

The Problem Of Mental Deficiency: Eugenics, Democracy, And Social Policy In Britain C.1870-1959

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REVIEWS

Kathleen Kiernan, Hilary Land and Jane Lewis, *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth-Century Britain: from footnote to front page*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1998, 335 pp., £15.99 pbk.

The marked increase in out-of-wedlock births that has occurred in the last twenty-five years has been one of the most remarkable demographic features of twentieth century Britain. Some sixty years ago, commentators were puzzling over the long fall in fertility that had originated in the 1870s, their uncertainty being reflected in many wild and sensationalist 'analyses' that appeared in the popular press. By the late 1940s, more accurate explanations were forthcoming. Likewise, it is only now, at the very end of the 1990s, that the increase in single parenthood is being examined in a sober and analytical way. We can see that roughly similar family formation trends are in evidence in all comparable 'postindustrial' societies, but with subtle differences in timing. Cohabitation before (or instead of) marriage, low birth and marriage rates, rising divorce, the growth of reconstituted families, more single-person households, rising illegitimacy ratios – do these all add up to a significant new phase of the demographic transition? Or, like the declining birth rate sixty years ago, will these trends suddenly reverse?

This book is co-authored by three scholars who are about as experienced and knowledgeable in this area as one could hope for. Their aim is to offer a cool and informed analysis of the rise in single parenthood, in contrast to its treatment in the media: as Jane Lewis remarks, 'the light and shade of the academic evidence has largely passed people – and many journalists – by'. In her introduction, Jane Lewis traces the history of ideas on lone parenthood. In the past, the death of a male breadwinner disrupted many families. What is novel about today's situation is the rapid increase in the numbers of lone parents, and the change in their type (with the single, never-married increasing fastest of all). Lewis rejects economic determinism; while there certainly is some value in models which see a causal relationship between marital instability and women's increasing economic independence, most single mothers cannot work while caring for young children and thus experience a marked degree of poverty.

The increase in lone parenthood cannot be analysed properly unless one understands its demographic underpinnings. Kathleen Kiernan provides an admirable distillation of the empirical evidence. The routes to lone motherhood are complex and varied, but three stand out: partnership breakdown, death of husband and having a child out of wedlock. Of these, the last is now the most important: in the 1960s, one in five women marrying for the first time was pregnant at the time of marrying, but high marriage rates kept the illegitimacy ratio low. Falling rates of marriage and increasing cohabitation before marriage, or instead of it, have dramatically reduced the proportion of premarital pregnancies that are regularised by subsequent marriage. But, Kiernan stresses, lone mothers are a dynamic, ever-changing group: the pathways out (mainly remarriage or re-partnering) need to be considered.

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