

Introduction: production and reproduction

We live today in a world dominated by the twin processes of exploding population and proletarianization. It is also apparent that the one engenders the other in a sort of vicious circle of desperation and, all too often, death. Yet, parts of our world have broken this Gordian Knot and now experience social reality in ways which are at several removes from the primal struggle against nature. At the centre of this revolution in social organization, one finds the revolution in family life: the transition from a regime of high fertility to another in which human reproduction is controlled. This demographic transition is a “great divide” in human history: when it occurs the compass swings around 180 degrees and the configuration of social experience is radically transformed.¹ Strategies of family formation thus provide the wider context in which this essay is situated: what were the mechanisms and social relationships which led men and women to disregard the traditional wisdom of their families, stretching back “time out of mind”, and set out on a radically new course of their own? The specific context of this study is England. Because the social compass has swung in history, and because English historical time has had its own counterweight, this epochal transformation of family life is explained *within the context* of English social and economic history.

The feed-back mechanism between production and reproduction had different results in historical time precisely because of the specificity of context in which it operated. It is my belief that one can only begin to recuperate the dimensions of family life by focussing on its interaction with time and place. There is, however, a problem here: one which I like to think of as “historical nominalism”, by which I mean that tendency in recent scholarship which only allows for the specificity of events, the specificity of time and the specificity of place, therefore denying the efficacy of overarching paradigms with which we might attempt to situate specific experiences within a broader continuum. One thinks here of so many recent squabbles among academic historians deriving from the “revisionist” perspective which only sees events as meaningful *in and of*

Reproducing families

themselves thereby questioning useful historical constructions by nibbling at their edges, putting nothing in its place except that form of “historical nominalism” which masquerades in the camouflage of FACT – as if objective facts exist, independent of the historian. The historian’s explanatory framework should give us an idea that there is something which needs explaining. Indeed, as E. H. Carr has written on this very point, the historian has “the dual task of discovering the few significant facts and turning them into *facts of history*, and of discarding the many insignificant facts as unhistorical”.² I start from this position. My own operating principle belies a statistical and social-scientific bent – I am interested in the *regularities* of experience while trying to remain cognizant of the distribution around whatever measure of central tendency is used to describe average behaviour. In a certain sense, of course, nothing is average or normal – or, indeed, representative of anything except our own perceptions – so that all points in our field of view are slightly out of focus; yet, it seems to me that if we are to resist the siren’s voice of “historical nominalism” then we must attempt to find the best fit with the available evidence. To use an analogy from optics – it should be possible to fit both the general and the particular within a depth of focus without being lost in the image’s circle of confusion.

While it is no doubt true that history has usually been experienced as being both variable and unpredictable, my concern in this essay is rather more with structural relationships than the crazy-quilt of individual experience. No attempt is made to account for or to describe aberrant behaviour nor is a concerted attempt made to put a “human face” on tendencies to which the group conformed; rather, the experience of family life is viewed through the prism of historical contingency. For most people, who saw through that prism darkly if at all, reproductive strategies were employed to balance individual demands with the force of circumstance. Therefore, the approach followed in this essay is to focus attention on *representative* behaviours by considering “central tendencies” at the expense of “standard deviations”. In a sense such an approach abstracts individuals and thereby, some might argue, desiccates their humanity. That is true; specific examples do tell us quite a bit about individual experience but they inevitably tend to be idiosyncratic and therefore unreliable in the sense that other, contrary examples can almost always be found.³ There is much to complain about in any historical recuperation since it cannot, necessarily, comprehend the complexity of experience nor the multi-faceted character of history itself. In seeking to comprehend, we inevitably simplify. If that is the historian’s dilemma then it seems to me that the best response is to face up to it by adopting a critical stance towards the past and interrogating it in the manner that seeks dialogue, not answers. If we cannot capture its totality in our lens’ field of view then, surely, we must

Introduction: production and reproduction

focus selectively by highlighting those forces and factors which provide perspective to our image of the past.

My emphasis largely dwells upon hegemonic modes and historical periods at the expense of individuality, local variations and alternatives because social history necessarily concerns itself with *representative* experience. My reason for choosing this approach is largely heuristic: I want to propose a series of structured family formations, in which production and reproduction were conjoined, in order to put forward an integrated explanation of why most English men and women behaved as they did. I am proposing my explication of English family history in the absolute and certain knowledge that it will not please most of the people, at least some of the time. This argumentative position is taken for argument's sake. It is well to keep in mind that "traditional wisdom is always refractory . . . [so that] one is forced to oppose it polemically, [and] to phrase the necessary revisions dialectically".⁴ In so doing we learn from the past not just to comprehend its totality but also to heighten our appreciation of both human behaviour and our own social experience.

"Wild genes", social mutation and English history

Humankind lives according to biological imperatives, human beings are social animals. In essence, this is the framework within which Malthusian concerns regarding human reproduction and Marxian ones about the social organization of production must be balanced. We might therefore think of English society as a kind of "wild gene" whose unpredictable evolution was almost wholly at variance with the processes scholars have described in other places and at other times. To carry on with the analogy, once the genetic code has been reformulated in English, other species were endangered and have since had the choice between evolution and extinction.

Peasant societies are inherently conservative, they usually conceive of economic life as a "limited good" in which horizons are limited. In explaining the growth and decline of the medieval peasantry and the extinction of its early modern successor, one comes face-to-face with the central characteristic of England's novel historical experience. Of course, this kind of revolutionary end was not what most peasants had in mind when they assembled in 1381 to demand more equitable taxation, when they rebelled in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to protest against depopulating enclosures, or when they rioted in the expectation that the royal government would re-assert its patriarchal control over the moral economy in foodstuffs; yet, the tensions inherent in their social system impelled it in a direction which did not finally result in a zero-sum-game. The history of England is therefore of interest to comparativists for whom

Reproducing families

it represents the prime-mover in the development of the modern world. They have seen England as an exemplar of other, broader trends and so have been less impressed by the exceptionalism of its history or the individualism of its people. They have been in sympathy with those who have argued against the “little England” perspective. This second point is important because from the middle ages until the day before yesterday this so-called “little England” has been a hungry, expansionist power: a seemingly insatiable appetite has led it to cast its gaze across the Atlantic strand, first, to the Americas and soon enough to compass the whole world in a *pax Britannica* ruling both the waves and the counting houses of the modern world. It is in this sense that English history and world history can only be disentangled by sacrificing one of the twins in a Solomonic choice. And because a prime-mover in this imperialism has been, first, the growth of the feudal economy based on peasant cultivation and then, after the transition, the mushrooming capitalist political-economy which was itself based upon the expropriation of these same peasants and their replacement with new productive arrangements using the labour power of their proletarian descendants, one returns to the “peasant question”. More specifically, one returns to the reproduction of bearers of this labour power and their connection to the changing configuration in the social relations of production.

In my reading, the family represents that intersection of individual motivations and social forces. The family is thus, to a certain extent, transparent. It seems to me that what we would like to think of as “the family” was the product of strategies of production and reproduction. That *inter-connectedness* between the repetitive reproduction of daily life and the ceaseless movement of history impinged itself upon the contingency of the historical present. Such an insistence on the *inter-connectedness* of production and reproduction – and their existence within a specific field of historical forces – is the real point of departure at which this study of English family history begins.

In the light of this point my essay has two thrusts: the first delineates the relationship between political change and social structures with special emphasis on the character of English rural society as a cause of, and also a result of, the transition; the second investigates the inner workings of the plebeian family and its reproduction as a biological and social unit. I have thus tried to draw attention towards the family as an independent variable of real importance. In so doing the debate about the dynamism of social change has been shifted away from the consideration of “vanguards and followers” and towards a reconceptualized framework in which the micro-level decisions of individual social units are seen to be both a condition of, and be conditioned by, macro-level changes in production. In forcing a revision in which production and reproduction are accorded

Introduction: production and reproduction

equal (or, at the very least, near-equal) weight, the argument concerning the demise of the peasantry and the emergence of the proletariat gains a measure of reciprocity lacking in earlier explanations. In addition, this revisionist viewpoint makes it possible to force a Marxist concern with the social relations of production against a Malthusian emphasis on the cumulative characteristics of population growth, extending far beyond the historical moment during which such growth occurred. Moreover, much insight can be gained by forcing these arguments against each other. Such a process of threshing and winnowing is greatly needed in any attempt to distinguish necessary from sufficient causes. Indeed, it is probably the case that the notion of a single sufficient cause is hopelessly simple-minded and that one might reconceptualize the problematic by suggesting that the point at issue is the concatenation of a series of necessary causes and that, furthermore, one can only locate the sufficiency of an explanation in its specific historical nexus. Once the transition had taken place in England then every other social formation was reconfigured by its place in relation to the over-determination of history itself. That is to say, we have no photo-finish but rather a quite distinct ordering between social formations which was set in motion by the successful transition in the English one. There was no need to re-invent the wheel; once the breakthrough occurred in England, others had no real alternative but to accommodate themselves to this new reality. The novelty of the English experience with industrialization at the end of the eighteenth century was very quickly followed by a series of imitations as others followed. The peculiarity of the English experience was rapidly submerged in the nineteenth-century convergence. What was left for the English was their experience of historical *forwardness* and the imprint it left on social relations of production and reproduction in the birthplace of modern industrial society. As we shall see, this was an ambivalent inheritance and one whose impact cannot be underestimated in assessing the contingency of the modern revolution in the family in England.

The reproduction of the social formation has been situated at the heart of my argument so as to capture one of the most revolutionary features of English history: the silent, cumulative pressure exerted by peasants living on the edge of subsistence, with just a toe-hold on their ancient rights and liberties. It created a reservoir of labour which was exploited by colonizers and industrializers alike. By focussing on the mentalities and survival strategies which motivated peasant producers (and, of course, reproducers), afflicted as much by social contradictions as their own fertility, we can see a micro-motor powering English expansion: first, within the British Isles; next, across the Atlantic; and, third, around the whole globe. For the erstwhile peasants, colonization and industrialization offered something into the bargain – they could maintain some vestigial control

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-33785-4 - Reproducing Families: The Political Economy of English Population History

David Levine

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Reproducing families*

over their own lives in the face of enormous odds. To be sure, this was a losing battle but we are well advised to avoid an unduly teleological perspective since that was clearly not the point of view of those who lived and died in this unredeemed time. The very protracted nature of the transition from peasant to proletarian – a process at the centre of the social history of the mass of the English population for almost the whole of the period in question – provides a context in which we can suggest some answers to Bertholdt Brecht’s worker’s questions.

Who built Thebes of the seven gates?
 In the books you will find the names of kings.
 Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock?
 And Babylon, many times demolished
 Who raised it up so many times? In what houses
 Of gold-glittering Lima did the builders live?
 Where, the evening that the Wall of China was finished
 Did the masons go? Great Rome
 Is full of triumphal arches. Who erected them? Over whom
 Did the Caesars triumph? Had Byzantium, much praised in song
 Only palaces for its inhabitants? Even in fabled Atlantis
 The night the ocean engulfed it
 The drowning still bawled for their slaves

The young Alexander conquered India.
 Was he alone?
 Caesar beat the Gauls.
 Did he not have even a cook with him?

Philip of Spain wept when his armada
 Went down. Was he the only one to weep?
 Frederick the Second won the Seven Years’ War. Who
 Else won it?

Every page a victory.
 Who cooked the feast for the victors?
 Every ten years a great man.
 Who paid the bill?

So many reports.
 So many questions.⁵

The agenda of this essay is, therefore, a large one: I will first consider how the dissolution of the feudal social formation promoted novel relations of social life, the emergence of both capitalist agriculture and an industrial economy; second, I will argue how these novel productive relationships were filtered through the familial grid of reproduction and family formation; and, third, the modern “revolution in the family”, the compass-swing of biological reproduction, is explained within the specifi-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-33785-4 - Reproducing Families: The Political Economy of English Population History

David Levine

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: production and reproduction*

city of its timing and its local variations. We have here an inter-related knot of demo-economic problems, whose resolution can only be resolved with reference to the contingency of historical context. It should be clearly stated at this point that my essay is primarily concerned with the socially constructed reality experienced by the vast majority of the population whose labour produced the "surplus value", the foundation upon which structures of political and social domination were erected. The reproduction of their labour provided a motor-force of its own which is too frequently forgotten in accounts of historical change or, if included, is usually considered outside of its historically contingent context.

This essay begins from the premise that the plebeian family was not simply the object of change but that its demographic response to economic forces created conditions which profoundly influenced subsequent historical developments. At the heart of the phenomenon there is a feed-back mechanism through which modes of production responded to forms of social reproduction, the foremost being the labour supply (i.e. the number of available proletarian hands) which was itself developed in the context of pre-existent arrangements. The demographic side of the argument relates to the persistence of comparatively low rates of population growth for almost all of the period in question, in spite of the fact that the transition from feudalism to capitalism *should* have created a tendency to faster growth rates. In crude economic terms, it is clear that the issue is not only the demand for these new forms of labour but also the *stickiness* of their supply and I have therefore accorded at least as much attention to the supply of labour, especially proletarian labour, as its demand. Additionally, prominence has been given to the characteristics of that labour supply; not least to its reproduction. Here, then, the peculiarity of the English, with their nuclear family households and their relatively late age at first marriage for women, has been subjected to considerable comment. It is simply not possible to see these cultural characteristics outside the nexus of material forces in which they breathed life.

It is the historians' credo that the past weighs heavily on the present while that present is contingent, in the sense of being unpredictable. Historians seem to be inherently wary of theory which, so they seem to feel, forces the contingent particularity of the past into determined and thus predictable routes. There is something of an evasion in this position – one can readily accept its historicity without necessarily agreeing that there is nothing to explain but, rather, a lot of things to describe. This essay is written from the position that historians of England, especially social historians, have a lot to explain. It is my belief that while "theory" may inform the questions I ask that theory must be subject to revision in the light of the available evidence. The answers I propose are proposed in

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-33785-4 - Reproducing Families: The Political Economy of English Population History

David Levine

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Reproducing families*

an attempt to interrogate that evidence and to situate those answers in a specific context. Historical events cannot be “structured”, and only for heuristic purposes can they be modelled. It is a self-evident fact that historical events occurred; we need to explain their particular occurrence. Yet, we also want to understand not only how things fell out in the way that they did but also why they did so. And it is this form of interrogation which inevitably leads us to consider the exigencies of the past. Things did not simply happen; forces – social, economic, demographic, political and cultural – provided a momentum which caught up individuals. Caught up in the flow, individuals’ choices of action were limited and defined by the context in which they acted, the context in which they thought, the context in which they planned and the context in which they made their choices. It is in this sense that individuals faced a determinate set of choices, not of their own choosing. It is in this sense that history impinged itself on individual decision-making. And because history presented itself to individuals as a set of determinate forces, one cannot understand the organization of personal life outside that set of historical forces which defined the specific character of the moment. My account is therefore as much about English economic and social history as the family formations which gave shape and meaning to personal life.

By relating the transition from peasant to proletarian in England to its specific historical context we must pay heed to the complementarity of production and reproduction within the plebeian family. It is my firm belief that there was an underlying rationality in family formation strategies, informed by the persistent need to balance hands and mouths in the daily reproduction of family life. For this reason I am concerned with the interaction between historical contingency and the material necessities imposed by the fetters of production and reproduction. Demographic events are thus assumed to have been responsive to *contemporaneous* changes in the material world. My political economy of English population history attempts to make these connections without recourse to ahistorical, neo-classical theorizing. Nor, I should add, will I have much time for social-scientific research into the minutiae of historical demography. Readers for whom the study of historical populations is incomplete without a battery of tables and graphs can look elsewhere.⁶ *Reproducing Families* is about the political economy of population history; it is only secondarily concerned with nitty-gritty mechanisms of demographic change. Finally, I have located these material imperatives within a distinctively English familial milieu – and vice versa. My account is about the feedbacks between the changing social relations of production and reproduction – both between classes and between men and women, parents and children – during the protracted metamorphosis of the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-33785-4 - Reproducing Families: The Political Economy of English Population History

David Levine

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction: production and reproduction

English political economy. I have argued that it was in this way that the mass of the population made their history – indeed, they made themselves – and in so doing they imprinted their impressions on the world of their children and their children’s children.

1

Feudalism and the peasant family

In the year 1000 England was one of the most thickly wooded parts of Europe; perhaps four-fifths of the land was forest, waste and marsh. By the time of the Black Death, in 1348, most of this primeval ground-cover was gone.¹ In the three centuries after the Norman Conquest these uncultivated lands had been colonized as the primitive economic life of the Dark Ages was transformed. Across the length and breadth of western Europe, the 350 years after the year 1000 witnessed enormous colonizing efforts in order to accommodate rising levels of population. Populations grew because the weather was then warmer and drier than it was before or would be subsequently; but, primarily, populations grew because between the Justinian pandemic (541–c. 750 A.D.) and the Black Death the plague had relaxed its grip on Europeans. English population growth in the high middle ages was thus part of a far larger phenomenon of demographic and economic expansion. But by the end of the thirteenth century, as the climate became colder and wetter, the ratio between humans and natural resources worsened. Thus, even before the Black Death of 1348 (and its successive visitations during the next 150 years) created a human wasteland, the long cycle of the climate had turned the tables against an over-extended rural population. From the late thirteenth century rural England, like the rest of rural Europe, was the site of recurrent and horrific famines. If the “Malthusian” nightmare of population pressing against resources and tipping the balance against life itself ever had any actual relevance in the day-to-day reality of English history then that time was most assuredly between the closing of the thirteenth century and the Black Death.

1066 and all that

The primeval economy of the peasantry was a long time dying – as J. H. Plumb has written, “the death rattle of the English peasantry lasted for generations”.² Until the end of the early modern era a very large part of