Introduction

It was a long time before historians deigned to take an interest in children. If they were slow to pay much attention to the role of women in past societies, they were even more reluctant to pursue research on the young. As late as 1960, a general history of childhood had yet to be written. Historians were for long open to the jibe that they were only interested in kings and battles. They certainly devoted most of their resources to the study of a very adult and very masculine world, centred on such areas as high politics, diplomacy, warfare, major intellectual movements and trade union struggles. Children were largely invisible in the historical record. At best, they might manage a bit part as threats to law and order on the streets or as victims of exploitation and neglect by adults.

Studies of Childhood in the Social Sciences

From the late nineteenth until the middle of the twentieth century, the study of childhood was left largely in the hands of psychologists. They brought a wealth of new knowledge to the area, above all in the form of developmental psychology. A string of luminaries, including G. Stanley Hall, Alfred Binet, Arnold Gesell and Jean Piaget, contributed to the emergence of the 'developmental paradigm', a set of ideas that continues to exert an influence on society in Europe during the twenty-first century.[1] Parents, teachers and others involved with children have become familiar with the idea of the 'normal' child, and the numerous charts, record forms and IQ tests that scientists use to measure and classify children. The seemingly intuitive notion of 'development', in which a child passes through a sequence of stages, predictable from their age, is also deeply embedded in institutions such as the justice and welfare

---

[1] See, for example, Dennis Thompson, John D. Hogan and Philip M. Clark, *Developmental Psychology in Historical Perspective* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

1

systems as well as the schools.[2] Other social sciences joined history in generally ignoring children during this period.[3] According to a division of labour established during the 1880s and 1890s, 'The child belonged to Psychology, the family to Sociology, the tribe to Anthropology, and the school to Education'.[4] The Child Study Movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with its concern to understand the development of the child from birth to adolescence, gave psychologists the initial lead in this area. In so far as other disciplines took any interest in children it was to study their socialisation – that is to say, the process by which individuals acquire the knowledge, skills and values they need for integration into their society.

All this began to change during the 1960s and 1970s among academics, which brought an enormous upheaval in the study of children and childhood. The social and intellectual climate of the period favoured a questioning of established values. Rebellious youth, up in arms about such issues as the Vietnam War or the rigidities of the French educational system, helped to undermine respect for the existing authorities. Postmodernists posed a challenge to accepted ways of thinking in both the natural and the social sciences.[5] Historians played their part in rethinking approaches to the study of childhood: indeed, according to the sociologists Alan Prout and Allison James, 'it was perhaps from history that the opening moves were made' during this period.[6] The work of Philippe Ariès stood out during the early stages because of the huge impact it had on social scientists and historians. With his famous contention that 'in medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist', Ariès gave an early hint that other societies might think differently about childhood from the way we do in the West today.[7]

It was during these years in the late twentieth century that a number of developmental psychologists began to ask whether their efforts in

[2] This section is indebted to André Turmel, *A Historical Sociology of Childhood: Developmental Thinking, Categorization and Graphic Visualization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[3] Heather Montgomery, *An Introduction to Childhood: Anthropological Perspectives on Children's Lives* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 5.

[4] Lloyd J. Borstelmann, 'Children before Psychology: Ideas about Children from Antiquity to the late 1800s', in Paul Mussen (ed.), *Handbook of Child Psychology* (New York, NY: Wiley, 1983), pp. 1–40 (p. 2).

[5] R. Murray Thomas, *Recent Theories of Human Development* (London: Sage, 2004), pp. 23–4, 195–205.

[6] Alan Prout and Allison James, 'A New Paradigm for the Sociology of Childhood? Provenance, Promise and Problems', in Allison James and Alan Prout (eds.), *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood* (London: Falmer Press, 1990), pp. 7–34 (pp. 16–17).

[7] Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), p. 125.

'sorting, grading and straightening children out' were not having the perverse effect of helping to prop up the *status quo*, with all its social, ethnic and gender inequalities.[8] There was the context of a general reaction against the tendency of behaviourism and psychoanalysis to reduce children to a passive role in their own upbringing. The 'cognitive revolution' of the 1960s saw the theories of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky come to prominence. Although still concerned with identifying the stages of growth at the heart of developmentalism, they at least envisaged children engaging with their social and cultural environment as they matured.[9] No less importantly, there were calls to abandon any notion that a child would grow according to the same set of stages or sequences wherever it was raised. Cross-cultural studies of childrearing practices across the globe revealed considerable variation in the abilities and competencies expected of the child.[10] As the psychologist Rex Stainton Rogers put it in a critical essay, the maturation of a child had all too often appeared as 'a process that is "wired in" to the human organism, and which inexorably unfolds just as, say, green leaves turn to red and gold in the autumn, or tadpoles turn to frogs in the spring'.[11] A number of influential works insisted that developmental theories were firmly rooted in modern Western civilisation, and might not apply to other societies, particularly non-literate ones.[12] In the case of Piaget, for example, for all of his awareness of the influence of the social context on the child's development, he stands accused of taking as his ideal of adult cognitive competence a peculiarly Western philosophical one.[13]

[8] David Ingleby, 'Development in Social Context', in Martin Richards and Paul Light (eds.), *Children of Social Worlds: Development in a Social Context* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986), pp. 297–317 (pp. 298–9).

[9] Alan Slater, Ian Hocking and Jon Loose, 'Theories and Issues in Child Development', in Alan Slater and Gavin Bremner (eds.), *An Introduction to Developmental Psychology* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 34–63 (p. 42).

[10] Allison James, 'From the Child's Point of View: Issues in the Social Construction of Childhood', and Robert A. LeVine, 'Child Psychology and Anthropology: An Environmental View', in Catherine Panter-Brick (ed.), *Biosocial Perspectives on Children* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 45–65 and 102–30, respectively.

[11] R. W. Stainton Rogers, 'World Children', in Karin Lesnik-Oberstein (ed.), *Children in Culture* (London, 1998), as cited by Turmel, *Historical Sociology*, p. 280.

[12] See, for example, Glenn H. Elder Jr., John Modell and Ross D. Parke (eds.), *Children in Time and Place: Developmental and Historical Insights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); and Martin Woodhead, 'Child Development and the Development of Childhood', in Jens Qvortrup et al. (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Childhood Studies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 46–61.

[13] David Archard, *Children: Rights and Childhood* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 93, as cited in Chris Jenks, *Childhood* (2nd edn., London and New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 21–2.

Anthropologists and sociologists were in their turn moved by these same upheavals to rethink their approach to the study of childhood. They began to adopt a child-centred approach in their research, recognising that children possessed agency and that children's understandings of their own lives and what was happening around them were to be taken seriously. There was therefore a call to 'give children a voice', granting that they should be treated as reliable informants. Thus anthropology experienced a 'noticeable shift' in this field during the 1970s, moving from relative neglect of children to a greater interest in their roles in society.[14] With a 'new paradigm', the sociology of childhood underwent an even fiercer reaction against its earlier preoccupation with 'developmentalism' and socialisation theory.[15] What this had amounted to, critics alleged, was finding ways to turn the child, an incomplete being variously described as immature, irrational and incompetent, into an adult, that is to say the complete article, mature, rational and competent.[16] This simple binary division both demeaned the child and flattered the adult. It suggested, according to revisionists, that children were a different order of beings to adults – 'human becomings' rather than full 'human beings'. It also implied that adults had a 'natural' right to exercise power over children.[17]

Historians and the 'New' Social Studies of Childhood

This revisionist approach, sometimes known from the 1990s as the 'new' social studies of childhood, affected both the cultural and social history of children. Following the usual convention among historians, the former involves a study of changing ideas about childhood in the past, the latter a focus on the lives of young people themselves. (This is not to lose sight of links between the two.) The history of childhood started in 1960 with *L'Enfant et la vie familial*, by Philippe Ariès. Ariès doubtless took his argument to its logical extreme, to the point of absurdity even, in asserting that medieval society had no idea of

[14] Montgomery, *Anthropological Perspectives*, pp. 43–8.
[15] Prout and James, 'New Paradigm'. For a European perspective, see Manuela du Bois-Reymond, Heinz Sünker and Heinz-Hermann Krüger, *Childhood in Europe: Approaches-Trends-Findings* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2001); and *Current Sociology*, 58 (2010), special issue on the Sociology of Childhood.
[16] Robert MacKay, 'Conceptions of Children and Models of Socialization', in Hans Peter Dreitzel (ed.), *Childhood and Socialization* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1973), pp. 27–43 (pp. 27–8).
[17] Jens Qvortrup, 'Childhood Matters: An Introduction', in Jens Qvortrup et al. (eds.), *Childhood Matters: Social Theory, Practice and Politics* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1994), pp. 1–23 (pp. 3–4).

childhood. The work soon provoked a fierce counterblast from histor-
ians of the period, indignant that people from 'their' period were
considered incapable of recognising this stage of life. It also encouraged
researchers to explore representations of childhood in different periods
and places. It is now generally accepted that every culture has some
notion of infancy and childhood as stages in the life cycle, though how
they are subdivided according to age and the meanings attached to
them vary considerably.[18]

There exists a wealth of texts and images for researchers to consult in
this area, including works by famous philosophers, paintings depicting
the young, poems and novels conveying thoughts about them, and even-
tually photographs and films. There is also support in finding and inter-
preting these sources from studies in related disciplines such as art
history, theology and literary criticism.[19] The upshot is a varied and
well-documented array of conceptions, including the idealisation of a
'sweet and sacred childhood' during the later Middle Ages in Western
Europe; the 'filthy bundles of original sin' perceived by the more extreme
Puritans in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England and the Ameri-
can colonies; the innocent child of nature associated with Jean-Jacques
Rousseau during the Enlightenment and the 'sexually knowing child' of
the late twentieth century.

In this respect, historians have often joined social scientists in con-
sidering childhood as a social construction. This involves grasping that,
in the words of social psychologist Arlene Skolnick, 'much of what we
tend to think of as obvious, natural, and universal about childhood may
actually be problematic, arbitrary, and shaped by historical and cultural
conditions'.[20] It has become clear that, as in the case of race and gender,
very different ideas can be constructed from the same biological starting
point. In the case of childhood, Nicholas Tucker argues that the small
size, early dependency on adults and constant growth of the young
provide the foundations. This biological immaturity of children is uni-
versal. From birth, however, the young have to adapt to the demands of
the society in which they live, creating the potential for as many variations
on childhood as there are societies.[21]

[18] LeVine, 'Child Psychology and Anthropology', p. 113.
[19] One might cite Anne Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence*; Marcia Bunge, ed., *The Child in Christian Thought*; and Marilyn Brown, ed., *Picturing Children*.
[20] Arlene Skolnick, 'Introduction: Rethinking Childhood', in Arlene Skolnick (ed.), *Rethinking Childhood: Perspectives on Development and Society* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1976), pp. 1–15 (p. 1).
[21] Nicholas Tucker, *What Is a Child?* (London: Fontana, 1977), p. 13.

This approach, for all its insights, leaves open awkward questions on the relationship between the biological and the social. A 'new wave' among sociologists in the twenty-first century has called for a reconsideration of some of the basic assumptions of the new social studies of childhood, suggesting that it is reaching its 'intellectual limits'. This includes cautioning against the dangers of 'social constructionism'. The tendency, according to Alan Prout, is 'to make the territory of the social as large as possible by winning as much as possible from biology, conceding to it, if at all possible, only a residue'. Rather than positing an opposition between culture and nature, he argues that they are 'mutually implicated with each other at every level'.[22] More specifically, playing down the material dimension to the study of the young risks ignoring the bodies of children, much in evidence when considering, for example, the history of their diet or their work in industry.[23] Finally, in stressing the vast potential for diversity in childhoods, the social constructionist approach obscures what is common to all children. For some purposes, it is useful to think of children as an age group in any society, with common interests that need to be considered in relation to those of adults and the elderly. Government policies, for example, may hinder or advance the welfare of children in a particular period.[24]

New Approaches to the History of Children

Researching the history of childhood has always been a relatively straightforward exercise, in so far as it can rely on material produced by adults. By contrast, writing a history of children, concerned with the experiences of the young in the past, has proved more challenging. Children have always found themselves excluded from positions of power: for all their numerical weight in society, they can be classified as a 'minority' group for this reason. And they have not left much in the way of written evidence behind them in archives and libraries. Hence it is all too easy to write a 'history of childhood' that leaves out the children. To move on, historians have had to join their colleagues from the social sciences in

[22] Alan Prout, *The Future of Childhood* (London: Routledge/Falmer, 2005), pp. 2–3, 54.
[23] Alan Prout, 'Childhood Bodies: Construction, Agency and Hybridity', in Alan Prout (ed.), *The Body, Childhood and Society* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 1999), pp. 1–18 (p. 1); idem, *Future of Childhood*, pp. 54–7; Martin Richards, 'The Meeting of Nature and Nurture and the Development of Children: Some Conclusions', in Panter-Brick, *Biosocial Perspectives*, pp. 130–46.
[24] This is a perspective adopted by Jens Qvortrup in *Childhood Matters*; see also Adrian L. James, 'Competition or Integration? The Next Step in Childhood Studies?', *Childhood*, 17 (2010), 485–99.

shaking off the legacy of the past, above all by questioning the emphasis among earlier generations of scholars on the development and socialisation of children.

The crucial change in approach has required researchers to consider children worth studying in their own right, rather than merely as adults-in-the-making.[25] The 'new paradigm' has played down the differences and accentuated the similarities between children and adults, seeing them all as 'beings'. It has insisted that childhood and old age are essential components of 'personhood', breaking the monopoly of adulthood as a focus of scholarly interest. Moreover, it has encouraged scholars to question the legitimacy of the existing distribution of power and authority between adults and children. They have begun to ask whether adults did always act 'in the best interests of the child', as was so often claimed, and whether they sometimes took advantage of their position to exploit, abuse or silence the young.[26] Again, it should be added sociologists will now admit that some of the arguments put forward in the first flush of enthusiasm for the new social studies over-reached themselves. They have conceded that they underestimated the diversity of approaches within developmental psychology during its early stages and the way its ideas have evolved since. And they have reined back on the refusal to see children as 'becomings'. Nick Lee, for example, argues that from the seventeenth century onwards nation states began to take an interest in the size and quality of their population, encouraging them to invest in the future of their children. Efforts to preserve the lives of the young left them dependent on adults, creating the conditions for the 'becoming view of childhood': conditions that remained in place until the 'age of uncertainty' loomed during the 1970s. Indeed, children are surely best considered as both beings and becomings. As the anthropologist Heather Montgomery observes, 'Childhood is a time of transition and change, and despite the enormous variation in the ways in which childhood is understood, there is no society that does not acknowledge that children (however they are defined) are very different from adults, have different needs, and have different roles and expectations placed on them'.[27]

[25] Note that Patrick J. Ryan, in 'How New is the "New" Social Study of Childhood? The Myth of a Paradigm Shift', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 38 (2008), 553–76, argues that the ideas touted as new by sociologists have deep roots in developmental psychology and historical studies.

[26] Prout and James, 'A New Paradigm'; and Turmel, *Historical Sociology*, ch. 1.

[27] Prout, *Future of Childhood*, p. 2; Nick Lee, *Childhood and Society: Growing Up in an Age of Uncertainty* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2001), p. 7; Montgomery, *Anthropological Perspectives*, p. 9.

8   Introduction

Historians have caught the *zeitgeist* in their own way by re-orientating their research in various directions. Firstly, they have widened the range of topics that interest them, beyond the experiences of the young in the family and the school. They have therefore considered the young in other roles, for example, as workers, as gang members, as hospital patients and as consumers. Some have also investigated the emotional life of children, reflecting current interest in the history of emotions generally, throwing light on such topics as parent–child relations and the way children learned how to express their feelings through their reading.[28] Secondly, historians have sought to avoid simple generalisations about children in the past, exploring the impact of such influences as class, gender and ethnicity in different historical contexts. Thirdly, historians have followed the mantra associated with the sociologist Leena Alanen that children should be seen as 'social actors in their own right'. This stems from the realisation among psychologists and sociologists that even young children can manage their social relations with considerable competence. Alanen in 2001 added the important gloss that 'children's powers (or lack of them)' need to be seen in their generational context; that is to say, their relationships with parents, schoolteachers, employers and fellow workers, among others.[29] In some circumstances, children have influence; in others, notably any level of government, virtually none. Moreover, as anthropologists have noted, one needs to recognise both agency and vulnerability when discussing children.[30] Overall, instead of depicting children solely as passive creatures, historians have brought the young to life by showing how they negotiate their role in such contexts as the family or the streets.

Attempting to give a voice to a 'muted group' such as children has proved particularly challenging for historians, because of the scarcity of

---

[28] Susan Broomhall (ed.), *Emotions in the Household, 1200–1900* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2008); Joanne Bailey, *Parenting in England 1760–1830: Emotion, Identity, and Generation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); and Stephanie Olsen, *Juvenile Nation: Youth, Emotions and the Making of the Modern British Citizen* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

[29] Leena Alanen, 'Rethinking Childhood', *Acta Sociologica*, 31(1988), 53–67 (59–60); eadem, 'Explorations in Generational Analysis', in Leena Alanen and Berry Mayall (eds.), *Conceptualizing Child-Adult Relations* (London and New York: Routledge-Falmer, 2001), pp. 11–32 (p. 31); Allison James, 'Agency', in Qvortrup et al., *Handbook*, pp. 34–45.

[30] E. Kay, M. Tisdall and Samantha Punch, 'Not So New? Looking Critically at Childhood Studies', *Children's Geographies*, 10 (2012), 249–64 (255–6); Myra Bluebond-Langner and Jill E. Korbin, 'Challenges and Opportunities in the Anthropology of Childhoods', *American Anthropologist*, 109 (2007), 241–6 (242).

documentary evidence available.[31] However, they have exercised their ingenuity to look from the bottom up as well as from the top down. They have managed to glean information from conventional sources such as official reports and newspaper articles. They have also resorted to 'ego documents', defined as texts in which authors write about their own 'acts, thoughts and feelings'.[32] Letters and diaries written by children are rare, and often heavily influenced by adult expectations, but revealing when written by older children in particular.[33] More abundant are childhood reminiscences and autobiographies written by adults, and oral history projects tapping people's memories. This type of material was often scorned by historians in the past as the least reliable of the sources available to them, but if treated with the same caution as others, can yield interesting insights. There are certain well-rehearsed drawbacks to autobiographies as a source for the history of children. They are vulnerable to lapses in memory or deliberate distortion. They are in effect a literary form, requiring a creative effort to reconstruct the early years in a life. And those who write their own life stories are likely to be exceptional individuals. Nonetheless, they serve to put some flesh and blood on the bare bones of a historical narrative. Fortunately for present purposes, those written from around 1800 onwards tend to pay more attention to the childhood years of the author than their predecessors. They are also more likely to explore in some detail the author's private life, including its seamier side, following in the footsteps of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his *Confessions* (1781). No less importantly, as a pioneer of the use of working-class autobiographies, the historian David Vincent observed, 'if we wish to understand the meaning of the past, we must first discover the meaning the past had for those who made it and were made by it'.[34]

---

[31] Charlotte Hardman, 'Can There Be an Anthropology of Children?', *Journal of the Anthropology Society of Oxford*, 4 (1973), 85–99 (85); Harry Hendrick, 'The Child as a Social Actor in Historical Sources: Problems of Identification and Interpretation', in Pia Christensen and Allison James (eds.), *Research with Children: Perspectives and Practices* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 40–65.

[32] Rudolf Dekker, *Autobiography in Holland*, p. 12.

[33] See, for example, Emily C. Bruce, '"Every Word Shows How You Love Me": The Social Literacy Practice of Children's Letter Writing (1780–1860)', *Paedagogica Historica*, 50 (2014), 247–64; and Philippe Lejeune, *Le Moi des demoiselles: enquête sur le journal de jeune fille* (Paris: Seuil, 1993).

[34] David Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Working Class Autobiography* (London: Europa, 1981), p. 6. See also Richard N. Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller: Autobiography and the Experience of Childhood* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984); Mary Jo Maynes, *Taking the Hard Road*; Dekker, *Autobiography in Holland*.

The Argument

This study takes issue with a tendency among historians of childhood to
adopt a 'Whiggish' approach to their subject. That is to say, the end of
the story is what is variously described as our 'modern', 'middle-class',
'privileged' or 'protected' childhood and adolescence, associated in
Europe with the welfare state as it emerged in the twentieth century.
Contemporary childhood does of course have much to recommend it,
given the material progress and concern for children's rights evident in
contemporary Europe. At the same time, it is common currency to
perceive some sort of crisis among the young.[35] Critics of a long,
protected childhood and adolescence have pointed to the risk of 'infan-
tilising' young people by treating them as innocents. They doubt the
benefits of excluding them from the world of work and politics, and the
unreasonable expectation that they should be 'purer' than adults in their
personal lives.[36] Already one can see, for example, a reluctant accept-
ance that children cannot remain 'innocent' in a highly sexualised
society. It is clear, then, that change continues apace in Western society.
There is also the growing awareness of the diversity of experiences
among the young in the past. There were numerous paths through the
early years, ranging from the aristocratic to the proletarian. Most have
diverged to a greater or lesser extent from the protected childhood
generally accepted today, in theory if not always in practice.[37] The
challenge for the historian is to understand these paths in their own
particular context and ponder what we may have lost as well as gained.
The challenge, also, is to reconnect histories of childhood to wider
histories of social, cultural, economic and political development, so that
these latter are no longer 'merely' context.[38] To quote Martha Sexton,
'Our understandings of individual identity formation, the structure of
the family, the relationship between the household and the state, as well

---

[35] See, for example, Barry Goldson, '"Childhood": An Introduction to Historical and
Theoretical Analyses', in Phil Scraton (ed.), *Childhood' in Crisis?* (London: UCL Press,
1997), pp. 1–27 (pp. 19–20); and Sue Palmer, *Toxic Childhood: How the Modern World Is
Damaging Our Children and What We Can Do About It* (London: Orion, 2006).

[36] Martin Hoyles, 'History and Politics', in Martin Hoyles (ed.), *Changing Childhood*
(London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, 1979), pp. 1–14; Martin
Killias, 'The Emergence of a New Taboo: The Desexualisation of Youth in Western
Societies since 1800', *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research*, 8 (2000),
459–77.

[37] Paula Fass 'Is There a Story in the History of Childhood?', in Paula Fass, *Childhood in the
Western World*, pp. 1–14.

[38] I owe this point to Dr Nick Baron, of Nottingham University.