and unnatural. They believe that, despite the fact that women do most of the child-care work before divorce, it is unfair for men to lose regular and frequent access to their children.

Additionally, Crowley provides evidence of disturbing and blatantly antifeminist and misogynistic views on the part of fathers' rights activists. Women are often painted as fundamentally materialistic, selfish, dishonest, and vindictive. For example, many interviewees assumed, but could not verify, that their ex-wives were using child support to pay for luxury goods for themselves. Most troubling is the frequent and wholesale dismissal of "false" accusations of domestic violence that many interviewees claimed are advanced by women as an attempt to keep children away from fathers. Finally, the author demonstrates that many interviewees perceive the larger culture as essentially "antifather" or insufficiently appreciative of fathers' unique parenting roles as breadwinners, dispensers of authority and discipline, and teachers of the value of hard work.

While Crowley clearly finds much to criticize about the fathers' rights movement with regard to its public policy preferences, goals, and actions, she argues that the street-level services provided by fathers' groups can be valuable to individual men, their ex-wives, and their children. Divorced and divorcing fathers across the county meet regularly in groups to provide and receive much-needed support. Group leaders invite experts to dispense legal advice related to the divorce

process and matters of support and custody. They also invite experts to provide instruction on interacting with spouses and children in order to minimize harm to children. For example, parents are encouraged to discuss conflicts over visitation after the children have gone to bed and to set firm ground rules concerning how and when such discussions occur. In addition, fathers are taught not to denigrate ex-wives in their children's presence, and to use phrases like "coparent," rather than "ex-wife." Crowley's research shows that such services are important to the well-being of all parties. She finds that many men have been helped to put aside feelings of anger, sadness, and despair, to avoid essentialist, misogynistic thinking, and to keep the well-being of their children uppermost in their minds. On the whole, she sees the services provided by many fathers' groups in a positive light.

Scholars of gender and politics have much to gain from this book. For one thing, it illustrates how fathers' rights groups seek policy changes that could bring great harm to women and children. Ultimately, Crowley concludes that the best way for fathers' rights activists to meet their policy goals of presumed joint custody and abolition of child support payments is to advocate strongly for equal pay, strengthened family-leave benefits, better enforcement of antidomestic violence laws, and other measures typically associated with the promotion of "women's" economic and social interests.

While it was not Crowley's goal to analyze the fathers' rights movement from an explicitly feminist perspective, implementing such a perspective would help reveal the full significance of fathers' rights groups. She makes very little reference to the large body of feminist scholarship that would certainly be relevant. Additionally, she neither interviews divorced mothers nor considers any evidence that would help contextualize the statements made by members of fathers' rights groups. Finally, her interviews present the views of white, middle-class men, rather than the full spectrum of divorced dads. While she acknowledges these absences throughout, her findings suggest that leaving out such analysis sharply curtails what can be learned about the significance of the fathers' rights movement. Nonetheless, on balance, I think that *Defiant Dads* has much to offer to scholars of gender and politics.