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

David Levine

Frontmatter

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## *Reproducing families*

Reviewing the course of English population history from 1066 to the present, this book challenges current orthodoxies about the evolution of English family forms, and offers a bold new interpretation of the inter-connections between social, economic, demographic and family history.

Taking as the point of departure the well-known observations that England was the first industrial society, that it was the first society to have its peasantry replaced by proletarians and that it was a society that was always dominated by nuclear family households, the main question David Levine asks is how these elements were connected in time and space. In answering this, he looks to contemporaneous changes in the labour process, and, in particular, to the disposition of labour within the family. His central theme is the impact of proletarianization on family formation. He argues that the explosive transformations of family and demography that occurred between 1780 and 1815 were the culmination of a protracted transition from a feudal to a capitalist social structure; and that the post-1870 decline in marital fertility took place within a context of demographic, familial, social and political adjustments which were themselves a response to the earlier population explosion. David Levine also offers a radical new interpretation of the statistics provided in Wrigley and Schofield's classic work, *The Population History of England*. His book is nonetheless not a work of quantitative analysis, but rather an explication of statistical meaning.

This innovative study will appeal widely to readers interested in the social, economic, demographic and family history of England.

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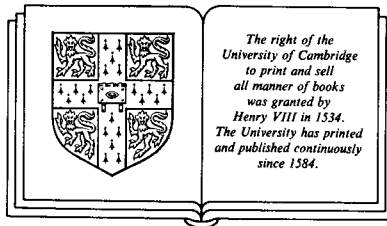
# *Reproducing families*

*The political economy of English population history*

DAVID LEVINE

*Department of History and Philosophy,*

*The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Toronto*



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*For Ruby*

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Far from INDUSTRY'S pride in apogee  
 I've still not gained the grace of exodus –  
 Engels renews its stark obscenity  
 In profit lettings of laudable pus –  
 Serried pigpens house seething pullulations  
 Of declassed proletariats' novel  
 Irruptions of national populations  
 To swarm labyrinths of fetid hovel  
 Destined offal of a system dispensed  
 To an imperial glory past belief:  
 A world renewed the old emoluments  
 To robber baron, entrepreneur, thief,  
 As exploitation rioted on flesh  
 Of carrion its process must enmesh.

In his *Seventh Thesis on the Philosophy of History* Walter Benjamin writes that the “historical materialist . . . regards it as his task to brush history against the grain”. Even before my academic interest in the history of the family developed, my parents introduced me to this practice. From a very early age my mind was suffused by their stories of social life in and about Manchester. Their conversations took me back a generation or two, halfway around the globe, to a world as remote in space as it seemed in time. My parents belonged to a transitional generation, in every sense of the word. Their parents had been driven out of the *stetls* and ghettos of eastern Europe and found themselves, around 1900, foreigners in England. These grandparents of mine – I only ever knew my maternal grandmother – had four and seven children; each couple lost one babe in infancy. Of the nine survivors, only my father went to school past the minimum leaving age, and he stayed on because he was one of only twelve scholarship boys who were elevated to the Grammar School in Manchester. At a stroke, his world changed; or at least part of it did, since he was tied to his family by bonds far stronger than those inculcated by the

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imperialist pedagogy of his Edwardian schoolmasters. He graduated from that school winning an open scholarship and keenly wanting to go up to Oxford and to read classics. But a classical education could not be pursued free of cost; he had to re-pay his family for the expenses they had incurred in foregoing his wages. So much for the vaunted individualism fostered by “modernization”! He therefore used his scholarship at Manchester University and became a doctor practising in Denton, a district of town dominated by three huge factories. I was born there in 1946, the Jewish doctor’s baby in a completely proletarian world. My parents’ experience brushed them against the grain of that social life – insiders as outsiders. Social ambivalence is an exacting teacher and I was privileged to learn about it second-hand in their recuperations within the discourse of my own daily life. They have been insightful and gentle instructors. Around our table, oral tradition was history so that by the time I went to university the familiar brush against the grain had penetrated into the core of my consciousness.

This inheritance has informed my academic studies by encouraging me to reflect upon other realities “shot through with chips of Messianic time”, as Benjamin writes in another place. In precisely this regard my second family has contributed immensely – their lives, too, have forced upon them alternatives to that middle-classness which the later twentieth-century machinery of cultural homogenization demands. Or, rather, they have been caught up in that machinery and have taught me to appreciate its costs and to be wary of its benefits and, above all, “that the magnitude of lives is not as to their external displacements, but as to their subjective experiences”.

Books are written by individuals, yet they are ‘almost always a product of that individual’s social experience. This essay is no exception. In writing it I have accumulated many intellectual debts and not a few social ones. And although *Reproducing Families* was written in an exuberant period of five months, it is the culmination of some twenty years of study and teaching. At the University of British Columbia, Murray Tolmie, Jean Elder, John Norris, Jim Winter and, above all, Ed Hundert were inspiring teachers. Later, I was fortunate to work with Peter Laslett, Tony Wrigley and, especially, Roger Schofield at the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure. Then, in 1975, I was doubly lucky – first, to land a job at O.I.S.E. and, second, because to live in Toronto is to be placed at a point of intersection between the Third World and the First. Living here has helped me put my own experience as a triple immigrant – coming direct from Cambridge and, before that, Manchester via Vancouver – into another context. It has been a place to learn and to grow, both inside and outside the walls of the academy as I have learned from the patient tutelage of the one-and-only Hesh Troper. My students at



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O.I.S.E. have had to listen to the formation of this argument. In response, they have questioned, prodded and probed – from such exchanges ideas were born and, hopefully, refined. In particular, I should like to thank Wally Seccombe for his unrelenting challenge to my supposed authority. I have also bounced my half-baked ideas off a diffuse network of colleagues and am especially grateful for the support and encouragement which Stan Engerman, John Gillis, Hans Medick, Louise Tilly, Susan Watkins and Keith Wrightson have continued to provide; I am deeply saddened that neither Allan Sharlin nor Andy Appleby are able to continue arguments so unfairly cut off in mid-stream, with so much left unsaid. Finally, there is a group of scholars with whom I have been in a perpetual dialogue, a relationship which has been largely unknown to them but very real and important to me: J. C. Caldwell, Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm, E. P. Thompson and Charles Tilly have been my contemporary mentors; behind them stand two haunting spectres, Karl Marx and Thomas Malthus, whose ghostly influences pervade the discourse of this essay.