COMMENT:

Family Relations: Response to "Authority and the Family: Some Considerations"

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I would like to open the published version of my remarks on the papers given in this section of the conference by congratulating Drs. Cafagna and Peterson. The need for communication between the various fiefdoms of intellectual life, the entrenched disciplines of our universities is, at the moment, so urgent that any attempt to help in this area is welcome. When the attempt is made with hard work and intelligence, and the result the level of scholarship achieved at the conference in 1980, then the organizers must be encouraged in the hope that others will emulate them. Those of us who have been engaged in the organization of conferences of scholars from a single discipline can only marvel at the diligence that has been the obvious order of the day for the hosts: congratulations.

My consideration of the paper by Professor Struckmeyer has obviously been governed by my own professional formation, that of a historian. The basis for my remarks is "the state of the art" in history today as regards the study of the child, both as an individual and as member of the family. Work in this area has been greatly influenced by the development of the "Annales" school of history, established in France by Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch in 1929, by the traditions of the demographic studies begun at the University of Cambridge at much the same time, and by the fruitful impact of sociology on historians generally during the past thirty years. In recent decades, particularly in the United States, works using the ideas of psychology for the analysis of the past have further influenced the nature of studies in history about the child.
The contribution of the "Annales" school has been to alter the very basic concept of what history as a discipline involves. Once the first issues of the journal, whose short title the word is, had been published, the idea that accounts of the past should be limited to the inter-relationship of "maps, chaps, and flaps, organized by the incidence of death" was ended. Past societies were recognized as being like those of the present: complex, fragmented and multivarious, presenting any scholar attempting their analysis with a need to understand both the static factors of the time in question as well as particular processes moving events. The Oxford historian Hugh Trevor-Roper has called its philosophy "social determinism limited and qualified by recognition of independent human vitality" (1972, p. 469). Works such as Ferdinand Brandel's monumental study of the Mediterranean world, published in 1949, stand out as massive efforts of synthesis in this tradition but works such as the collection of essays published in 1971 by the journal under the title Crimes et criminalité en France--17e-18e siècles (Cahiers des Annales 33) or Yvon Castan's Honnêteté et relations sociales en Languedoc 1715-1780, published by PLON in 1974 make my point here more clearly. In the first work, for example, evidence concerning youthful criminals is found throughout. As well, there is a particularly good essay devoted to juvenile delinquency and the legal responsibilities of the under-age in eighteenth century France. Similarly, Caston takes account of the process of the human aging cycle throughout his work and devotes complete sections to the questions of the training and behaviour of children. It is not surprising that one of the first attempts to present a history of western European childhood was written by a French scholar: Philippe Aries published his L'Enfant et la Vie Familiale sous l'Ancien Régime in Paris in 1960.

The work of the Cambridge scholars has been above all statistical, based in the first instance upon medieval parish records, and so building the picture of what the households of the communities are about. Peter Laslett's work is typical of this school, both his book The World We Have Lost, published in 1965, and his organization of the conference held in 1969 on the theme of the household and the family, proceedings of which were published as Household and Family in Past Time, published by Cambridge University Press in 1972. In both these publications the history of the child is given as that of a member of a greater whole, not yet of individual importance but very definitely as a relevant topic of historical research. By 1971 the development of interest in the family had reached a level of such consequence that The Journal of Interdisciplinary History published a complete issue on the matter, which was later re-issued in book form, editors Rabb and Rotberg: The Family in History (Interdisciplinary Essays, Harper Torchbooks, 1973). Once more the child was both an integral part of essays such as Robert Wells' "Demographic Change and the Life Cycle of American Families", and the centre of attraction in others, such as David Rothman's "Documents in Search of a Historian: Toward a History of Children and Youth in America".