

PARENTAL DEPRIVATION IN THE PAST: A note on the history of Orphans in England

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Parental deprivation is a subject of considerable importance in our own day, especially to those concerned with social welfare. The psychologists insist that parental loss has a significant effect on the development of the personality, and this is true whether it came about by rejections, estrangement – as through divorce – or by death. Rejection need not be accompanied by physical separation between parent and child, but there can be no doubt that such separation can be very widespread. In the United States at the present time something like a sixth or more of all children under the age of 18 may well have suffered departure of a parent from the home. It is probable that less than a quarter of these parentally deprived persons have actually lost father or mother because of death, for orphans so defined only make up something over 4% of all children of these ages. The rest, that is some 12% to 15% of American children who are seventeen or younger, have been cut off either from father or from mother because of divorce or because their parents are living apart as separated couples.

We can take this as the highest proportion of parentally deprived children we are likely to find in our time, since estrangement, divorce and remarriage are so much commoner in the United States than they are elsewhere.¹ Nevertheless there is growing concern in other highly industrialised countries, including our own, about the increase in the breakup of families, with its regrettable effects on children, especially young children. There seems, moreover, to be the same tendency here as the historical sociologist has observed for other issues, to look on our own generation as burdened by the problem to an extent never paralleled in the past. Arguments in support of such self-sympathetic views are seldom advanced, and I am not aware that any previous work has ever been done of a properly historical kind on the breakup of vertical family links. The only exception is an interesting set of numerical calculations about grandparenthood, great-grandparenthood and orphanage in France in the 1970s as compared with three villages in the Paris basin in the 18th century published by the French mathematical demographer Le Bras in 1973 which I shall be quoting below.²

In this note I want to try to give a provisional answer to the following question, are there more parentally deprived children today than there were in traditional, pre-industrial England? The answer cannot of course be very definite at this stage, since estimates of the proportion of children in such a position two or three hundred years ago are subject to so much error. But the evidence we do have for England, when prompted by the French figures I have referred to, seems to me to suggest that we may not be justified in believing that parental deprivation is commoner now than it has ever been before. There were so many orphans and step-children present in the 17th and 18th century English communities that they may have equalled the proportion of children who have lost a parent by death, divorce or separation in England at the present time. Indeed there are indications that orphans in pre-industrial English society—children who had lost either father or mother or both—may actually have been of the same order as the maximal figures I have quoted from the United States or even larger. This certainly seems to be true for individual communities at particular points in time, although as must be expected orphanage levels varied very widely from place to place.

We may start with such totals for resident orphans as we have been able to recover from the analysis of the lists of inhabitant of settlements in the 17th and 18th centuries which has been made by the Cambridge Group. We can construct, for example, the following table for orphans on the basis of the two documents written out of his parish by an exceptionally intelligent, well-informed and accurate observer, William Sampson, Rector of Clayworth, Nottinghamshire during the 1670s and 80s.

Table 1 – Resident Orphans, Clayworth, Nottinghamshire, 1676 and 1688

| | 1676 (pop. 401) Number | % of all orphans | 1688 (Pop. 412) Number | % of all orphans |
|---|------------------------------|---------------------|------------------------------|---------------------|
| Orphans living with widowed mother | 32 | 64 | 19 | 34 |
| Orphans living with widowed father | 11 | 22 | 5 | 9 |
| Orphans living with widowed mother and stepfather | 4 | 8 | 14 | 25 |
| Orphans living with widowed father and stepmother | 3 | 6 | 18 | 32 |
| TOTAL | 50 | 100 | 56 | 100 |
| Number of resident children | 154 | | 162 | |
| Proportion of all children orphaned | 32% | | 32% | |
| Number and proportion of all resident children bereaved of mother | 14 | 9% | 23 | 13% |
| Number and proportion of all resident children bereaved of father | 36 | 23% | 33 | 19% |

Almost a third, then of all resident children present in Clayworth at these two points in time had lost one or other parent by death. It is interesting to see that many more of them were fatherless than motherless, well over double the number in 1676, and that no child was recorded as deprived of both parents. The Rector tells us nothing about the other young, unmarried individuals to be found in his lists which would enable us to recognize them as having lost their fathers or mothers. These others were the servants for the most part, of whom there were seventy-seven in 1676 and sixty-five in 1688. There may have been a higher proportion of orphans amongst servants than amongst children as a whole, if indeed the loss of a parent led to the break up of a family or to its drastic remodelling. On the other hand there must have been cases where it was the other way round, when a child out at service returned to the parental household when his or her mother or father was widowed. Still it seems reasonable to regard the figure of 32% unmarried persons orphaned as the lower limit for the parish of Clayworth in the 1670s and 80s, for even the careful Sampson might not have identified every resident offspring of a broken marriage. Some orphans might have been disguised as resident relatives, as lodgers or even as solitaries. A closer estimate, allowing for a half of servants being orphaned rather than the one-third for children still at home, might be about 37.5%. Three-eighths, therefore, of all unmarried, dependent young persons had suffered parental deprivation in this very well documented community.

We may notice that quite a number of the orphans at Clayworth, seven in 1676 and no less than thirty-two in 1688, were step-children, living with a remarried parent. Psychologically these children may have been in an even more difficult position than those living with their widowed mothers or fathers, whatever the economic situation, which is always worse for the families of widows. Listed below are corresponding figures for all nineteen of the places, including Clayworth in the two relevant years, for which we have what looks fairly complete information as to orphanage.

Table 2 – Resident orphans in nineteen English communities, 1599–1811

| | No. | % |
|---|-------|------|
| 1 Orphans living with widowed mother | 720 | 52.1 |
| 2 Orphans living with widowed father | 333 | 24.1 |
| 3 Orphans living with stepmother only | 0 | 0 |
| 4 Orphans living with stepfather only | 1 | 0.1 |
| 5 Orphans living with widowed father and stepmother | 105 | 7.5 |
| 6 Orphans living with widowed mother and stepfather | 173 | 12.5 |
| 7 Orphans living with two step-parents | 5 | 0.4 |
| 8 Known orphans living with persons other than parents or step-parents | 46 | 3.3 |
| Total orphans | 1383 | 100% |
| Total children | 6668 | |
| Orphans as a proportion of all resident children | 20.7% | |
| Living with (widowed parents not remarried) | 76.2% | |
| (remarried widowed parents) | 20.0% | |

These figures put the facts from Clayworth into a somewhat more general context, though they are a poor basis on which to generalize about pre-industrial English society as a whole. In this larger sample some circumstances are found which are absent at Clayworth, including the occurrence of full orphans, children living with two step-parents: there were only five of these out of 1383 orphans and nearly 7000 children. It is to be expected that the proportion of resident orphans in these less carefully counted places should be less than at Clayworth, 21% as against 32%. Though we can be certain only that one in five of the children in this larger sample were parentally deprived we may believe that in fact a much greater number was in this plight. When the names of the settlements are written out in date order, it becomes apparent that the determinable level of resident orphanage must vary quite considerably with the quality of the data. It seems moreover to have varied with time as well, which is much more interesting.

Table 3 – Settlements with recorded proportions of orphans, in date order

| | | |
|----|----------------------------------|-----|
| 1 | Ealing, Middlesex, 1599 | 25% |
| 2 | Cogenhoe, Northants, 1624 | 25% |
| 3 | Clayworth, Notts., 1676 | 32% |
| 4 | Chilvers Coton, Warwicks., 1684 | 12% |
| 5 | Clayworth, Notts., 1688 | 32% |
| 6 | Norwich, St Peter Mancroft, 1694 | 7% |
| 7 | Lichfield, Staffs., 1695 | 21% |
| 8 | Harefield, Middx., 1699 | 16% |
| 9 | Stoke-on-Trent, Staffs., 1701 | 25% |
| 10 | Monkton, Kent, 1705 | 16% |
| 11 | St Nicholas at Wade, Kent, 1705 | 36% |
| 12 | Puddletown, Dorset, 1724 | 26% |
| 13 | Cardington, Beds., 1782 | 34% |
| 14 | Corfe Castle, Dorset, 1790 | 17% |
| 15 | Ardleigh, Essex, 1796 | 14% |
| 16 | Barkway & Reed, Herts., 1801 | 16% |
| 17 | Binfield, Berks., 1801 | 13% |
| 18 | Littleover, Derbs., 1811 | 7% |
| 19 | Mickleover, Derbs., 1811 | 16% |

As for the quality of data, the documents for Cardington, Puddletown and Ealing are all superior in the detail they contain and in the consistency of their entries. In this they resemble the file for Clayworth, and it must be significant that these places have the highest recorded proportions of resident orphanage, along with St Nicholas-at-Wade. Registration is not particularly good at this last place, and its high figure demonstrates that variation must also have been due to causes other than the quality of the data. The documents for Chilvers Coton and for Harefield are also high in standard, and it would seem that their low levels of resident orphanage represent genuine variation downwards. The modest proportions at Norwich and at Littleover are more likely to have been the result of incomplete identification.

This small sample, therefore, can be taken to reveal the expected variability in orphanage from place to place. The impression of variation over time is also conveyed by the listings of proportions according to date. If this effect is a real one, it presumably arose because of shifts in demographic rates, particularly in mortality, by far the strongest influence on orphanage. The mean of mean proportions of identifiable resident orphans for the nineteen places is 20.5%, or 22% omitting the two lowest figures; the median, a more realistic marker, is 18% (25%). But the first eleven places which are dated between 1599 and 1705 have a median of 25% (mean of 22.5%) whereas the last eight dated between 1724 and 1811 have a median of 16.5% (mean of 15.9%). The 17th century is becoming known as a period of high mortality over much of England, especially after 1650, and it could be that the effect of this in maintaining higher proportions of orphaned children shows itself in these recordings in spite of variation due to locality and to quality of document. We must remember that all the figures for the nineteen places would have to be increased somewhat to obtain a total proportion which would include servants and others not being children resident in their families of origin.

This is about as far as it is possible to get with information from lists of inhabitants lacking ages, the usual case unfortunately with English materials. Our information can be supplemented, however, with one further set of facts derived from the exceptional entries made during the seven years from 1653 to 1660 in the marriage register for St Mary's Manchester. Here the names of the fathers of both bride and bridegroom are given, and marked 'dec' where appropriate to indicate deceased. Between 52% and 59% of all brides at first marriage were described in this way as fatherless.³ This proportion, which covers all brides of course and not simply those resident with their parents or step-parents at the time of the ceremony, is about what we might expect in girls of age to be married, if a fifth of all unmarried girls had lost their fathers, and a third had lost either father or mother, or both. The rare recordings for Manchester may accordingly be taken as generally confirming our estimates for the mid and late 17th century, and especially for Clayworth.⁴

We must recognize, of course, that it is not entirely realistic to compare the class of unmarried, dependent young persons of that generation in England with the class of all persons under eighteen years old in the United States in our generation if we want to get an idea of the relative prevalence of parental deprivation then and now. But it is also evident that no direct comparison of like with like would ever be possible, not even one contrasting those of identical age and marital status at the two chosen points in time. Assumptions about maturity, childhood, dependency, subordination were simply different in the earlier society. To discover, however, that a third or more of all unmarried dependents could be parentally deprived in traditional society when mortality was high, and that the figure seldom dropped below one fifth even at times and in places with more favourable conditions, does make possible the rough comparison which we have in mind. Considering that in our day the very highest proportion of parentally deprived amongst those under eighteen is a sixth or somewhat more, it cannot be said with confidence that parental deprivation is commoner under the conditions of the late 20th century in high industrial society than it was in the 17th and 18th centuries in traditional society. We are hardly justified, in historical terms, in sympathizing with ourselves for the prevalence of broken marriages in our time and its deplorable effects on our children.

We may complete our note with a glance at such age evidence as we do possess. For England the historical data at present can only be called crude, and not much worked over, but for France the situation is a little better. For the 20th century we have one very

useful set of English statistics, compiled by the Registrar General from the national census of 1921 – England and Wales. In the table below will be found proportions of resident orphans in three English settlements up to age three, up to age five and up to age nine, set out alongside the corresponding proportions of orphans recorded in the census of 1921.* The first of these age groups has been used because of the great vulnerability of children in their first three or four years to parental loss, particularly to the loss of the mother. During the next two years of life, four and five, infants remain very dependent, and even amongst the very poor in pre-industrial society were extremely unlikely to be sent out of the home although they might begin to do a little work. By the age of ten however, the prospect of leaving the family as servants began to be tangible and we have to reckon with the fact that only up to that age can figures for resident orphans be taken to indicate approximate figures for all orphans. A comparison between the last two rows of the table in the columns for pre-industrial communities gives some idea of how many orphaned children left their families of origin between the age of ten and marriage, since the percentages seem to increase far too little.

Table 4 – Resident Orphans, Proportions in Various Age-Groups

| Age Groups | Ealing 1599 (Pop. 427) | | Lichfield 1697 (Pop. 2861) | | Ardleigh 1796 (Pop. 1145) | | Census of 1921 |
|--|---------------------------|-------|-------------------------------|-------|------------------------------|-------|----------------|
| 0–3 | 3/27 | 11.1% | 18/214 | 8.4% | 10/130 | 7.7% | 4.5% |
| 0–5 | 7/43 | 16.3% | 30/348 | 8.6% | 18/190 | 9.5% | 6.1% |
| 0–9 | 17/81 | 21.0% | 79/642 | 12.3% | 31/315 | 9.8% | 8.7% |
| All resident orphans | 33/133 | 24.8% | 268/1146 | 21.5% | 87/598 | 14.5% | (0–14 11.3%) |
| Orphans 0–9 as a proportion of all orphans | 17/33 | 51.5% | 79/268 | 29.5% | 31/87 | 35.6% | |

Some notion of how much greater the growth in the proportion of orphans would be if we had information on all parental losses after age ten can be gathered from the next table, constructed of course on entirely different principles and for French pre-industrial communities rather than English.

Table 5 – Calculated Proportions of Orphaned Offspring, 18th Century France (3 villages) and 20th Century France*

| Age Group | 18th Century | 1960s |
|--|--------------|-------|
| 0–3 | 4.5% | 0.3% |
| 0–5 | 7.1% | 0.8% |
| 0–9 | 12.5% | 1.9% |
| **All orphaned offspring | 32.1% | 8.5% |
| Orphans 0–9 as a proportion of all orphans** | 21.1% | 8.5% |

* Estimates from Le Bras, 1973

** All orphaned offspring taken as those aged 0–25

Although these figures would seem to imply that fewer children up to age five were orphaned in the French 18th century villages concerned than in any of the English, the very different bases of calculation makes comparison hazardous.⁶ The contrast between the 18th century and the 1960s is certainly a startling one, and underlines the enormous difference between ourselves and our ancestors in respect of the risk of death. We may 'lose' our parents at a rate comparable to that which they experienced, or at least the Americans may do so, but nearly all of those parents go on living. It should not escape us that the difference between the English census figures of 1921 and estimates for France in the 1960s are so considerable too. Most of the change in orphanage, as in so many other matters of population and social structure, has come recently, within the lifetimes of our older contemporaries.

In our last table we venture on a direct comparison between orphanage worked out from lists of inhabitants and orphanage worked out from demographic statistics.

Table 6 – Observed numbers of Resident Orphans (England) and Calculated numbers of Orphaned Offspring (France)

| Age Group | Ealing† | | | Lichfield† | | | 1921 Census | | | Un-known |
|----------------------|-------------|-------------|-----------|-------------|-------------|-----------|-------------|-------------|-----------|----------|
| | Father-less | Mother-less | Both lost | Father-less | Mother-less | Both lost | Father-less | Mother-less | Both lost | |
| 0–3 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 17 | 1 | 0 | 2.4% | 0.9% | 0.1% | 1.2% |
| 0–5 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 24 | 8 | 1 | 3.7% | 1.3% | 0.2% | 1.3% |
| 0–9 | 13 | 0 | 0 | 61 | 24 | 3 | 5.8% | 2.1% | 0.3% | 1.2% |
| All resident orphans | 31 | 4 | 1 | 191 | 71 | 5 | | | | |

Motherless as a proportion of fatherless

12.9%

37.2%

| Age Group | *18th century France | | | France in the 1960s | | |
|----------------------|----------------------|-------------|-----------|---------------------|-------------|-----------|
| | Father-less | Mother-less | Both lost | Father-less | Mother-less | Both lost |
| 0–3 | 7 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 0–5 | 14 | 10 | 0 | 3 | 2 | 0 |
| 0–9 | 40 | 31 | 2 | 12 | 4 | 0 |
| All resident orphans | ** 242 | ** 203 | ** 55 | **139 | **47 | **3 |

Motherless as a proportion of fatherless

** 83.9%

** 33.8%

* Estimates from Le Bras 1973
 ** All orphaned offspring taken as those aged 0–25

†The totals differ from those given in Table 4 because those who had lost both parents have also been included amongst the numbers fatherless and motherless. (Editors)

These final details serve to draw attention to the instability of the proportions we have been dealing with and warn us against accepting any of them as anything other than a rough estimate. They bring out, however, two points we have stressed more than once in this note. The first is how much more likely you were to lose your father than your mother, and still are indeed; in this respect the French figures for the 18th century seem to be an aberration. The second is how very, very rare it always has been to lose both your parents when a child. In common parlance the word 'orphan' seems to mean one who is entirely bereft of the father who begat him and the mother who brought him into the world, and Cinderella is the archetypal orphan. But a Cinderella was a rarity, in the traditional world where the story is set, that influential piece of mischievous make-believe.⁷

Notes

- 1 It seems peculiarly difficult to find numerical calculations for these proportions, and the estimates for children of divorced and separated parents are based on the figures given in Carter, H. and Glick, P.C., *Marriage and Divorce*, Harvard 1970: see chs. 8 and 9, and especially the footnotes on pp. 432-3. I have increased the proportions suggested by the figures appearing there by 25% to allow for growth in the number of broken families in the last 15 years. It is true that a good part of this parental deprivation in the U.S. occurs amongst blacks and that in black ghetto society separation from the biological parent, even the mother, may not mean separation from the effective parent who can be quite another person. These complications, however, do not seem to me likely to alter the gross comparative effects with which we are concerned in this note.
- 2 H. Le Bras. 'Parents, grand-parents, bisaieux', *Population*, 28^e annee no. 1,9-38. He draws his historical data from the reconstitution of *Trois villages de l'ile de France*, c1700-d1800, by Jean Ganiage, Paris 1963.
- 3 Lancashire Parish Record Society, registers of Manchester, vol.III, published in 1949, pp. 47-93. Three samples of girls marrying for the first time were taken, yielding 53/93, or 57%; 83/140 or 59%; 100/192, or 52% orphans. Obviously variability was high. Corresponding proportions for bridegrooms were 37/78 (48%), 64/130 (49%) and 85/178 (48%), much less variable and against expectation since bridegrooms and so the fathers were presumably some years older. Less trouble seems to have been taken to discover whether the fathers of men were alive, since it was less important. I should be delighted to hear from any reader of *Local Population Studies* who knows of other registers giving such information.
- 4 In reconciling proportions orphaned at marriage with proportions of resident orphans, the age at marriage for women is assumed to be 22-25, and proportions orphaned at those ages, and of all those ages and younger are taken from the calculations made by Le Bras (see below).
- 5 It must be borne in mind that the Census figures are for *all* orphans in the national population, not simply those resident in a particular set of households. The figures seem to have been worked out for this particular Census because of the considerable mortality amongst fathers caused by the First War, and so must be regarded as high for an early twentieth century industrial society.
- 6 The object of the article by M. le Bras was to estimate probabilities of having surviving parents, grandparents and great-grandparents at given ages rather than of estimating orphanage as such, using vital rates derived from reconstitution rather than lists of inhabitants. The figures in my table have been derived from the graphiques 11 and 13, printed on pp. 32 and 34. He is now engaged in work on orphanage itself and tells me that his results will take account of variance rather than simply being based on averages.
- 7 In the 'original version' of Cinderella in Grimm's fairy tales the neglected child does have a father and he seems to appear, though a dim and distance figure, in most of the other multifarious versions too. But it seems that the general belief nowadays is that she was a complete orphan, even though this rather blunts the edge of the story.