Town and Child in eighteenth century Rheims

The eighteenth century saw lessening mortality, the disappearance of terrible subsistence crises and an increasing use of family limitation. Without family reconstitution it is impossible to say anything, at least as far as Rheims is concerned, on Malthusianism in urban areas. Studies of certain other communities seem to show that the attitude of married couples could vary a great deal between one social class and another even within the boundaries of the same town: the well-known Lyonnais butchers with their twenty or so children might exist contemporaneously with families limiting their progeny.* There is general agreement that the number of children is closely linked to the method of lactation: if the mother suckles her own child there will be less risk of another conception. On the other hand if the child is put out to nurse, the mother runs the risk of having many children if the couple do not practice any form of contraception.

In urban areas putting children out to nurse was not confined to the relatively well-to-do. When the wife worked in a factory or commercial establishment the newly born infant was entrusted to a wet nurse, providing the amount earned by the mother came to more than what had to be expended on the nurse’s wages. At the end of the eighteenth century the nurse might expect to receive eight or nine livres per month. Customarily children were sent into the country, sometimes far from their parents’ home, and our research shows very clearly that this putting out to nurse doubled the chances of the infant dying. For example, if we look at the enquiries made by Tenon, a surgeon, towards the end of the Ancien Régime we see that the “office supervising nurses to take care of the children of Paris artisans and servants” was recruiting at least 10,000 nurses each year, particularly in the provinces surrounding the capital. The mortality of these nurse-children was said to be 33% in Champagne, 28% in Bourgogne, 23% in Picardy and 18% in Normandy, where deaths were fewest either because of the quality of the environment or because of the presence of better nurses.

The mortality of the Lyon children reared by hired nurses was much greater, as much as 70%, but it was only 16% when the children were suckled by their own mother. The result of putting children out to nurse is therefore evident. Infant mortality (deaths of children less than a year old) depends entirely on the mother’s attitude to the child. The study of the whole question is fraught with difficulties because there is so very little written evidence. The only solution is to seek out the burials of nurse-children in the registers of parishes adjacent to the towns, but as the children were often despatched beyond a radius of 30 km, it is not possible for a researcher working alone to attempt to trace them all.

The only statistical source to give us an oversight of this special and fundamental type of migration is that dealing with children left in the care of local communities. I have discovered and analysed for Rheims a list of 800 children sent to nurses in the country by the Hospital [L'Hôtel-Dieu] in the years after 1779 when a Royal Edict prohibited the more or less clandestine removal of illegitimate children to the Foundling Hospital in Paris, which was receiving in this period 5-6,000 children each year from all parts of France and even from abroad, in particular from the Low Countries and the district of Liège. I have mapped the villages where these children were sent and in the majority of cases have been able to trace their histories, at least until they were weaned: infant mortality was 45%. Almost half of these infants did not, therefore, live to see their first birthday. We are forced to ask what sort of society could thus condemn a third or even half of its offspring to die in infancy.
The wide gulf between the fine sentiments expressed by Rousseau in *Emile* and the way he treated his own children—by abandoning them to nurses and thus consigning them to an early death—is to my mind characteristic of the indifference with which children were generally treated in eighteenth century France, combined with the first, admittedly theoretical, signs of interest in childhood. It cannot be denied that parental interest in children and evidence of family limitation appear at about the same time. Those who want to pursue the subject further can do no better than consult the works of Philipp Ariès mentioned below.  

**Antoinette Chamoux**

**Notes**


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