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Review of Glen Elder, *Children of the Great Depression: Social Change in Life Experience*

**Disciplines**

Family, Life Course, and Society | Sociology | Work, Economy and Organizations

## Review Essay

*Children of the Great Depression: Social Change in Life Experience.* By Glen Elder. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974. Pp. v+400. \$15.00.

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Sociologists used to be content to support their historical observations about changing family patterns with undocumented speculation or, at best, choice bits of anecdotal material. Assistance was rarely supplied by social historians, who seemed as little interested in family life as students of the family were in the conduct of historical research. I am not prepared to speculate why historians consistently neglected this area of research, but a reasonable case can be made that sociologists shied away from historical inquiry because of the prevailing prejudice that it was not sufficiently scientific. In an era when as much if not more attention was given to method as to substance, family sociologists—already branded as closet moralists—were simply unwilling to risk the stigma of being soft on methodology.<sup>1</sup> Far better a systematic survey of courtship attitudes among students on a midwestern campus than a search through archival records to learn about marriage practices a century ago. The inevitable result was blissful ignorance, captured so well in William J. Goode's image of "the classical family of Western nostalgia."

In 1963, when in the final chapter of his survey of family change, *World Revolution and Family Patterns*, Goode lamented the lack of historical studies, no one, least of all Goode himself, expected this area of research to develop into one of the major growth industries in the social sciences. And yet, this is precisely what has occurred. During the last 10 years there has been an outpouring of papers, special issues of journals, and monographs on family history.<sup>2</sup> The expansion of historical demography, the emergence of the "new social history," and a redirection in sociology which is more sympathetic to historical methods have all contributed to a burgeoning interest in the family of times past.

Many recent studies of family history have been concerned with assembling and reconstructing fragments of data which in turn have under-

<sup>1</sup> In making this generalization, we are not ignoring the few exceptions where sociologists used historical material to shed light on family life in previous times. Without attempting a complete list of the exceptions, it is worth taking note of such writers as W. E. B. Du Bois (1967), E. Digby Baltzell (1958), and Thomas C. Monahan (1951).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Gordon (1973) provides an excellent introduction to the recent contributions on historical family research. For other fine collections, see Hareven (1971); Rabb and Rotberg (1971); and the special section in the *Journal of Marriage and the Family* (Gordon and Hareven 1973).

mined some of our most cherished myths about the preindustrial family; others have demonstrated with systematic data what we have “known” all along. Useful as they have been in providing knowledge of how little or how much family form and functioning has shifted over time, what we have learned from these studies about the dynamics of institutional change has not been impressive. In part, the failure to understand the process of change can be traced to the design of most historical studies, to what might be termed a “then and now” strategy of research. Typically, features of family life are examined at different points in time, setting up a contrast between the family of the past and of the present (though frequently the contemporary family is referred to only implicitly). Much as one might be able to detect alterations in dress and demeanor by flipping through the pages of a family picture album, this cross-sectional approach reveals, often in striking detail, what has changed, but fails to disclose how and why change has occurred.

In *Children of the Great Depression*, Glen Elder rehabilitates a neglected strategy for studying the dynamics of family change, reminding us that an interesting alternative exists to the “then and now” mode of analysis. By cleverly piecing together a series of observations and interviews collected over a 30-year period, Elder constructs a longitudinal study of the life histories of a small cohort of youth who grew up during the depression. The result is both an imaginative case study of social change and family life and a methodological tour de force.

The intellectual roots of Elder’s project reach back a half a century to a tradition of research initiated by W. I. Thomas. Reconstructing the personal biographies of Polish immigrants, Thomas, and his collaborator, Florian Znaniecki, explored the forces of social change on family life and individual behavior. For those familiar with this study, Elder’s book will produce a remarkable sense of *déjà vu*. There is, for example, a passage from *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* which could as well serve as the introduction to *Children of the Great Depression*:

A social institution can be fully understood only if we do not limit ourselves to the abstract study of its formal organization, but analyze the way in which it appears in the personal experience of various members of the group and follow the influence which it has upon their lives. . . . The superiority of life-records over every other kind of material for the purposes of sociological analysis appears with particular force when we pass from the characterization of single data to the determination of facts, for there is no safer and more efficient way of finding among the innumerable antecedents of a social happening the real causes of this happening than to analyze the past of the individuals through whose agency this happening occurred. [Thomas and Znaniecki, p. 1833]

The “life history” method of research did not survive in sociology partly because it was unable to compete with more rigorous methods of data collection. Analysis of life records was burdened by the unwieldy and unsystematic features of individual case histories. Moreover, as

Thomas himself recognized, biographical insight was frequently based on personal hindsight. Elder has managed to overcome these liabilities by introducing more sophisticated techniques of handling life histories and by shifting from a retrospective to a prospective design.

In the 1930s a team of child psychologists, headed by Harold Jones and Herbert Stoltz, launched an intensive study of 167 preadolescents living in Oakland, California. The aim of the Oakland Growth Study was to trace the course of personal development during adolescence. Using varied techniques such as observation, clinical assessments, self-ratings, and interviews with parents, peers, and teachers, a massive amount of information was collected on each child.

Longitudinal studies have a habit of taking on a life of their own, and this study was no exception. Under the sponsorship of the Institute of Human Development, the Oakland Growth Study outlived its founders. In addition to the information collected on the youths in the thirties, interviews and clinical assessments were carried out at periodic intervals during the forties and fifties.

When Glen Elder joined the staff of the institute in 1962, he set to work organizing what had by then become an almost unmanageable set of data. Although the data set had served as the basis of a number of developmental studies, its sociological and historical value had been largely untapped. Elder spent nearly a decade refining and augmenting the data in order to analyze the life histories of the small band of participants in the Oakland study. Elder himself designed an additional follow-up in 1964; by that time, the surviving participants had entered middle age.

Following in Thomas's footsteps, Elder argues that abstract and general theories of social change are of little use if they do not ultimately lead to concrete and specific explanations ("linkages" in Elder's terms) which couple changes in the social structure to alterations in individual behavior: "In this study, we shall formulate analytic models which specify linkages between socioeconomic change in the Depression and its psychological effects within the life course. On the theoretical level, linkages provide answers to the question of why economic change has particular effects; they offer an interpretation of the relationship, an account of the process or mechanisms through which social change influences personality and behavior" (p. 13).

With painstaking detail, Elder reconstructs a chain of events beginning in the depression and ending in the decade of the sixties. At the risk of some oversimplification, his argument can be briefly stated: The depression resulted in severe economic dislocation for some individuals and not for others. Characteristic adaptations occurred in those families hardest hit by the depression, altering the socialization experiences of the children and permanently marking their personality and adult careers.

As a measure of the economic deprivation, Elder subdivides his sample into families which experienced a sharp decline in income (at least 35%) during the period from 1929 to 1933 and families which were, relatively speaking, "nondeprived." This distinction is then separately applied to

middle- and working-class families, generating a fourfold typology. Throughout the analysis, Elder contrasts the socialization of children in these four family situations, showing how their childhood experiences shaped the later course of their lives.

In the first part of the book, Elder demonstrates that certain dramatic shifts in family functioning took place as a result of economic dislocation. Children in the deprived households assumed a greater degree of responsibility in the family economy, which in turn accelerated their passage into adulthood. When compared with their peers from nondeprived families, adolescents from the more disadvantaged households were more autonomous and at an earlier age shifted their allegiance away from their parents (especially their fathers) to nonfamily members. Associated with their earlier separation from the family, the "deprived" youth experienced greater anxieties about social acceptance and were more sensitive to the opinions of their peers. But along with the psychological costs of economic dispossession, the adaptation to misfortune conferred positive benefits as well. Impoverishment, for example, hastened the formation of vocational plans, and, at least among the middle class, deprived youth were more likely to convert intellectual potential into actual educational achievement.

Many of the long-term consequences of the depression, discussed in the second half of the book, flowed from the adolescent experience of the Oakland youth. The males from deprived families showed few of the traces of economic disadvantage in their later career patterns. Elder argues that strong achievement motivation, early crystallization of career plans, and economic independence contributed to the mobility of the economically disadvantaged males during the postwar period of economic growth. By contrast, females from deprived families were distinctly more inclined to pursue domestic careers. The experience of filling in for their working mothers during the depression years cultivated strong homemaking interests which were sustained in adulthood. This finding leads Elder to speculate that the postwar commitment to domesticity among females may have had its origins in the childhood experience of the cohort of women who entered adulthood during the decade of the forties.

Despite the fact that Elder goes to some lengths to discover the intervening links between childhood economic conditions and adult experience, his efforts are not always satisfactory. The route from economic deprivation, patterns of family socialization, to adult behavior is a difficult one to chart. At a number of points, Elder's analysis resembles a road map designating construction in progress, and we are not certain which way to turn.

Take, for example, the evidence on personality development during adulthood. We learn that children from deprived middle-class backgrounds were psychologically healthier as Elder concludes: "It seems that a childhood which shelters the young from the hardships of life consequently fails to develop or test adaptive capacities which are called upon in life crisis" (pp. 249-50). Why, then, did deprivation not confer similar ad-

vantages on the children of working-class families who also experienced hard times during the thirties? We are told that their potential for adaptation was initially not as great. Though adaptive potential may, indeed, explain the difference, we are never shown that deprived youth of middle-class origins had greater adaptive potential as children or that those who did were better adjusted during adulthood.

If Elder reneges a bit on his promise to build a bridge from adolescent to adult experience, the fault is not entirely his. At many points the data simply do not provide sufficient building material, and he is forced to make do with whatever scraps of information are available. In some of the most rewarding sections of the book, Elder, equipped with limited data, takes us through the difficult process of testing an explanation. When forced to improvise, he is devilishly clever at coming up with a plausible interpretation. But at certain points he finds it difficult to resist the temptation of making much of trivial differences, and his explanations become contrived and unconvincing.

Elder's difficulties in establishing empirical linkages not only stem from gaps in his data, they result as well from his initial decision to organize the analysis around a comparison of deprived and nondeprived youth. I question whether it was necessary or desirable to employ a single global indicator, short-term economic decline in family earnings, to measure the impact of the depression. By reducing a complex historical event to a narrow operational definition, Elder forgoes the possibility of exploring a number of considerations, besides temporary economic loss, that could have shaped both adolescent and adult experience. At several points in the book, for example, we are told that the majority of families recovered their economic position by the end of the decade. Elder never explores how this process of recovery may have affected the later careers and lifestyles of participants in the study. Is it not possible that in conditioning the course of later life the timing and management of economic recovery was as important as was the rapidity of economic loss?

Elder's conception of the socialization process is solidly grounded in developmental theory, but his analysis departs from this framework. Largely ignoring the influence of formative life experiences before, and particularly after, adolescence, Elder comes dangerously close to endorsing an outmoded image of socialization. If we are to reject the notion, clung to by some orthodox Freudians, that all the "action" takes place in the first six years of life, why should we insist on drawing the line at age 18?

Many of the limitations in the analysis which I have mentioned are acknowledged by Elder himself. In the final chapter of the book he provides a trenchant critique of its shortcomings and maps out a program of future research. Having paid homage to the gods of science, Elder reserves the final pages to sound a note of moral concern about the situation of youth in contemporary society. While the depression teaches us that scarcity can have unanticipated benefits for family life and adolescent development, Elder contends that we are beginning to discover the converse as well—affluence may deprive youth in fundamental ways:

“. . . This society of abundance can and even must support ‘a large quota of nonproductive members,’ as it is presently organized, but should it tolerate the costs, especially among the young; the costs of not feeling needed, of being denied the challenge and rewards which come from meaningful contributions to a common endeavor?” (p. 292).

Even if Elder is inclined to romanticize the depression years, betraying a penchant for a period when self-sacrifice, frugality, and duty were still in fashion, his conclusions address the need for a radical alteration in contemporary American society. His final comments also remind us that, for all our sociological declarations about the intimate relationship between the economic system and family life, the link between the two in modern society is poorly understood.

Elder is now at work on a sequel to *Children of the Great Depression* which will carry on the analysis of life course into the postwar period with an expanded and more diversified sample than was available from the Oakland archives. His current project will inevitably extend and refine many of his specific findings, but even if it is superseded by further investigation, *Children of the Great Depression* will long be remembered as a significant departure in historical research on the family.

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