Review Essay: The ‘Problem’ with a Name: Whose Child, Whose Responsibility?
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The ‘Problem’ with a Name: Whose Child, Whose Responsibility?

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Lyn Craig
Contemporary Motherhood: The Impact of Children on Adult Time

Paula England and Kathryn Edin (eds)
Unmarried Couples with Children

Frank F. Furstenberg
Destinies of the Disadvantaged: The Politics of Teen Childbearing

Introduction

A contemporary concern of western, and perhaps other, societies is the ‘problem’ of children. Albeit that children are key for securing future generations of humanity, the conditions under which it is deemed appropriate to have them are much debated, indeed researched and theorized, and done so within several disciplinary approaches.

Of course, the concerns are not new – desirability versus necessity in child-bearing/rearing has been a battle fought by generations of mothers, families, societies and governments. The effects on, and reactions to, children by their parents, family and welfare systems are interesting and significant. Yet attitudes to, and perceptions of, children will shape our future adults. From the perspective of social scientists, therefore, areas for investigation centre on their social relevance and impact. This is especially
pertinent, and probably most prominent, for, and in, families where conditions are considered far from ideal in terms of political and moral understandings.

This essay reviews three recently published texts which contribute to this discourse, as they deal with various aspects of process and progress in parenthood within various situations. The texts are summarized and then critically discussed with reference to specific lines of enquiry and argument, including their political and practical significances. The texts’ authors have used varying methods, posed differing discussions and, in many ways, approached diverse subject matter. However, in sum, they have, together, provided a good overview of current and comparative social situations involving children: the ‘problems’ with names.

The Texts

Each of the three reviewed texts approaches the wider subject area of children and family life differently. Methodological and theoretical concerns vary, as do the foci. Therefore, a brief summary of each follows by way of introduction to the wider comparisons and discussion offered by this review.

Craig’s *Contemporary Motherhood* carefully traverses the modern conception of parenting, specifically what it entails, or demands, in terms of time. Changing roles for women, in particular (the book’s title highlights the differences: ‘Motherhood’ and ‘Adult’, as the book deals with the ironies), have had a knock-on effect on family life and for sharing the workload. Craig also looks at the financial impact of having children and frames her investigations around ‘cost’: both of time and money. Her quantitative analyses of the Australian Bureau of Statistics Time Use Survey 1997 (ABS TUS 97) and the Multinational Time Use Study World 5.5 (MTUS), which measure family size, sex, qualifications, etc., are both revealing and informative.

Not unlike Craig’s endorsement of quantitative data analysis as a source of knowledge and understanding, England and Edin’s edited book *Unmarried Couples with Children* comprises chapters authored by both postgraduate research students and established academics. These chapters consider primary statistical data collected in a purpose-devised study entitled ‘Time, Love and Cash among Couples with Children project’ (TLC3), along with qualitative responses, i.e. using mixed-methods. Conducted in the USA, this samples a nationally representative group of unmarried couples who bore children c. 2000. Ranging from basic economics to infidelity, multiple partner fertility to break-ups, this text speaks to some of the issues that so-called ‘fragile families’ (to which one in three babies across the United States are born [p. 3]) face in pursuit of the already difficult task of childrearing.

Linked with very similar notions of fragility, Furstenberg’s *Destinies of the Disadvantaged* focuses on families, individuals and the life course within American families as they are touched by teenage childbearing. Employing a different methodology, Furstenberg uses qualitative methods to access data from respondents and their kin within his ‘Baltimore Study’, asking them to reflect on the effects of early mother (and father)hood. He accesses respondents of his earlier studies and so the follow-up element of his research and analysis permits additional insight, considering
both parents and children, and verifies his claim that: ‘The causes and consequences of early childbearing [...] have been misunderstood, distorted and exaggerated because they are refracted through a peculiarly American lens strongly tinted by our distinctive political culture’ (p. 3).

In sum, the link between these texts is clear: children impact upon the lives of their parents, and others, terrifically. In particular, they cost time, money, effort and work. The studies reviewed here engage in different ways with the participants and their vignettes, indeed their complications, together offering a detailed and thought-provoking picture of modern parenthood; an indictment for modern society?

**Critical Discussion**

Craig’s book, indeed her opening lines, ‘Becoming a parent is not only one of the most significant rites of passages in the human life course but a contribution to the perpetuation of the human race. For such a fundamental event, parenthood has become remarkably problematic’ (p. 1), reminds the reader of the basic and essential role of becoming a parent. Her claim that this is a recent phenomenon, however, is more problematic than the problem itself. Indeed, modern life has changed aspects of parenthood, but the ultimate responsibility, and often pressure, of bearing and supporting new life is eternal.

Nevertheless, the ‘change’ to which Craig most probably refers is that relating to the roles of women. Although these have remained somewhat similar over time – the woman, the female body, continues to physically accommodate and bear her children – some aspects of motherhood have altered. For instance, women of contemporary western societies are more likely to enjoy careers prior to starting their families. Further, marital status and relationship positions for women have also changed: as increasing globalization and more secularized societies emerge, the emphasis on family life and roles adapt. Although these changes do not alter fundamental elements of parenthood, it is evident that there is an impact on parental function and character for today’s families. Having made this claim, it is pertinent to note Craig’s assertion that ‘there is not a common social understanding of the issue. Attitudes to children, gender and to paid work can operate on different planes’ (p. 1). Accordingly, her book approaches the investigation of gender equity, ‘private indulgence’, requirement and social concern with careful attention, particularly towards feminist and liberal claims – public benefit versus public cost (p. 7).

Indeed, Craig assumes a rather objective stance on parenthood: she attempts to quantify the direct cost of having children in terms of both time and money – resources that most, even non-parents, would claim were too short in supply, a result of the constraints of ‘modern’ life. In doing so, she looks at categories of paid and unpaid labour, personal care, recreation and leisure, and, most importantly for the purposes of her argument, elements of ‘care’ for children, incorporating interactive, physical, travel and communication and minding responsibilities. As such, she does not underestimate the full remit of duties attached to being both person and parent: indeed, she separates these, analysing those activities which involve the
simultaneous presence of child(ren) and equally those where they are absent. Her findings are presented within the subsequent chapters of the book, in line with these considerations.

Craig contends that family size and specific gender roles within families are pertinent. She claims that such concerns have been inadequately addressed in previous attempts (p. 27) and shows that there is a significant impact on the workloads of women with the birth of a first child, as compared with those of men. This increases when there are more children, but becomes proportionally less per child, and it remains that men are still less investing of their time, or, as Craig writes, ‘specialised’ (p. 38), as the family grows. She develops this ‘gender line’ further, looking at how time and money are spent by parents on their children, especially where both paid and unpaid work, often mutually dependent, may dictate the resources and roles available. Although Craig notes that marriage consists of a partnership of two equals (p. 52), she contrasts the ideal and actual consequences of women’s entry into the ‘workforce’ with the distinct lack of response from men in terms of balancing their family ‘responsibilities’. She talks of the ‘dual burden’ (p. 56) for women and illustrates the sheer magnitude of daily hours devoted by mothers. Even when there is assistance by way of non-parental childcare, they are still more fraught with pressures of and on time. Indeed, Craig concludes that there is no significant difference between mothers who have partners and those who raise children alone. This is not to mention the impact of emotion, which Craig, perhaps by virtue of her distinctly logical and quantitative approach, fails to contemplate. In tune with her, by now, usual ‘cause-effect’ rationale, Craig goes on to address the issue of educational attainment of parents, linking capacity to provide financially or otherwise directly to the level of academic achievement. She then suggests that women with greater economic resources have more bargaining power in negotiating the division of labour within the house and in respect of the children. Craig writes: ‘Implicit in bargaining theories is the idea that the more power one has in a relationship, the more one will be able to avoid unpleasant tasks’ (p. 112). Is spending time with one’s children to be deemed ‘unpleasant’?

By way of contextualizing her work and, indeed, as she earlier claimed in respect of ‘different planes’, Craig ends her analysis with a brief cross-national comparison. She finds some variation. However, she concludes that gender is the predictor of the amount of work done, although there is difference according to the degree to which this is so. Her findings permit her to draw one important conclusion, nevertheless: ‘parenthood has an overriding effect that builds upon that of gender’ (p. 132). She stresses that the ‘subtle’ differences are unlikely to have an effect on policy or employment, even though the effects are said to be felt more widely. The efforts and investment of those (women) who have children ought to be spread amongst all those who benefit from them: even though they do not contribute, they have the ‘opportunity to free ride’ (p. 137). What it boils down to, Craig presumes, is three options for women: ‘rearing the next generation in our spare time, sacrificing our livelihood to it, or missing out on the experience altogether’ (p. 138). Indeed, her most matter of fact approach to this argument renders her clearly feminist text worthy of applause: her impression is really refreshing!
Craig’s contention that single mothers are typically loaded with the same volume of ‘work’ as their partnered counterparts renders consideration of ‘coupled’ parents, married or otherwise, irrelevant within the discussion of contemporary parenthood and the division of labour. England and Edin’s edited text, however, sheds further light on the intricacies of the roles of both parents and within different family circumstances. They draw attention to specific differences felt within ‘stable’ and ‘less stable’ families through bringing together a collection of research papers. Their opening chapter suggests that the study conducted is consistent with older literature; low-income couples are most likely to be involved in troubled relationships, where some behaviour by men is what women find unacceptable (p. 17). Collaborative work of the editors and others is presented, whereby the intentions of women in terms of planning pregnancy for such ‘fragile families’ are discussed; marital status, racial group and educational differences playing significant roles.

Of course, implicit in pregnancy and expected in terms of responsibility for fertility is the role of the woman: for ‘low-income’ couples, the gendered elements of relationships and conflict are crucial. As such, child discipline, partner’s attention, housework, childcare, irresponsibility and spending priorities are differently understood by women and men and so create the source of much unrest. Indeed, so does marriage, moreover the lack thereof, especially where there is a so-called ‘economic bar’ or family/community disapproval of childbearing out of wedlock. These exacerbate feelings of insecurity, which incorporate fears of infidelity, and impact on children’s future ability to develop stable adult relationships, free from suspicion and distrust. Yet, ‘Infidelity is the rule, not the exception, among couples in this study’ (p. 112). Essentially, ‘Most cohabiters with children have not made a definite commitment to each another’ (p. 134), resulting in a lack of stability. ‘They experience more conflict, less communication, feel less secure in their relationships, see them as less permanent, are less likely to pool resources than married couples and experience more infidelity’ (p. 136). As a result, these relationships are unlikely to survive, beckoning analysis in the England and Edin text of parenting apart, and the associated problems, particularly the father–child relationship. Break-ups are often followed by the establishment of mixed families, but bringing together children of same and other parentage within what are already ‘fragile’ relationships complicates matters further, especially where fathers ‘choose to disengage from their other children’ (p. 199). The role of money in these extended families is all the more decisive (p. 200) and unreliable provision, hence dependence on welfare support, adds to relationship problems that are already frail. Financial constraints often impact on ‘ex-family’ access arrangements, discussed within the text as ‘maternal gatekeeping’, worsening father–child contact, though ‘fathers need to be careful that they are not being exploited’ (p. 241); deeper difficulties persist for ex-partner, parent–child relationships and family survival.

Considering England and Edin’s compilation of studies relating to unmarried parents, and reflecting on specific gender roles found by Craig, the title of Furstenberg’s book, Destinies of the Disadvantaged, seems all the more resonant. Informed by qualitative data collected from participants during a ‘follow-up’, he looks specifically at another group where difficulties are often found in parent–parent and
parent–child relationships. Indeed, continuing with the theme of unmarried couples, teen parents are undoubtedly the most likely culprits, Furstenberg considers the ‘serious social problem’ (p. 1) of early childbearing, particularly considering political attitudes, where such families result in public expense.

Rather than approaching the subject of teen childbearing as a rising and grave crisis for the United States, Furstenberg instead considers the history of the ‘problem’ as one among others; indeed, only as problematic as the political agenda and economy decides. Essentially, he notes that ‘Early childbearing has never been unusual in this country’ (p. 7). What he notes as the ‘change’ is risk management, however; marriage was once a common ‘remedy’, but has become less popular than the alternative options, resulting in a different ratio of non-marital teen births. Changing attitudes, economies and coping mechanisms have also meant that early childbirth is linked with premature cessation of full-time education, with low income and the cycle of poverty. Rather than adopting a ‘solution’-finding perspective, as colleagues have done, Furstenberg instead speaks to the concerns of the young mothers themselves: unplanned pregnancy, marriage, early parenthood, the instability of their relationship, later life; finding that: ‘They had a very rough time in the immediate aftermath of becoming a teenage mother, but most eventually found their way back into more conventional roles’ (p. 51). Unlike the other authors, whose data may not have allowed, Furstenberg also considers the children born to these mothers, in terms of poverty, absent fathers, inadequate step-fathers and grandparents. He looks at various aspects of success and failure within their lives, according to conventional understandings – for example high-school diploma versus arrest – and finds that sons do much worse than daughters born to teen mothers, particularly within some racial groups.

Furstenberg considers realistic sex education and greater attention to the reproductive health of young people. He talks about rebellion, responsibility and the normalization of sexual behaviour, comparing the United States with the European Model (pp. 102–3), criticizing American attitudes as instrumental in the creation of the ‘problem’. He reconsiders marriage – expectation, promotion and benefit – but recollects Edin’s earlier study (p. 117) whereby ‘fragile families’ are deemed ‘inherently’ insecure: ‘cure’ is not so simple! The book highlights many sources of difficulty, both for teen mothers and/or parents and for the society that stigmatizes them, but also shows how interpretation of issues as ‘problems’ can be obstructive where families are trying to manage. Indeed, what Furstenberg does is deal with issues from a very sensible perspective, showing that perceptions of teen parenthood and the realities are not always co-conversant. Furstenberg’s closing line tells us his purpose:

Can we do better? Perhaps, but not until we change the fact that this situation is treated with indifference by those who could afford to invest greater share to ensure that children get what they need. Until this attitude changes, we will remain a society known for its vast waste of its most precious resources – the next generation. (p. 173).

Instead of bandying about blame, he is sympathetic to all concerned – humanity.
Conclusion

The authors of the texts included in this review have opted to focus on various aspects of family creation and life. Though economic, political and moral climates may have changed, family concerns remain similar across societies and nations. Time, money and effort are ever-demanded resources in the course of childrearing and, howsoever parents choose or are compelled to organize their family, such investment is central. Craig’s analysis of ‘normal’ families with ‘untroubled’ relationships and the gender inequity found therein, more complicated situations, where marriage is little known and break-ups frequent within England and Edin’s set of low-income respondents, and Furstenberg’s contemplation of teen parenthood and relationships display and represent the intricacies and complications that can be found within any given family. Concerns are negotiated ‘on the job’, not forgetting or underrating the impact on our future generations as, most crucially, the children cope with the deals meted out to them by their parents and by their contemporaries – an issue for future research or follow-up, according to the results of these studies. The texts’ authors, although their approaches and lines of inquiry and argument are different, agree that the problems for families are many. They have each presented their research in most accessible and instructive manners, their unbiased and sensitive representations of respondents and responses have allowed them to, individually and together, effectively communicate the message that though having children fulfils a basic function, the process is not that straightforward.