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THE HISTORY CHILD

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I am a human being; therefore nothing human is alien to me **(Terence)**

From the Renaissance until the mid-twentieth century the belief that knowledge of the past was an essential component of the model citizen's cultural portfolio was a commonplace in the western world. Most contemporary Anglo-American university historians, however, rightly aware of the way in which the parts of the past privileged for study and the manner of their interpretation have been largely determined by tradition and/or current political and social concerns, are reluctant to subscribe to such view. They claim instead that they are interested in the past (or that part of the past which fascinates them) for its own sake, and make great play of the fact that the worlds they reconstruct are most certainly not their own. When pressed as to the value of history as a subject at school and university, academics usually take refuge in the skills argument: above all the study of the past teaches you to think critically (vide the Modern History Faculty's current mission statement).

Today's historians plug the gaps of the past in different ways. Some enter into a given epoch and remain there for most of their careers. Others are migratory, serially tilling several eras and nationalities, usually concentrating on a few problems or seminal figures. Still others refuse to pin themselves down, eclectically tackling diverse topics, rendered topical by presentist concerns. It is rarely the case that historians believe the events around them to be so pressing - so urgently compelling - that they must drop their other work and discover the distant history of these developments. Presentist concerns typically influence historians' choice of research project, even shape aspects of the way they configure the past. But presentism does not ordinarily compel historians to turn away from their other work and consciously start to compile the history of some present anxiety. Yet this is precisely what happened at pivotal moments, still vivid in our memories, certainly in America. The Great Depression of 1929 spawned a new school of economic historians who left their ordinary work and began to study past financial cycles in order to understand how unique the crash of October 1929 really was. The racial persecutions of Nazi Germany also deflected groups of American historians from more traditional projects in the 1950s, once the war was over and some semblance of ordinary life returned. Similarly deflected were those struck by the sexual epidemics of the 1980s now sometimes referred to as the Decade of the Gay Plague. They began to configure the lot of sexual minorities in history.

In an age when many British politicians at national level seem to carry no map of the past in their head or see little point in having one, the professional historians unwillingness to contribute his pennyworth to debates of policy and principle has perhaps been taken too far. All of us in our different roles as private citizens, parents, academics, administrators, law-givers and so on make judgments and take decisions according to a set of historically-created codes and practices, which are largely operated unconsciously

and unthinkingly. To this extent, these codes and practices can be prisons, which inhibit creative and imaginative thought, and it might be argued that a proper understanding of their historical gestation would be the key to mental liberation. Far from being made redundant or confined in decreasing numbers to their ivory towers, professionals historians, even the medievalists so maligned by the present Secretary of State for Education and Skills (!), should therefore be welcomed with open arms by those who claim to wish to build a better Britain. Indeed, in a fantasy world where historians were genuinely valued, every minister, chief executive and departmental head would not move a finger without consulting his or her historical advisor in the same way that the early-modern prince never sneezed without consulting his astrologer.

The value of an historical understanding of the development of their subject is widely appreciated today in the world of the biological and physical sciences, and many medical schools in Britain, Europe and the United States insist that their students take courses in the history of medicine. At Oxford, where the history of science has long been an important part of historical studies, there are a number of lecture-courses and seminars organized by the History Faculty, which are primarily intended for science and medical students or attract a cross-disciplinary audience. On the other hand, the world of the social sciences, especially the world of social policy-making, seems less than interested in the value of history (at least any part of the past except the virtual present). Policy makers often seem to operate with a series of assumptions that are treated as absolute truths. This is particularly true of the one social issue which dominates and exercises politicians and governments more than any other today: the rearing and protecting of children.

At the start of our new century, few topics seem to be as explosive as children: their rights, their plight, their families, their friends, their health, their welfare and safety, their diverse roles as consumers, their futures, and especially the crimes committed against, and by, them. Everything pertaining to the world of childhood, including the codes by which we understand and interact with them, currently seems to be in the process of being rethought in law courts, medical schools, social agencies, governmental departments and, especially, in the media. Talk to anyone, even casually, and the response is uniform: if you want to sense not merely the pulse and temper of our times but the deepest vulnerability of our era, ponder the lot of children; then our deepest social riddles and cultural contradictions will emerge. Children not merely in particular socio-economic groups but children everywhere are felt to be a cause for concern: in the affluent sprawls of the West as well as the drought-stricken deserts and steppes of the East; middle-class children in suburbia and deprived children in inner-city ghettos. Children, it seems, are either *in* trouble or are *having* trouble functioning as we used to think they should. This is the *Age of Child Trouble*, to coin a phrase reminiscent of University of California Berkeley Professor Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* of the 1980s, wherein she signaled the major fault lines that had then emerged in the new arrangements between the genders. [1]

Whether we look to areas involving children and violence, children and sexuality, children and health, children and education and consumerism, the picture presented is uniformly ominous. Child Trouble sounds like a vulgarism, even a contradiction in terms, yet the phrase encapsulates our current global anxiety. Children across the world seem to be the victims of biogeographical dislocations that unnerve the adults around them. If they are not being abused or raped, then they are apparently starved and murdered in larger numbers than hitherto. If not the subject of physical violence, then alternatively, in

the developed world they are so appallingly spoiled and pampered that by puberty, we are told, they sink into adolescent depression persuaded they have little to live for. Or fed with such unhealthy food, the nutritionists argue, and given so few opportunities to exercise, according to broad camps of health professionals, they succumb in their millions to the new disease of pediatric obesity.

In the West, adult anxiety is all the greater in that the reality of childhood in our modern affluent society is Janus-faced. On the one hand children are cosseted and protected as never before and our discourse on children - biological, psychological, social, economic - however well intentioned is often confused and sometimes hypocritical. On the other, children are increasingly victims of our modern materialist and individualistic culture. More children now go to sleep hungry, even in relatively affluent America, than in any decade since the Great War. Forget Africa, forget the jungles, hunger in America is rising. The situation on this side of the Atlantic appears to be not much better if the statistics we are being provided are accurate. Every year 6,500 children are abandoned in the UK alone and several hundred disappear, never to be found; if latchkey children are figured in (albeit a phenomenon that has existed for a century), this number swells statistically into the millions. There are now more child terrorists, especially in vulnerable countries, than ever before. Children are being abused and victimized to an extent which shocks and dismays us in the civilized world; apparently there are even cases of the ritual murder of children now coming to light. Witch-hunts within the American Church may amount to a pedophilia craze thriving on hysteria and sensationalized in the media; even so, the statistics on the prevalent sexual abuse of children continue to remain alarming. Many large cities now have armies of children who roam an underworld of black-market vice and gang destitution. Childhood crime and violence are on the rise. Stress and illness among children have intensified, especially in psychological domains, in part because children are more frightened than they have been in recent memory. The new waves of immigration to developed countries are intensifying these fears as children see ever-more child beggars and juvenile criminals in the streets. These scenes of horrific life have not been routinely seen in the Western world since Victorian times.

Whatever the statistical reality is today, it is perfectly clear that we in the West are living in the midst of a significant shift both in the abuses done to children and the way those abuses are being defined and reified. At first sight this shift seems to be a peculiarly modern event**:** the unintended and unexpected effect of unprecedented affluence and technological progress. Further reflection, however, demands the shift be historicized. Childhood has always been a time of suffering; children have always been the victims of perilous disease, parental neglect, government policy, war, etc. Concurrently children have also always been the hope of the future, the focus of peculiar love and attention. This tension is especially apparent in periods of revolutionary upheaval, when order and stability break down and the new regime sets out to create a new generation imbued with the Revolutions ideals and ideology. Although we may not generally realize it, today we in the West are living through just such an era of revolution, albeit one created in spite of, rather than by, our political elites. Our life expectancy, material culture, social institutions and trail-blazing technology are all in a process of rapid, indeterminate change. Our children are guaranteed to be profoundly affected by these developments. If we are to gain control of the process and ensure that our children have a positive and secure outcome, it behooves us to study the experiences of children in earlier societies, especially at

revolutionary junctures. Without such knowledge it is small wonder that national campaigns to save the children cannot acquire the ammunition they need to cope with these harsh realities. We need to ask tough questions about the comparative vulnerability of children in other eras. For example, are children always the most vulnerable segment of the population, whether in Bolshevik Russia or Bin Laden's Kabul? How do the forms of terror and victimization vary from one revolutionary moment to the next? Do all regimes become obsessed with education and parenting during revolutionary moments? The current global debate about the plight of children also begs for adequate historical contextualization. Yet no individual or group, anywhere, possesses an adequate armory of facts to know whether to respond hysterically, calmly, or indifferently: whether to shrug off this state of affairs on grounds it has been occurring for centuries and is merely receiving more attention now, especially in the media, or whether to demand national inquiries and swift government action.

We, in Britain, now have a minister responsible for children but it may be an altogether insufficient step. If we are to make the right decisions for the twenty-first century, we also need to consult the past to comprehend what happened to children in other revolutionary eras. The historical gaze is all the more crucial in this case in that the victimization of children in its many forms represents the one topic today we cannot quite bring ourselves to discuss calmly. It often seems to lie beyond all ordinary decency and to be the last aspect of modern life we have left to unpack. The reasons for this are hugely complex and include the nostalgic and idealized view the middle-class and the middle-aged have of their own apparently tranquil post-war upbringing, which forever defines what childhood is. Childhood victimization is also the one domain we are least equipped to confront. Pornography, prostitution, poverty, violence, destitution, homelessness, mortal disease, displacement: these have been dissected to the point that they have become commonplace. Yet the grotesque abuses of children still lie beyond the pale of the unspeakable; even beyond the realms of the shocking because we cannot believe that the daily transgressions being made against them are entirely credible. This is the new frontier we have to face and is proving simply too explosive to jest about; as difficult as it was to discuss genocide in the 1950s and 1960s, cannibalism in the 1970s, and the history of sexuality in the 1980s. To arms ourselves for the future we need reliable synthetic research about children in history, especially during transformative revolutionary periods, so that we can place it in the service of our looming problems.

The early twentieth-century German philosopher Karl Liebknecht, who was murdered with Rosa Luxemburg after the failed rising of 1919, wrote: Whoever has the young has an army. Nothing better describes the exuberant power of the young to create a new world, and, equally, emphasizes in graphic terms the potential of the young for destruction once they are disaffected. In a world whose population is steadily aging, it is in our own interests to ensure that we spawn a new generation of adults with a sense of community and obligation. Part of the key to getting it right, we think, is an understanding of the past. Pace the American futurologist Francis Fukuyama, we have not entered an era when history is dead. As the American pragmatic philosopher George Santayana prophesied, those who do not know history are doomed to commit the same mistakes over and over again. He might also have added that those who do not know the history of something are prone to think its current appearance the only one: unique without precedent.

It is precisely for this reason that we have decided to establish, in Oxford, an interdisciplinary Workshop for the History of Childhood. This is a key moment in the development of this particular branch of historical study, which could be said to have begun seriously with the publication of Philippe Ariès's *Centuries of Childhood* in 1960 (translated into English in 1962). Ariès historicized childhood by using a variety of literary and visual sources to argue that childhood and children were the invention of the Renaissance. In the following decades his argument was refined by other historians, especially those working on the family, such as the late Lawrence Stone in his *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (1977), but the outline was not seriously challenged. Only in the last few years have many of Ariès's assumptions come under heavy criticism with the publication of the first volumes of Yale's *History of the European Family*. Multi-authored and based as much as possible on hard statistical data, the Yale history presents us with a new, much more circumspect template of the experience of children across the ages.[2] Given its publication, the number of scholars in Oxford in different disciplines interested in the historical child, and the light debating the history of childhood may shed on our present child-centred anxieties, it seemed the ideal time to establish the interdisciplinary workshop.

One emphasis of the workshop, especially given the criticisms leveled against Ariès for using unrepresentative sources, will be methodological. How do we recapture the world of childhood in eras prior to 1800 in particular? Another inevitable methodological crux is bound to be the definition of what a child is. When we contemplate the different historical meanings of the word child prior to 1600 we become aware of the dangers of historicizing a phenomenon that has few stable parameters, and, in some cultures, may not even exist at all. In several languages there is no word for child; even in English, the word has drastically shifted its meaning over the centuries. Yet a third crux will be whether the history of childhood and children should be written from within the family. However, we do not think that the pursuit of methodology is an end in itself, however committed we are to rigor. We hope the workshop will primarily be one in which we retrieve the facts and recover the contexts, that is one in which our speakers tease out significance and meaning from their sources, be they statistics, first-person accounts, eye-witness reports, photographs and other visual presentations of childhood, fictions and fantasies, and so on. Method is, of course, crucial, in all good historical enterprise. The historical study of any object is a way of distancing yourself from that which is too difficult to discuss calmly and clearly. But if we get bogged down in method we may lose sight of the pressing matter of children in the world today. For the same questions continue to cry out over and again. On what foundations are we so shocked? What has been the past of childhood that makes us so confident we are the first generation to witness these calamities? Are the changes we read about genuinely without precedent?

We won't be able to address all these questions at the start, but we will try to make a dent. Our pitch is high and aims to appeal to the best thought on any of the topics we address, but this should not imply it is merely academic or pedantic. For we hope, by launching this initiative, to commence a dialogue with the public community outside the academy as well as within it. Towards this end speakers and participants in the Workshop will come from both spheres: town and gown, and we are also ensuring that no single subject or discipline, no century or era, commandeers the spotlight. Our basic agenda appeals to the discovery, and recovery, of the facts about children - even if hunting down

truth entails the telling of stories too painful to hear. The beacon guiding us remains our focus on history: the sturdy belief that we can confront all these topics with the past firmly before us, no matter how blindingly painful its revelations may be. The plan is for annual seminars, beginning this term (Michaelmas 2003) and extending over five years. Each Michaelmas Term we shall hold eight seminars and lectures on Thursday afternoons at 5:00 in Magdalen College. The full program of events is found on our website: http://www.history.ox.ac.uk/faculty/research/history_childhood.htm. The five annual topics are children and violence (2003), sex (2004), consumption (2005), health (2006), and citizenry (2007).

We aim to create contextual knowledge by bringing together experts from a wide variety of backgrounds ranging from the humanities, the arts and the media to government and the social sciences, nutrition, and public health. At the same time there is pressing need to marshal the media to present and disseminate the new comparative context to the larger world. The need for this is all the stronger because this is the only interdisciplinary workshop at research university level devoted to the history of childhood in the country. Other seminars deal, of course, with children, representations of them, their literature and art, their psychological and medical profiles. But no workshop has yet adopted the multi-layered perspective of the historian. By historically exploring key aspects of childhood that worry us today, much needed light should be thrown on our often-hysterical responses. To forward our aim we are deliberately placing the Workshop both inside and outside the University. It will be primarily an academic, interdisciplinary forum within the university, while at the same time extend outside by our invitation to a number of non-academics working with children who will help organize the lectures, seminars, and workshops. It is hoped to follow up each series with a one-day conference later in the year where child professionals and other interested parties can mull over the value of an historical approach. The attraction to non-academics of such an historically informed picture of childhood is self-evident. The parallel attraction for academics is apparent: if historians wish to escape from their self-imposed closets, they must be prepared to talk directly with the people they most want to influence.

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[1] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990).

[2] David I. Kertzer and Marzio Barbagli, eds., *The Yale History of the European Family:* Vol 1: *Family Life in Early Modern Times, 1500-1789;* Vol 2: *Family Life in the Long Nineteenth Century*; Vol 3*: Family Life in the Twentieth Century.* 3 vols. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001-4). Volume 3 has not yet appeared. For a recent review of the volumes, see Joan Acocella, 'Little People,' in*The New Yorker* (18 & 25 August 2003), pp. 138-42.

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