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Disordered Lives: Eighteenth-Century Families and their Unruly Relatives

Review Number:
24
Publish date:
Saturday, 1 March, 1997
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ISBN:
9780745615141
Date of Publication:
1996
Price:
£40.00
Pages:
230pp.
Publisher:
Polity Press
Publisher url:
http://www.polity.co.uk/book.asp?ref=9780745615141
Place of Publication:
Oxford
Reviewer:
Tim Hitchcock

In the cities and towns of eighteenth-century Europe many families from all social classes used the resources and powers of the state to forcibly incarcerate their mad, violent, or simply disorderly members. In this volume Lis and Soly analyse the thousands of petitions and supporting depositions created by this process in the towns of the Austrian Netherlands. In doing so they have created what should become a classic in the genre of 'history from below'. In it, the lives, the concerns and shear humanity of the individuals who both suffered at the hands of their families, and who were driven to extreme action by close relatives, are brought to life with verve and style. Recalcitrant sons and desperate parents, the mad, the drunk, the lascivious and the simply inconvenient, are each illuminated with the sharp light of clear description.

In the process this work furthers and deepens the best intellectual tradition within social history. Both the dry inhumanity of quantitative history, and the jargon ridden excesses of discourse analysis are eschewed in favour of a straightforward approach which juxtaposes clear tables indicating statistical trends, and narratives of individuals and events embedded within a thematic analysis. This approach ensures that the

amazing quality of the material upon which the book is based comes through. And to the extent that *Disordered Lives* creates a new and fuller history of plebeian people and their concerns, on the basis of a powerfully detailed and largely ignored set of sources, it demonstrates both how much can be done to create an inclusive account of the past which recognises the real experiences of people of all sorts, and how much remains as yet undone.

But at the same time, the quality of human experience and suffering reflected in this volume forces us to ask if Lis and Soly, or indeed the historical profession in general, have done enough to represent plebeian people on their own terms and in their full complexity. And more than this, it forces us to ask if the methodological and intellectual tools used in this analysis, do justice to either the sources or indeed the lives upon which it is based.

The analysis in *Disordered Lives* demonstrates that poor people came to use the opportunity provided by civic authorities to control individual family members more frequently as the century progressed, and especially after around 1770. The authors explain this phenomenon by positing a direct relationship between changing economic circumstances and the decisions made by plebeian families which resulted in the state sponsored incarceration of difficult members. Lis and Soly base their analysis on the assumption that the poor families who petitioned the civic authorities to have their sons and husbands, daughters and wives incarcerated in houses of correction did so because changing patterns of waged labour *forced* them to. The authors certainly recognise the ambiguity in the power relationships they describe. They frequently allude to the fact that the poor themselves needed to actively pursue the alternative of incarceration for it to become a reality, and that this in turn suggests that it was the poor who in some ways controlled the process. More than this, they recognise the extent to which there was a degree of collusion between the state (and hence elite opinion) and the poor in determining which forms of disorder should be addressed through incarceration. And yet, the family members who drew up petitions and the neighbours who gave evidence in support of those petitions seem too frequently to be depicted as economically rational individuals simply responding to circumstances beyond their control. The reorganisation of cloth manufacture and the increasing importance of the lace industries are continually deployed as the fundamental driving force, pressurising families and ensuring the existence of a continuously rising tide of individuals driven from their homes for months or years, and kept in harsh and degrading conditions in a variety of institutions at the expense of the state.

The difficulty is that the very richness of the source material - the quality of human experience it contains - seems to demand a more nuanced and humanistic explanation. We are, for example, given detailed information demonstrating that most plebeian people imprisoned at the request of their parents were men in their early twenties. Lis and Soly explain this by reference to the dehumanising conditions increasingly suffered by young men given over to the meagre care of the *kelderboer* (cellar-farmers) of the cotton spinning industry, and the late age at marriage imposed on these same men as a result of financial insecurity. This analysis is almost certainly true, and is strongly supported by the fact that the largest group of incarcerated young men were accused of being ?work shy?. It is at the same time an explanation which, in many ways, hides more than it reveals. The behaviour of the parents and children involved needs to be imbedded in a more complex understanding of the youth culture created by these young men, and the nature of the expectations which parents brought to their own roles. In a brilliant section on youth gangs and criminality, the authors demonstrate that they have the material with which to create such an explanation, but they never really relate the two phenomenon. Too often the culture and decisions of plebeian people are described as the unproblematic response to circumstances beyond their own control. In this instance, an appeal to economic rationalism allows Lis and Soly to skate over the occasionally unpalatable and always politically problematic views, beliefs and decisions of the poor, in favour of a view which sees them as victims of their social circumstances. In the process the subjects of this book, the violent husbands and wives, brutal parents and uncontrollable adolescents, alcoholics and libertines are made less than they were.

In a similar way, the explanations deduced for the behaviour of the participants in the next largest group of commitments - that of husbands by wives - is equally frustrating. Again the changing character of male employment, and the growing demand for female employees in the lace industry are pointed to as an

explanation of the marked preponderance of husbands committed for domestic violence, and drunkenness, laziness and general fecklessness. And while economic change is certainly a major context for this phenomenon, it again does not explain why, within a strongly patriarchal society, relatively large numbers of women were given and took the authority and support of the state in order to control their disorderly husbands. Nor does it explain the internal power relationships within the household that allowed women to use these opportunities as effectively as they seem to have done.

To take just one instance of the kind of phenomenon which need explaining in a more complex way, one might consider the high proportion of cases of domestic violence reflected in the petitions which involved apparently symbolic attacks on the marriage bed. Lis and Soly tantalisingly note this phenomenon and in passing give a bemused explanation, but even on the surface it seems to represent a much more complex set of assumptions than the authors are willing to entertain. Some deeper explanation is needed to allow us to understand why a worker from eighteenth-century Brabant should choose to use the bed as a symbol of household and marriage, instead of the more usual crockery and kitchen implements. What is needed is some sense of the changing content of plebeian culture which does not assume that culture is simply responding to economic change.

These comments are almost certainly unfair. I am sure that the authors of this book would concur in my desire for a more complex history of the lives and beliefs of working people, and would point out the fearsomely difficult task involved in creating such a history for even a relatively small area and period. The problem is that by bringing to our attention such a tremendous source of information, Lis and Soly have left this reader acutely aware of how much we currently do not understand about the actions and motivations of working people. By bringing to our attention the tremendously rich details included in this material, one?s historical appetite is whetted rather than satisfied.

More than this, by attempting to fit the complexity of real lives and painful decisions within an essentially materialist and rationalist analysis of historical change, the inadequacy of such an approach is highlighted. By choosing to emphasise the economic context at the expense of the cultural, Lis and Soly make all too clear the need to move beyond the assumptions of materialism as reflected in both Marxism and right-wing economics, towards something that more clearly reflects the complexities of the power relationships within which all decision making occurs.

It is clear from the text that the authors are aware of the deeply problematic nature of the relationships and decisions they describe, and of the relative inadequacies of a materialist analysis to explain them, and yet they do not make sufficient use of the alternative approaches which are currently available. Feminist scholarship, in particular, and here one thinks of work such as Laura Gowing?s recent analysis of the essentially similar content of English Consistory Court records, has provided at least one model of how detailed family and neighbourhood relationships can be understood without doing damage to the individuality and personality of the historical actors involved.(1) Rather than allowing our assumptions about the impact of macro-economic change to guide our analysis, it is time, and these types of records allow us, to look at individuals first, and to build models from the ground up, rather than from the theory down.

Perhaps it is in the issues surrounding the relative authority and interests of working families and the state that the impact of an overly theory led analysis can be seen. The period which witnessed the highest number of incarcerations by poor families, 1770-1790, was also the period which saw a concerted attempt on the part of the state, under the leadership of Vilain XIIII, to reform the system of social policy. Panopticon-like institutions were established, work projects set on foot, and proposals for a professional police put forward. Indeed, in a whole range of ways, elite social attitudes towards disorder seem to have hardened in these last two decades of the *Ancien Regime*. The coincidence of the apparently co-terminus concerns of poor families and elite opinion is explained by Lis as Soly as accidental, the two phenomenon having little real relationship. As a result, one is left with an analysis in which the elite figures who control the state apparatus are seen to be responding to the Enlightenment, and intellectual debate. For them social policy and the control of disorder is a matter of choice, and in a broader sense a matter of cultural prejudice. At the same

time, for the poor, the same issues are a matter of knee-jerk economic rationalism, in which culture and debate seem largely superfluous. This division seems unnecessarily patronising to plebeian people. For Lis and Soly, this division between elite and plebeian interest is necessary because of their dialectic understanding of power. But, just as the individual conflicts which fill the petitions need a more nuanced and complex explanatory model, so the broader understanding of power relations which inform this analysis, likewise needs to be rethought. As the historiography of the last twenty years, from Foucault to the New Historicists, has amply demonstrated power is never invested in a single relationship. It is a complex interrelationship in which a wide variety of participants enter. Inevitably, the roles of the rich and the poor in creating the ?reformation of manners? which seems to have taken hold of the Austrian Netherlands are different, but they are surely not separate or accidental. And whether the links which bind these various historical actors are to be found in economics, or language, or symbol, in the changing patterns of the theatre of social interaction, or in the demands placed on relationships by changing economic necessity, it cannot be enough to simply say they are coincidental, and by implication that the rich have culture and choice, and the poor are mere historical automatons responding to circumstances beyond their understanding or control. As when looking at the disputes and contentions which filled the lives of the petitioners and the incarcerated, the broader history of the phenomenon which produced the hundreds of cases analysed here needs to be contextualised and rebuilt from the bottom up.

Having made these criticisms, I am very conscious that they are directed at the wrong object. Lis and Soly have created a brilliant piece of historical writing, which I do and will continue to recommend to any one willing to listen. My comments on their approach are more a reflection of the moment in the development of historical scholarship at which this volume was created, than it is a criticism of the work. More than any other example of eighteenth-century social history written in recent years, this volume is full of the words and lives of working people. In reading this book, one is continually struck by the wealth of material Lis and Soly have uncovered, and continually moved by the tragedies and conflicts, the human stories and vignettes that fill these pages. If in the end, one is left frustrated, it is because one has become involved in the lives of the individuals described, and wants more. This volume demonstrates that the lives and experiences of the eighteenth-century poor are there in the archives, and that it is down to historians to go out and reconstruct those lives in their full splendour of human fallibility and individuality.

Notes

1. Laura Gowing, 'Gender and Language of Insult in Early Modern London', History Workshop, 35 (1993) 1-21. Back to (1)

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