

Sinners? Scroungers? Saints? Unmarried Motherhood in Twentieth-Century England

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Sinners? Scroungers? Saints?: Unmarried Motherhood in Twentieth-Century England offers a rich and fascinating study of the National Council of the Unmarried Mother and Her Child (later the National Council for One Parent Families, then One Parent Families and now Gingerbread), a charitable organization that was established to provide support for unmarried mothers and their children. In doing so it also reveals much about the lives of unmarried mothers and the changes and continuities in attitudes towards them over the course of the 20th century. However it is more than an account of unmarried motherhood and adds to our understanding of the interaction between the state and voluntary sector, the changing position of women in society, and the relationship between political and popular debates.

The book takes a chronological approach, telling the parallel stories of unmarried mothers' experiences and the dealings of the National Council with women, the public and the state both before and after the creation of the welfare state. Through these 'intertwined stories' they aim to counter the conventional narrative that until the 1960s unmarried motherhood was always seen as shameful, with a transformation then occurring during this decade which has since seen the raising of children outside of marriage becoming normalised within society and condoned and even facilitated by the state. In order to challenge this assumed history the authors principally draw on the archives of the National Council itself, but place this in the context of parliamentary papers and official reports, social surveys, newspapers and a small number of autobiographical sources.

A vivid anecdote at the beginning of the first chapter about a young Catherine Cookson learning of her own illegitimacy during a quarrel with her friend – who shouted ‘YOU haven’t GOT NO DA’ – illustrates the real anguish that illegitimacy could cause at the turn of the 20th century. However, while Catherine’s experiences feel like they belong to a by-gone age, the authors also aim to show the continuity in lone motherhood over the century by demonstrating that cohabitation had been a more enduring phenomenon than has often been thought the case. Indeed it was even recognized by the state, as is seen in the support given to the ‘unmarried wife’ and illegitimate children of servicemen during the First World War. Not all cases were as accepted, though, and there was a difference in the attitudes towards, and experiences of, those couples who cohabited as if man and wife and unmarried women raising their children alone. While both groups were subject to the pressures of hiding their status from their communities, Thane and Evans argue there was a greater level of toleration shown towards the former rather than the latter group.

Indeed it was the vulnerability of many unmarried mothers and their children (which aroused particular attention during the First World War) that encouraged the voluntary sector to step in to support them. The book is as much, and perhaps more, about the role of voluntary action in supporting unmarried mothers as the lives of the women themselves. The National Council was founded in April 1918, chaired by Lettice Fisher, with the aims of reforming the Bastardy Acts, securing the provision of adequate accommodation for mothers and babies (with the special aim of keeping mother and child together), and dealing with enquiries from unmarried mothers. It was part of a general expansion of voluntary action between the wars with voluntary agencies proving to be important providers of services to those marginal groups that were neglected by the state. Within 20 years the National Council was, in the words of Fisher, ‘solidly established as the recognized central organization for dealing with unmarried mothers and illegitimate children’ (p. 52).

In many histories of British social policy the Second World War emerges as a turning point, both in terms of welfare provision and societal attitudes.⁽¹⁾ Thane and Evans dispel the myth that the war was a time of unprecedented sexual ‘immorality’, but they do show that the war played an important part in changing attitudes towards unmarried motherhood. While the war caused a moral panic ‘over the supposed irregularities of unmarried younger people in wartime’ by the end of the war there were ‘signs that the veil of secrecy around illegitimacy was gradually becoming more transparent, and attitudes were shifting’ (pp. 55, 73). The war also precipitated a change in the provision of services for unmarried mothers as the lessons learned from the wartime experiences contributed to the post-war reform of policy and practice. Nonetheless, although the introduction of the welfare state benefited lone mothers, as it did all mothers, gaps in state provision soon became obvious. A central tenet of Thane and Evans’ argument is that the welfare state did not supersede the voluntary provision that existed before it, rather the two continued to work alongside one another and in co-operation.

Change in the post-war period was therefore complex and contradictory. On the one hand new patterns of family life were emerging in the context of rising rates of female labour participation, improved living standards for many combined with the safety net of the welfare state, and greater control of family size through better contraception. Yet at the same time these years have been characterized as a period of conventional attitudes towards the family which stressed the nuclear family with breadwinner husband and homemaker wife as both the norm and the ideal. Such views were supported by the mother-centred theories of child development that were in the ascendancy after the war as popularized by John Bowlby. Thane and Evans question how influential these views were in determining responses to unmarried mothers, stating: ‘It is possible to exaggerate their dominance in this much stereotyped but little understood period’ (p. 85). This is one area where it would have been interesting to hear more from mothers and children themselves to discover how important they thought such theories were in shaping their lives.

While the 1960s are popularly imagined as being transformative in the status and numbers of unmarried mothers, *Sinners? Scroungers? Saints?* argues that such a characterisation of the ‘permissive sixties’ over-estimates both the sexual conformity of society in previous decades and the extent of change in the 1960s. Whilst there was change, it was ‘slow, uneven, and contested’ (p. 139). This of course is not a new argument, but is nonetheless persuasive.⁽²⁾ Perhaps a more innovative angle taken by Thane and Evans is to

show how there was a shift in the social policy discourse in the 1960s from a representing unmarried, widowed, divorced and separated lone mothers as distinct groups with distinct problems, to emphasizing what these *Fatherless Families*, in the words of Margaret Wynn (1964), or Dennis Marsden's *Mothers Alone* (1969) had in common, in particular their material difficulties, poverty, and poor housing. Reflecting this change, the National Council for the Unmarried Mother and Her Child changed its title to the National Council for One Parent Families in 1973, arguing that 'all lone parents share one crucial characteristic: the responsibility of bringing up children single-handed in a society that is geared economically, socially and emotionally to two-parent families' (p. 137).

The 1970s saw the continuation of many of the developments that began in the 1960s, encouraged by the publication of the landmark Finer Report, which the authors describe as 'the most thorough description and analysis of the situation of lone-parent families of the twentieth century' (p. 167). The Finer Committee on One-Parent Families was set up in 1969 and considered issues such as housing, employment and 'the social and personal life of one-parent families', concluding that the circumstances of one-parent families were far worse than those of two-parent families. Amongst its recommendations were that claimants should be spared going through the courts to receive their maintenance, the introduction of family courts, and that a Guaranteed Maintenance Allowance (GMA) should be available for all lone-parents. However, publication of the report in 1974 coincided with the economic crisis that followed the 1973 Arab oil embargo. Rather than pursue costly and potentially unpopular reforms to help one-parent families the Labour government preferred to try and help all families through Child Benefit reforms. Thane and Evans' account of the Finer Report, its recommendations, and why these were not adopted, is an interesting one, and it is also indicative of the 1970s – a story of laudable aspirations that came unstuck in the face of economic crises.⁽³⁾

The chapter on the 1980s and early 1990s is the most thought-provoking in the book, but perhaps the least conclusive. The decades saw a significant growth in the numbers of unmarried mothers, openly cohabiting couples and one parent families, yet, the authors argue, they were also subject to an unprecedented attack (unseen at any point in the preceding century) from representatives of the government. It was

an extraordinary time. Never in history had so many children been born outside marriage in England and Wales and never had so many unmarried couples lived together openly, facing little evident disapproval from friends and neighbours but attacked by a government which objected strongly to any transgression of 'family values', which appeared to mean raising children in a lasting marriage (p. 194).

However the chapter raises many questions that are not fully addressed, perhaps because it is yet too soon to fully understand what was occurring during these years. Was the hardening of governmental attitudes simply attributable to the politics of the Thatcher, and then Major governments? If so, why was the approach so different to previous Conservative administrations? Was there really a new approach to unmarried mothers or were existing views being more expressed more forcefully? How did the tough political rhetoric influence popular attitudes towards unmarried mothers? In order to fully probe some of these questions it would have also been helpful to hear more of the narratives of those involved. For instance, in order to assess whether lone mothers and their children really did face a new level of stigmatisation in the 1980s it would be interesting to contrast their experiences to their counterparts earlier in the century.

Thane and Evans take us up to the present to evaluate the position of unmarried mothers in 21st-century Britain. They show how they have continued to be vulnerable to the changing political and economic climate. Following the election of 'New Labour' in 1997 the vilification of lone parents by politicians ceased and there were 'real, if limited, improvements' in their incomes and the services available to them (p. 198). However the authors are less hopeful about the future for lone-parent families under the coalition, with the threat of reforms and cuts and single mothers again being blamed for the ills of society after the 2011 riots. They are also critical of David Cameron's idea of the 'Big Society' and its assumption that voluntary services had been squeezed out by the state. They counter that their account of the National Council

demonstrates the vital support such organisations have always provided: ‘Throughout its history, the National Council, now Gingerbread, has drawn attention and when possible filled the gaps in state provision, working with the state (both local and central), not in competition with it (p. 208)’.

Sinners? Scroungers? Saints? is, then, an excellent example of why the histories of voluntary organizations such as the National Council should be conducted. Through exploring the past of this one organisation they have challenged conventional understandings of both unmarried motherhood and the relationship between the state and voluntary sector before and after the welfare state. However there are also some significant absences from the story they tell. As they note, there is little in their account about the fathers (whether absent or present). In addition, while the importance of class is discussed at length, ethnicity receives far less attention. In a book of this length it is of course not possible to cover every aspect of the topic and these gaps reveal the need for more research in this area. The book’s claim to be the ‘first book to describe the real lives of unmarried mothers’ also seems over-stated. In comparison to the wealth of new information the book sheds on the National Council, there is relatively little on the actual experiences of mothers. The small number of published autobiographies and memoirs that are consulted are selective and principally of public figures. The voices of ordinary women do come through in the case notes and letters to the National Council, but these offer snapshots rather than the opportunity to examine how women experienced unmarried motherhood over the course of their lives and their paths in and out of it. One further small, although not trivial, criticism is that there is no list of abbreviations, which in places makes the text difficult to follow. Nonetheless, these comments in no way detract from the book’s valuable contribution to the history of the family and social policy in 20th-century England.

Notes

1. See, for example, Harry Hendrick, *Children, Childhood and English Society 1880–1990* (Cambridge, 1997); Nikolas Rose, *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self* (London, 1990).[Back to \(1\)](#)
 - This argument was made in Kathleen Kiernan, Hilary Land and Jane Lewis, *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth-Century Britain: From Footnote to Front Page* (Oxford, 1998).[Back to \(2\)](#)
 - There are parallels with the dropping of plans to expand nursery provision, see Vicky Randall, ‘The irresponsible state? The politics of child daycare provision in Britain’, *British Journal of Political Science*, 25 (1995), 327–47.[Back to \(3\)](#)

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