1. Past children. A review of the literature on the history of childhood

Childhood today is a subject of intense interest to anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists among others. Children play a central role in most households and have rights protected by the state. Parents give up a great deal of their time and energy to rearing their children and would appear to enjoy doing so. But was this always the case? Many historians looking at attitudes to and treatment of children in the past would insist it was not. It is only relatively recently that the history of childhood has been considered an area worthy of research. The picture painted so far by the vast majority of writers on the subject is surprisingly similar. With an almost monotonous regularity the same idea appears again and again in the discussion of the history of childhood: that there was no concept of childhood in the past (first explicitly stated by Ariès, 1960). Many authors argue that there was no appreciation of the needs of children and thus they were neglected – some authors would say systematically ill-treated – by both parents and the state. It is claimed that there has been only a gradual realisation that children are different from adults and not merely smaller versions. Accompaniments of this realisation were a growing concern for children, at times a very strict discipline, and an increasingly closer parent–child relationship. Most researchers in this area would appear to be more concerned with finding additional evidence to support the argument than with critically appraising it.

There are a few authors, however, who think differently. They believe that both childhood and adolescence were recognised in previous centuries, although children may not necessarily have been viewed in the same way as children today.

The Ariès thesis

Philippe Ariès’ book L’Enfant et la Vie Familiale sous l’Ancien Régime¹ is the most influential work in this field.² Though his sources are taken mainly
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from French culture and society, it is clear that he believes his conclusions to be true as well for the rest of Western society. Of particular importance is his finding that there was no concept of childhood during the middle ages. He also suggests that, although there was no awareness of the nature of childhood in previous centuries, this does not mean that children were ill-treated. In fact, he argues that, once it was appreciated that children were different from adults, they were subjected to a stricter method of rearing and severer punishments. These two facets of his argument: that childhood as a state did not exist and that children have been harshly disciplined will be reviewed here. In addition, a theme which Ariès does not discuss, but which appears frequently in later literature – that of the formality of the parent–child relationship in past societies – will be considered.

The concept of childhood

Ariès argues that medieval society did not recognise childhood – ancient society ‘supposaient une différence et un passage entre le monde des enfants et celui des adultes’ whereas ‘La civilisation médiévale ne percevait pas cette différence’ (463) (ancient society ‘presupposed a difference and a transition between the world of children and that of adults’ whereas ‘Medieval civilisation failed to perceive this difference’ (411–12)) but does not explain why adults stopped regarding children as children. He deduces from paintings – a vital source of evidence in his work – that childhood did not exist in the middle ages and claims that there are so few pictures of children because a child was not deemed of sufficient importance to merit a painting. As soon as a child could do without the care of his mother or nurse, ‘peu d’années après un tardif sevrage, à partir de sept ans environ’ (462) (‘not long after a tardy weaning (in other words at about the age of seven)’ (411)), he entered the adult world.

Ariès states that in the 16th century adults were beginning to notice children as ‘une source d’amusement et de détente’ (135) (‘a source of amusement and relaxation’ (129)), but they were regarded only as the playthings of adults, there was still no awareness of childhood as a separate state from adulthood. During the 17th century, Ariès claims that, although people enjoyed ‘coddling’ their children (‘le “mignotage”’), they were gradually realising that children were different from adults and not merely smaller versions. Children were now seen as being innocent but weak, particularly by the moralists of the period. Thus
children had to be trained and their behaviour corrected – they were ‘de fragiles créatures de Dieu qu’il fallait à la fois préserver et assagir’ (141) (‘fragile creatures of God who needed to be both safeguarded and reformed’ (133)). These two elements of a concept of childhood were also in evidence during the 18th century and in addition the physical health of children became a matter of concern. By the mid-18th century the modern view of childhood had emerged: ‘L’enfant a pris une place centrale dans la famille, et pas seulement l’avenir de l’enfant, son futur établissement, mais sa présence et son existence nue’ (142) (‘Not only the child’s future but his presence and his very existence are of concern: the child has taken a central place in the family’ (133)). Although Ariès does not provide any evidence on the actualities of childhood in support of his thesis, such evidence has been presented by Demos in Family Life in a Plymouth Colony (1970).

Demos researched into the Puritan colony set up at Plymouth, Massachusetts, in the 1630s. He was interested in reconstructing the actual experiences of a child, criticising Ariès for not doing so, and based his judgements on such physical artifacts as house size, furniture, type of clothing, and from documents – wills, inventories and the official records of the colony. Despite the large difference in approach and theoretical orientation, Demos agrees with Ariès that there was no concept of childhood. He, in fact, believes that there was no such awareness even in the 17th century, when Ariès asserts it emerged, since children were still clad in the same fashion as adults. Zuckerman (1970) agrees with Demos on this point. Demos does suggest that there may have been some recognition of infancy as children under the age of 7 were dressed differently from adults. Nevertheless, he declares: ‘Childhood as such was barely recognised in the period spanned by the Plymouth Colony. There was little sense that children might somehow be a special group, with their own needs and interests and capacities. Instead they were viewed largely as miniature adults: the boy was a little model of his father, likewise the girl of her mother’ (57–8).

In The Making of the Modern Family (1976), Shorter emphasises how our attitude to children has changed. They no longer belong to the lowest level of the social strata but are rather the subjects of our primary concern. Almost implicit in this viewpoint is that today our treatment of children is perfect and bad parents are never found. Shorter even goes so far as to state: ‘Good mothering is an invention of modernization’ (168). He claims that children were held in such low esteem that they were not even regarded as human. ‘Nor did these mothers often (some say “never”) see
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their infants as human beings with the same capacities for joy and pain as they themselves’ (169). Shorter does believe that there has always been a ‘residual affection’ between parent and child – the product of a ‘biological link’ – but he stresses the change in the priority which the infant occupied in the mother’s ‘rational hierarchy of values’, this change appearing first in the upper classes of the 16th century.

Researchers such as Firestone (1971), Hoyles (1979) and Illich (1973) similarly maintain that there was no concept of childhood in past societies. For example, Hoyles argues in ‘Childhood in historical perspective’ that ‘childhood is a social convention and not just a natural state’ and believes that ‘Both childhood and our present-day nuclear family are comparatively recent social inventions’ (2, 16).

Other scholars have been concerned not so much with the existence or non-existence of a concept of childhood as with attitudes to children through time. Most of these authors take it as given that previously children were regarded as being at the very bottom of the social scale whereas now children are an essential component of society and family life. They thus describe changing attitudes to children (for the better) through the centuries and do so regardless of their research interest and theoretical orientation: to describe social history; to apply psychological theory (Demos, 1970, 1973; Hunt, 1972; de Mause and case studies, 1976; Trumbach, 1978); to document the various child-rearing theories (Cleverley & Philips, 1976; Newson & Newson, 1974; Sears, 1975; Wishy, 1968); or to trace the development of public policy towards children (Bremner, 1970–3; Pinchbeck & Hewitt, 1969).

As has been stated, Ariès claims that there was no appreciation of the state of childhood in the middle ages; children ‘did not count’. Lyman (‘Barbarism and religion’, 1976), studying the period A.D. 200–800, believes that up till the 8th century parents were ambivalent towards their offspring, viewing them both as a pleasure and an integral part of family life, as well as a ‘bother’. He argues that the former was the ideal but that in actual fact the latter was more often the actuality. Though parental love was often described as natural in the 7th century, ‘The continued need for legislation, as well as other scattered evidence, suggests, however, that the distance between ideals and actuality had closed rather little in half a millennium’ (95). McLaughlin (‘Survivors and surrogates’, 1976) also found that there was ‘conflict between destructive or rejecting and fostering attitudes’ on the part of parents to children, this time, though, for the period spanning the 9th to the 13th century. However, through the four centuries studied ‘there are also clear signs, especially from the
twelfth century onwards, of tenderness towards infants and small children, interest in the stages of their development, awareness of their need for love’ (117–18). In direct contrast to Ariès, McLaughlin claims that by the end of the 12th century, the notion of the child as only the property of his parents ‘had also been joined by more favorable conceptions, by a sense of the child as a being in its own right, as a nature of “potential greatness”, and by a sense of childhood as a distinctive and formative stage of life’ (140). Both of the above studies contradict Ariès’ argument that the middle ages were unaware of the nature of childhood.

De Mause is by far the most extreme of the writers in this field. In ‘The evolution of childhood’ (1976), his avowed intention is to propose a ‘psychogenic theory of history’; that is the central force for change is the ‘psychogenic’ changes in personality occurring because of successive generations of parent–child interactions. In carrying out this intention, he reconstructs a horrifying dark world of childhood in the past. He agrees with Ariès that past parents were attached to their children but he argues that they were unable to regard their offspring as separate beings. ‘It is, of course, not love which the parent of the past lacked, but rather the emotional maturity needed to see the child as a person separate from himself’ (17). De Mause suggests that there have been six successive historical modes of parent–child relations, with children regarded as being ‘full of evil’ up to the 13th century. Parents of the earliest mode, the infanticidal, ‘routinely resolved their anxieties about taking care of children by killing them’. From the 4th century ‘parents began to accept the child as having a soul’ and therefore were unable to kill them and resorted to abandonment instead (51). During the 14th to the 17th centuries the child ‘was still a container for dangerous projections’ but it ‘was allowed to enter into the parent’s emotional life’. De Mause claims that ‘enormous ambivalence marks this mode’ (51–2).

There was little improvement in the child’s status during the early modern period. Tucker concludes from her research into 15th- and 16th-century England (‘The child as beginning and end’, 1976) that children were seen as untrustworthy and as being at the ‘bottom of the social scale’. In fact, ‘childhood was a state to be endured rather than enjoyed’ (229–30). Tucker states that parents were ambivalent towards their offspring: they were unsure whether to regard them as good or evil, and also when to include them in adult society or to exclude them from it. But, she argues, attitudes were changing during this period so that a ‘greater value’ came to be put on the child, and a ‘greater attempt is made to please him through attention to his physical welfare and happiness’
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(252). Tucker decides that, by the end of the 16th century ‘More and more children were being recognised as human beings with different developmental problems than adults’ (252).

Shorter and Stone concur with the main thrust of Tucker’s views. Shorter too found that more interest was taken in children from the 16th century on. In The Family, Sex and Marriage in England (1977), Stone insists that for the period 1450 to 1630 the interests of the group took priority over the individual and therefore children were ignored. Most upper-class parents as well as many of those lower down the social scale, for instance, fostered out their infants and parents in general were unmoved at the death of infants. Between 1540 and 1660, however, increasing interest was shown in childhood as a state, resulting in ‘a greater concern for the moral and academic training of children’ (193).

In Children in English Society (1969), Pinchbeck & Hewitt chart the development of public policy towards English children from Tudor times. They do not distinguish between social and parental treatment of children, but instead they look upon parental care as being influenced by social attitudes and developing along much the same lines as public policy. They deal with changing social attitudes, documenting the rise of statutory protection for children. They too maintain that children were regarded as unimportant in Tudor society: ‘Infancy was but a biologically necessary prelude to the sociologically all important business of the adult world’ (8). Although children were loved, they were considered to be merely the ‘property of their parents’ and to be miniature adults: ‘They were, indeed, looked upon as little adults and therein lies the essence of the explanation of much otherwise inexplicable to us today’ (348).

Hunt in Parents and Children in History (1972) attempts to fuse history and psychology so as to provide keys to our understanding of French notions of childhood in the 17th century from psychoanalysis. Unlike Demos (1970), Hunt is more interested in concepts than in actualities: ‘I am interested in the way people felt about the family . . . the attitudes they seemed to hold with regard to the duties of parenthood’ (5). His main source of evidence is Dr Héroard’s diary on the upbringiing of the dauphin of France 1601–10, the future Louis XIII, and Hunt uses statements from this text to generalise to the rest of French society, despite the uniqueness of the boy’s position. He argues that children were regarded as being inferior to adults. For example, despite ‘the efforts of doctors and moralists’, ‘the process of child rearing was not valued very highly and did not bring the mother much in the way of prestige or honor’ (102). He states that the construction of the royal
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household told Louis ‘as a child he was something inferior, a chattel to be used in the elaborate dealings which adults had with one another’ (99). For young children, those under the age of 7, ‘being the father’s servant was the only role which society allowed them to assume’ (152). From 7 years onwards, children were expected to behave as adults, ceasing to be only a ‘consumer’ and becoming a ‘contributor’.

Badinter depicts a similar type of French society in her book L’Amour en Plus (1980). She writes that before 1760 the educators, philosophers and theologians considered the child to be ‘le mal ou le péché’ (52) (‘an evil or sinful creature’ (39)) whereas to the ordinary people a child was ‘davantage, ressentit comme une gêne, voire comme un malheur’ (52) (‘more often considered a nuisance, or even a misfortune’ (39)). Moreover, she argues, even after the publication of Rousseau’s book on education in 1762 which emphasised the importance of childhood, ‘il fallut près de cent ans pour effacer la majeure part de l’égoïsme et de l’indifférence maternelle’ (194) (‘it took almost one hundred years to subdue most mothers’ selfishness and indifference’ (168)).

Not all writers would agree with the above views on French attitudes to children. Hunt’s interpretation of Hérodu’s journal is markedly at variance with that of an earlier writer, Crump (1929). The latter found that Louis’ needs as a child were recognised and catered for. Furthermore the findings of Marvick in ‘Nature versus nurture’ (1976) are opposed to those of Badinter and Hunt. Marvick suggests that parents were concerned about the survival of their babies. Though ‘Birth alone did not qualify the infant for protection that would maximize its chances for survival’, once ‘a bond between child and outside world had been forged the adults brought their powerful forces to bear on its behalf’ (293). She adds that, although children were regarded as ‘vexing and peevish’ at times, they were not thought to be beyond redemption – training and ‘manipulation’ would ensure conformity.

Illick (1976) arrives at an almost identical conclusion to that of Marvick, but in relation to 17th-century England and America:

There is no denying that parents in seventeenth-century England were interested in their children, but that interest took the form of controlling youngsters – just as adults restrained themselves – rather than allowing autonomous development. (323)

American parents of the same time revealed great anxiety over the illness of and sorrow at the death of their children, but they were also concerned with breaking the will of their sons and daughters. An alternative view is
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given by Macfarlane in The Family Life of Ralph Josselin (1970). He based his research on the diary of a 17th-century British clergyman and describes a much more caring parent–child relationship. Macfarlane states that it appears that children were eagerly welcomed by their parents and valued highly – both for the pleasure they afforded and the comfort they would later provide. In Josselin’s diary there are numerous allusions to his love for his offspring and he took a great deal of interest in their development. Wrightson’s (1982) research on 17th-century diaries supports Macfarlane’s findings.

Josselin’s ideas would seem to be in advance of their time as, according to most scholars, there was no marked alteration in attitudes to children until the 18th century. It is held that in the later modern period, children became increasingly important and the focus of parental concern and attention. Plumb argues in ‘The new world of children’ (1975) that, up until the end of the 17th century, there was an ‘autocratic, indeed ferocious’ attitude to children. They were viewed as being full of ‘Original Sin’, whereas in the late 17th century ‘a new social attitude towards children began to strengthen’ (65). Parents adopted a ‘gentle and more sensitive approach’ to their offspring; they were no longer to be looked on as ‘sprigs of old Adam whose wills had to be broken’ (70). None the less, despite this new view of children, Plumb does not claim that there was therefore a concept of childhood in the 18th century. Children were regarded more as things than as people: ‘Children, in a sense, had become luxury objects upon which their mothers and fathers were willing to spend larger and larger sums of money, not only for their education, but also for their entertainment and amusement. In a sense they had become superior pets’ (90). Really? In what sense?

In Your Ancients Revisited (1975), Sears holds a similar point of view, though he dates the new position of children as occurring towards the end of the 18th century. By that date there was ‘a clear increment in the empathic ethos of Western society’ (3). This newly aroused empathic spirit ‘dictated a change from punitiveness and brutality to kindness and compassion’ in methods of child-rearing. Like Sears, Trumbach in The Rise of the Egalitarian Family (1978) considers the 18th century to be characterised by a rise in the ‘importance of domesticity’. Accordingly parents, and particularly mothers, are more attached to their offspring – ‘Eighteenth-century parents were just discovering childhood and learning to enjoy its innocence’ (262). De Mause, too, asserts that there was a ‘great transition’ in parent–child relations in the 18th century – the intrusive mode of child care appeared. The child was no longer ‘full of
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dangerous projections’ and, since he was so much less threatening, ‘true empathy was possible and pediatrics was born’ (52). Other authors such as Stone and Shorter make the same point. Stone states that during the period 1660 to 1800 there was ‘a remarkable change’ in attitudes to children. The family became child-oriented, affectionate, with a permissive mode of child care and a recognition of the uniqueness of each child. This type appeared first in the landed and professional classes who were ‘able to afford the luxury of sentimental concern’ for children (405). Shorter adds that the poor remained indifferent to their offspring at least until the end of the 18th century, and in some regions considerably longer.

Smith (‘Autonomy and affection’, 1977) and Walzer (‘A period of ambivalence’, 1976) studied 18th-century America. Smith would agree with the belief that there was a more humane view taken of children in the 18th century, but only in the Chesapeake region. He begins by stating: ‘Most parents in eighteenth-century Virginia and Maryland were deeply attached to their children and they structured family life around them’ (32). Smith then goes on to say: ‘Such an assertion could not be confidently made about parental conduct in much of the pre-industrial West’ (32). He does not appear to wonder why there is such a discrepancy in parental care between America and the rest of Western society but seems to prefer to look on the Chesapeake colony as being the forerunner in novel methods of child care which the West was yet to adopt. Yet the discrepancy is easily explained once it is realised that Smith uses primary sources – mainly diaries and letters – for his own research, but relies on the arguments and conclusions of other historians, usually de Mause, to depict the rest of Western society. He is quite happy to do this, even though de Mause uses mainly secondary sources of information, comes to quite the opposite conclusion regarding parental care and is also regarded by Smith as being ‘obsessed with discovering child abuse or neglect in times past’ (32).

Smith argues that in Europe children were not breast-fed by the mother because they were viewed as parasites who would drain the mother, a stance which he takes from the work of Hunt. In Chesapeake, however, suckling by the mother was probably the normal feeding method. Parents were anxious about their children, revealing concern during such stages as weaning and teething. Their letters and diaries contain ‘a welter of evidence of parental tenderness and affection towards young children’ (39). Smith believes that childhood had become a distinctive phase for 18th-century Chesapeake. This, as he points out, is in opposition to the findings of Walzer.
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Walzer considers that American attitudes to children of this period can be characterised by the parental wish to retain and at the same time reject offspring. He gives the example that, although American fathers and mothers were genuinely interested in their children, they still sent them away to school or to live with relatives. Nevertheless, he still believes that there had been a shift in parental attitudes so that children were regarded more as individuals and treated with indulgence.

Progress continued to be made during the 19th century, at least for middle- and upper-class children. Ariès, Badinter, Pinchbeck & Hewitt, Shorter and Stone all insist that the poor child was still ignored and exploited by his parents. In the matter of child labour, for example, Pinchbeck & Hewitt argue that the indifference of both parents and the community to the suffering and exploitation of children in this way ‘was one of the greatest obstacles to be overcome by those seeking to establish their legal rights to protection’ (355). In ‘Home as a nest’ (1976), Robertson argues that, by the 19th century, and in contradiction to previous centuries, European parents were being urged to find joy in child-rearing. This development was, according to Robertson, due to Rousseau. He, for the first time in history, ‘made a large group of people believe that childhood was worth the attention of intelligent adults, encouraging an interest in the process of growing up rather than just the product’ (407). How could one writer have such an influence? Robertson also believes that public responsibility for children was growing:

At the very least, however, the nineteenth century was the time when public bodies began to think of children as children, with special needs because of their helplessness and vulnerability, rather than as small adults with the right to hire themselves out for sixteen hours a day, or as the chattels of their parents. (428)

Stone maintains that, following the benevolence of the 18th century and because of the rise of the Evangelical movement, early 19th-century families imposed a strict disciplinary regime on children. Humane attitudes reappeared during the mid-19th century. He therefore concludes that the evolution of the family has been one of fluctuating change and not one of linear development. But ‘The only steady linear change over the last four hundred years seems to have been a growing concern for children, although their actual treatment has oscillated cyclically between the permissive and the repressive’ (683).

Bremner comes to a similar conclusion to Stone. In his book *Children and Youth in America* (1970–3), Bremner’s specific intention is to review the history of public policy towards children as opposed to parental policy.