

# Family life and illicit love in earlier generations

---

*Essays in historical sociology*

PETER LASLETT

*Fellow of Trinity College and Reader in Politics  
and the History of Social Structure in the  
University of Cambridge*

*Director of the Cambridge Group for the His-  
tory of Population and Social Structure*

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

*London New York New Rochelle  
Melbourne Sydney*

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP  
32 East 57th Street, New York, NY 10022, USA  
296 Beaconsfield Parade, Middle Park, Melbourne 3206, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1977

First published 1977  
Reprinted 1978  
Reprinted with corrections 1980

Photoset and printed in Malta by Interprint (Malta) Ltd

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data*

Laslett, Peter.

Family life and illicit love in earlier  
generations.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Family — History. 2. Illegitimacy — Great  
Britain. 3. Orphans and orphan asylums — Great  
Britain. 4. Slavery—United States. I. Title.

HQ503.L375 301.42'09 76—21010

ISBN 0 521 21408 4 hard covers

ISBN 0 521 29221 2 paperback

# Contents

Introduction: the necessity of a historical sociology	<i>page</i> 1
1 Characteristics of the Western family considered over time	12
2 Clayworth and Cogenhoe	50
3 Long-term trends in bastardy in England	102
4 Parental deprivation in the past: a note on orphans and stepparenthood in English history	160
5 The history of aging and the aged	174
6 Age at sexual maturity in Europe since the Middle Ages	214
7 Household and family on the slave plantations of the U.S.A.	233
Bibliography	261
Index	265

## Introduction: the necessity of a historical sociology

The feeling which most of us have about the family is direct, spontaneous and often very powerful. It is strong enough, in fact, to sustain a fund of interest in all aspects of family life, including the family life of earlier generations, on the part of people for whom the past history of other things may have little value. Any writer on the subject out of the university, therefore, has both an advantage and a handicap. He can count on his possible readers' wanting to know what he has to say; but he must find it difficult to provide the information which he thinks they ought to have in a form acceptable to them.

'Acceptable' here means written in plain, readable prose. It means naming the names of the past people whose familial experience is being described, spelling out the resemblances with what goes on in the home in our own day, and lighting up the contrasts. Leafing over the pages of this book will soon show that a good part of the exposition is not in prose at all, but in figures, frequently in tables of figures and sometimes in graphs. Not much experience is actually described. Not many of those who took part in family life, or fell illicitly in love, have their names and ages written out. Little is said about how different these things were in days gone by or how much the same. The reader may perhaps come to think he has been cheated of what he had a right to expect to be able to read.

This is especially a pity in the present case, because the facts and figures here set out could never have been assembled at all without the co-operation and the active help of hundreds of people who have demonstrated their interest in earlier family life in a practical way. No single scholar, no body of scholars banded together in an institution, could ever have recovered the hundreds of thousands, the millions even, of individual acts of procreation reported upon in chapter 3, which tries to write out the story of bastardy in England over the last four hundred years.

The job could only have been done as it was done in fact. That is to say, by the co-operative work of many persons willing to search out the recordings of baptisms, to note those marked 'illeg.', 'spur.', 'base', 'alias' or 'bastard', and then to report their findings systematically to the researcher. The creation of the file of one hundred English communities which has yielded standard samples for such things as three gene-

rational households, or the proportion of orphaned children living with their widowed mothers, was likewise made possible by the help of volunteers who found the documents, and also by the painstaking, repetitive, daunting work of those who did the analysis at Cambridge. Only because of the sustained effort and interest of these people could we begin to write upon such topics as comparative household composition, or the familial identity of the West, or about parental deprivation in the past as compared with parental deprivation in our own day.

I have done my best at the appropriate places to acknowledge all this help, and to make it clear how far this book is a work of collaboration, not of individual composition. But a debt acknowledged is not a debt repaid, and it remains to be seen whether the appearance as a book of a series of decidedly numerical studies, often couched in abstractions and only seldom engaged with personalities, will be taken as any kind of service in return. Even the foreign scholars who have exchanged evidence and results may feel they have a right to expect more of a connected study, solider and more advanced conclusions, perhaps more history and less social science, or the other way round. This brings us to the point where it may begin to appear why a book of this kind has to be written in this particular form. The reason is to be found in the clear and present necessity of a historical sociology.

'Sociology' has never been a popular word amongst historians, and perhaps not many of them would be prepared even now to accept the necessity of its existence. There are many reasons for this: the literary and humanist tradition of historical writing; its preoccupation with unique events, unique personalities, unrepeatable episodes and experiences; the status-ordering of faculties in universities, which has given to history a place in the First Division in some sort of succession to the Classics, and has relegated the social sciences, the 'soft sciences', to a lower division altogether. More interesting, perhaps, are the political reasons. Sociology and the social sciences generally have been regarded by those engaged in the celebration of the *status quo* as inevitably subversive, by those whose interest is in changing society as irremediably committed to the defence of the social order which exists.

This last is a dilemma from which the study of society may never escape, and perhaps ought never to try to do. It would not be difficult to demonstrate, however, that the writing of history can be subjected to the same sort of criticism, that its claim to objectivity appears to be more convincing only because its traditional methods have worked to obscure its final political tendencies. To acknowledge that history stands in need of sociology is to realize that this is how history will come to recognize its own position in the social world. Which implies an admission that history stands as much in need of a theory of itself as of any other form of generalization about social facts.

This may seem rather a portentous reflection in an introduction intended to explain or to justify a series of studies of the history of family life, with an excursus into sexual behaviour. Before we propose rather more specific reasons why history can be said to stand in need of the social sciences, we may consider why it is that the social sciences stand in need of history. This, so it seems to me, can be dealt with in a summary fashion and in terms of social welfare as well as of social theory. 'The value of historical sociology to the creation of policy in the present', it is said in chapter 5, 'is in denoting how far we differ from past people and how much we are the same. With respect to aging, it is maintained that we . . . shall have to invent appropriate social forms, for they cannot be recovered from our history . . . Our situation remains irreducibly novel: it calls for invention rather than imitation.'

The confident conviction that the historical record has a social use, in enabling us, as was insisted in *The world we have lost*, to understand ourselves in time, is close to the surface on other occasions. The situation of the black family in the United States as it was in the 1960s, a situation which was freely described as almost desperate by government advisors as well as by social investigators, looks rather different when historical sociology addresses itself to the situation of the black slave family. The ghetto in the contemporary American city no longer appears as the inevitable outcome of the situation on the slave plantation as it is described in the last chapter of this book. The problem of the parentally deprived child in the contemporary world, a world which believes itself to be peculiarly prone to the breakup of marriage, is likewise considerably changed. For it turns out, as chapter 4 attempts to show, that high industrial society in the twentieth century is not *more* likely, but *less* likely, to leave children without their natural parents than was pre-industrial England.

The discovery of a time dimension in areas where the passage of years had scarcely previously been noticed could be said to be part of the prospectus for a historical sociology. Some of these areas are already beginning to become familiar, as for example the history of illegitimacy, where the first long time series was arrived at almost a decade ago. Only in the last year or two, however, has it become apparent that the bringing forth of illegitimate children over this long stretch of time was to some extent the responsibility of an ongoing, descent-related sub-society, discernible in the same communities over several succeeding generations.

If this comes as a surprise, it is surely only because questions of this kind, questions of continuance over time, had never previously arisen in this area of enquiry. 'Perdurance' is a word for such a phenomenon, a noun which appears in the first sentence of our first chapter and a concept which occurs again and again thereafter. The details of the per-

during sub-society of the illegitimacy-prone have, moreover, a significance for the general study of social wholes. For they can be said to bear upon the nature of social rules, rules of such fundamental importance as those which govern sexual behaviour, and upon the plural, the conflicting, character of social structures. This in its turn brings us up against the notorious limitations of a functional explanation and of theories of balance and self-regulation.

Or we might take turnover of population. This was the earliest topic to appear written up in the form which now seems to have established itself as usual for exercises in historical sociology, a form even at the outset necessarily subjected to figures, tables and numerical analysis. The slight sensation of shock felt by those who first found out, by doing the necessary sums, that there could be a turnover of nearly two-thirds of all persons in a pre-industrial English village within twelve years has been deliberately preserved in chapter 2. This fifteen-year-old discovery (the actual comparison of the two lists for Clayworth was made in 1961) may yet startle some readers.

Now that the facts of population turnover are becoming familiar, however, and falling into place, what begins to surprise us is how little we can know of social experience if something like this can have been overlooked entirely for so long. The figures for change of address, which used to be brought out to show how quickly everything happened in the advanced United States, how temporary everything is and how volatile in high industrial society, have lost their meaning, and for historical reasons. 'Lost' is not quite right. They have changed their meaning because at last a temporal landscape has been mapped out behind them.

The seven topics which occupy us here are of course only a selection from the possible subject matter of historical sociology. We may take another one at random, from political science. Patriarchal authority is widely believed to be the subjective-symbolic counterpart of political authority. How interesting it is to be informed, therefore, that in England, where political patriarchy was codified in the 1630s by Sir Robert Filmer, paternal power was exercised over servants, over strangers to the family and to the kin, that is, very much more than it was exercised over kinsmen.

Familial authority, therefore, seems always to have been political authority in this sense in the English and Western European past, and political education, political socialization, quite literally patriarchal. It was a matter of positive inculcation by the catechizing priest, using rote learning and the rich array of samples of paternal authority contained in Holy Writ so as to condition the minds of the masses of illiterate English youth. The paradox that this situation should have been

discovered in the country which was the first to develop representative institutions has already been noticed by political scientists.<sup>1</sup>

It can be shown in ways like these how the distorted picture which synchronic social science has brought about requires the therapeutic intervention of the historian or of the historian as sociologist. We do not understand ourselves because we do not yet know what we have been and hence what we may be becoming. This must change, is changing.

As we turn back to the necessity of a historical sociology for historians themselves, we may take note of two circumstances which bear upon the form of presentation adopted here. In the first place, because of the recent emergence of this line of study it is frequently appropriate to put forward a bold hypothesis and to support it with a body of miscellaneous early evidence. This means that a table of percentages gathered from a number of diverse places at different times is the easiest and perhaps the only economical form of demonstration. Chapter 1 is an obvious example, and stands in fact as the introduction to the intellectual themes of the volume as distinct from the methods which have had to be used to expound them. The field, I hope, is still novel enough and the topics sufficiently profitable to compensate the reader for the crudities he will encounter.

In the second place is the characteristic shared by all of the subjects dealt with here. They are to varying degrees demographic, to do with the family and the family group. It is significant in itself, of course, that in our generation preoccupation with population should be so strong. There are other reasons, as will become evident as we proceed, why demography should have become the first body of social scientific theory and technique to be used by those calling themselves historical sociologists. But it goes without saying that demography is not the only social science which they can learn to use, and that its dominance in these early stages has not been a necessary one. Economics was domesticated amongst historians two generations ago and its presence is taken for granted in these essays. But demography has proved to be remarkably fruitful in every direction.

Now demography is a tabular pursuit. Its prose is inevitably studded with digits and intercalated with tables. Although this should explain the frequent occurrence of figures and tables in each of our chapters, the population problems of our day are in no sense the final objects of the work. The example of illegitimacy should have made it plain that what must also interest the historical sociologist is the further

<sup>1</sup> See Laslett 1975 and especially G. J. Schochet, 'Patriarchalism, politics and mass attitudes in Stuart England', *Historical Journal*, xiii (1969): 413-41, with his recent monograph *Patriarchalism and political theory* (Oxford, 1975).



intellectual horizon, those general issues of social control, social development, social composition, which this new-found understanding of the past can be made to open up.

Quantities are crucial here, just as they are with demography itself. But quantification is an incident, a circumstance, never an end. As for the computer, it should surely now no longer be necessary to lay it down that this intricate, time-consuming, ingenuity-demanding, exasperating and marvellously useful machine is an instrument only. It is hardly ever mentioned in the course of this book, but much of the text depends upon the computer's having played its part. With so much numerical evidence to deal with, however else could we have done the work?

Ten years ago, in an attempt to map out the relationship of history to the social sciences, as they then were, it was insisted that the interests of the historian must be wider and more diffuse than those of the social scientist.<sup>2</sup> 'Deliberative societal history' was the unwieldy phrase there used to describe the active component of historical sociology, and this was only one of the activities of the writers of history, with their immense and varied readerships and great range of intellectual responsibilities. But restricted as this sector is, to lose command here might be to yield strategic control of social history as a whole. There are those who believe that the quantifiers are in a position to succeed to this particular command. And by quantifiers people from outside the realm of historical study seem often to be meant.

To my mind, anyway, the notion of quantification, mechanical or otherwise, as being in some way alien to the historian's accepted way of doing his job or even as opposed to it, is entirely misconceived. Even apposition seems wrong to me. Whenever a statement is made about a plurality of persons and it is claimed that they are more this than that, or mostly the one and not the other, or on average like this rather than like anything else; whenever a proposition is made in social terms, whether it is about votes, or prices, or length of life, or the number of heirs likely to live long enough to succeed, or even about the distribution of opinions, or preferences, or beliefs, then quantities are in question. All historians deal in societies to some extent, even if their chosen subjects are individuals or states of mind, and therefore all historians deal in quantities.

The important distinction, as Professor Michael Drake<sup>3</sup> so correctly

<sup>2</sup>See Laslett 1967b.

<sup>3</sup>In my view the most illuminating of the numerous works which have appeared in recent years on quantification in history and in historical sociology are the course books prepared by Michael Drake and his colleagues for the Open University course D301, Historical Data and the Social Sciences, issued in 1974 by the Open University Press, Milton Keynes.

insists, is between quantification which is implicit and quantification which is explicit. What must be seen apart are statements which are covertly numerical, whether or not the historian who uses them recognizes the fact, and statements which are overtly numerical, where the historian does his best to get usable figures and deals with them as figures should be dealt with, that is whenever possible statistically, mathematically. But he remains a historian still, even if he does his computation by machine.

This is not the end of the matter, of course. To guard against misunderstanding I should like to lay strong stress on two or three straightforward points. One is that the historical statements which are implicitly numerical are few and quite rare in much historical writing, although they are likely to be the key assertions when it comes to social change in the past. Another is that the question of which of these numerical statements can be appropriately and adequately dealt with statistically or mathematically has to be settled on every single occasion. Disagreement is very probable here, especially since, as in all social analysis, numerical or quasi-numerical indicators have to be used rather than the more exact numerical measurements of the physical sciences. A third point is that even when there is agreement as to the appropriateness of the indicators and even when it is also granted by everyone that the numerical analysis is itself properly suited to the issue and has been correctly carried out, the outcome is very unlikely to settle the issue with finality. Certainty is not to be secured simply by the adoption of the proper method for the task, and in any case the answering of one question, however important, always leads to the raising of other questions.

There is a fourth important point not quite distinct from those already set out, which has to be taken a little further. Historical documents which come in figures, or which can easily or unequivocally be made into figures, like series of prices paid, or lists of votes cast, or registrations of baptisms, marriages and burials, or even listings of inhabitants by household, are not because of that very fact more reliable in the results they yield than documents of other kinds. On the contrary. Because they are susceptible of quantification – by counting items, for example – completeness, exhaustiveness, is of much greater significance in documents of this kind than in those which describe or recount. But final completeness is extremely unlikely to be an attribute of historical documents, especially of those which come to us from traditional times, when numeracy as well as literacy was spread so thin throughout society.

Those who handle such 'statistical' sources, then, should pay heed when they are told, as they are repeatedly told, not to be deceived into supposing that evidence which comes in numbers is closer to the truth

than evidence which does not. Nor must they fail in their professional duty, the particular obligation laid on historians, to be critical of their sources.

There are, nevertheless, features of such evidence which do distinguish it from evidence of other kinds, and which do make an agreed settlement of the issues in question considerably more likely. Because these sources are numerical, or can easily be made so, it is frequently possible for them to be so manipulated by the historian that he can estimate how far they are likely to be out, or incomplete: their degree of error. He does this first by common sense and secondly by statistical theory and statistical method. Estimation of degree of error cannot be carried out with anything like such confidence for documents which do not come in countable items. Moreover, the very unawareness of the composers of such lists of items of the purposes to which their work would finally be put insures against deception of a particular kind, the deception which comes from a desire to make a case.

In the prospectus for English historical demography composed at about the time when the numerical facts concerning turnover of population at Clayworth in the 1670s and the 1680s were coming to light, the following sentences were written about the conditions under which demographic evidence was created in that now so distant-seeming past.

‘If we think of the educated priest, or the literate parish clerk scrawling out the words and figures in the appointed book after the baby had been borne from the font, or the body laid out on the floor of the grave, with the puzzled faces of the illiterate peasants crowding round him, we can see at once how far our purposes were from his mind. If he failed in his task at the time, because he was cold, or the sun had set and he had no light, or because he had something else to do, then it might lie upon his conscience, if he was a conscientious man. But whether or not a sense of duty in the mind of a priest, duty to his order or duty to his flock, was sufficient to keep him at his task of registration consistently enough to earn our praise so long after he is dead, it is impossible to imagine that he could ever have anticipated being judged on our criteria.’<sup>4</sup>

But this attribute of its sources is not the only virtue possessed by historical demography, and not the only reason why the results which

<sup>4</sup> Laslett, ‘The numerical study of English society’, introduction to E. A. Wrigley (ed.), *An introduction to English historical demography* (1966), p. 3. When men of the past themselves had the statistical attitude, or some approach to it, as when Gregory King writes out his tables, then this quality of *unanticipation* disappears, and it becomes very important to discover whether a particular case was being made out in the very act of recording. See Laslett 1973.

it has produced during the last decade seem to be such a strong persuasive towards accepting the necessity of a historical sociology by historians. The processes it deals in are universal, or as near universal as can be found amongst regularities in human behaviour. We are all born, we all die, and nearly all of us live long enough to get married. Both before and after marriage we tend to live in family groups. Every one of these things comes in figures to be counted. They belong, moreover, with the known, tested, reliable body of theory developed by demography, except only those numerical facts about the composition of families for which an allied, if as yet inchoate and dependent, kind of theory is now being developed. We can therefore make comparisons across cultures and over time in this area of human behaviour which are unequivocally quantitative. This is also true of another of the social sciences which has begun to enter into historical sociology.

This pursuit is econometrics. It is the econometricians who have tended to set up quantification in apposition to other historical methods, and it is they who incline to see their activity as different in kind from *traditional history* as it is coming to be called. In this way they have in a sense laid claim, from outside, to the central ground of the study of social change in the past. This thrust into historical territory has proceeded so far that it was possible to write as follows of the most ambitious publication so far issued by econometricians acting as historians:

'The most interesting aspect of this book is its implication for the future of the historian: humanist scholar or numerical technician? On this there seems to be one simple thing to be said. *Time on the Cross* is no treatise in higher mathematics, however skilful its authors, and however mystified the distinguished historians have been who have tried to review it in the United States. Throughout my life at the university, men have been calling for the merger of the disciplines. Now that the moment is come, it is not for the historian to draw back: unless, of course, he really believes that others better qualified than himself can now do that job better than he can.'<sup>5</sup>

This concluding judgement on a book which sought to upset the interpretation of a central theme in the political history of the United States as well as of the social development of its people, must be largely independent of how far its authors turn out to be right or wrong on any of the issues which they raise. From now on, anyone who wishes to make his own decision between North and South will have himself to be some-

<sup>5</sup> Laslett, broadcast review of Fogel and Engerman 1974, printed in *The Listener*, 4 July 1974. Some phrases of the original were omitted from the printed version, phrases which drew attention to the fact that the mathematics employed were well within the capacity of a beginning historian.

thing of an econometrician, or cliometrician, as he is now being called. In this sudden and imperative fashion the historian of the United States has been brought to admit to the necessity of a historical sociology.

If the English or indeed any Western European historian is disposed to think that no such imperative demand yet exists for him, he might reflect on the implications of the thesis of the first chapter of this book. There a particular view is taken of the Western family throughout its history. It is hinted again and again that the unique pattern of postponed marriage, predominance of the simple family household, and so on has had considerable effects on European economic, social, political, cultural and even industrial life. Since Western European industrialization has within the last two centuries transformed the life of the whole world, it could be said that these familial characteristics existing in the past of Britain, the Low Countries, and the European North west as a whole, may have had a global significance.

But who can tell, without a set of sociological principles, how the form of the family affects economic change and activity? How can we argue from one phenomenon to another, or from a particular set of variables to a particular set of outcomes, unless we acquaint ourselves with all that is relevant in all the social sciences we can master? It is difficult to see how anyone could proceed at all from the position laid down in that chapter without a historical sociology.

The particular theory there briefly and boldly set down may likewise be shown to be wrong. But it might still be true that a theory of this kind relating family life to social change would be the most promising point of departure for the attempt to find out why the world in our day should be divided so fatefully between industrial and non-industrial societies.

Sociology has been used in this introduction to cover all the disciplines banded together in the social sciences. This rough and ready procedure is forced upon the social scientist working in past time because of what is so often called his interdisciplinary position. He finds himself, as should be evident from the argument so far, having to take up the contents and techniques of many well-established traditions of study, and to do with them what he is able. But though this may make him an indifferent anthropologist on one page, an indifferent economist or social psychologist on another, it should not make him an indifferent user of figures. For the use of figures began its career in the analysis of social facts very early indeed in scientific time. It was an invention by the English which took place before ever societies began to be distinguished between the industrial and the non-industrial.

This is one reading, anyway, of the pioneering sociology of men like William Petty, John Graunt or Gregory King during the Scientific

Revolution of the seventeenth century. All these men, it may be noted, are to be described in the first place as demographers, but also as economists and even as econometricians, especially Gregory King (see Laslett 1973). This is not the occasion to try to understand why it was that such an early initiative was lost sight of in England, and why social science, under the guise of *political arithmetic*, was so little heeded by writers of history until so very recently. Suffice it to say that it is simply untrue to suppose that overt numerical argument, rigorous demonstration in figures, an insistence on finding numerical indicators where that was feasible and on setting out arguments in the form of tables where that was necessary, can appropriately be called newcomers to English or American intellectual culture.

A historical sociology is neither a novelty nor an inhumanity. It should have infused historical scholarship for the last three hundred years, and it must do so from now onward. To such weighty and unexpected conclusions can we be brought when we reflect on the strong feelings which we all seem to have about the family, its present and its past.

#### NOTE ON THE 1979 REPRINT

For this amended reprint little attempt has been made to bring the text up to date, though some alterations have been made, especially to the Bibliography. Most of the changes have been due to the inaccuracies of the original printing of 1977.

*Peter Laslett*

*September 1979*