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More to Offer: Rachel Fuchs and *Poor and Pregnant in Paris*

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Rachel Fuchs published *Poor and Pregnant in Paris: Strategies for Survival in the Nineteenth Century* twenty-five years ago, during a period of intellectual excitement for social historians. Augmenting the *American Historical Review* and *The Journal of Modern History*, postwar journals such as *French Historical Studies* (founded in 1958) and *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (1959) had been supplemented by such publications as the *Journal of Social History* (1967), *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (1969), *SIGNS: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* (1975), and the *Journal of Family History* (1975). We were eagerly submitting our work all around while preparing our new books as social history was in full flower, not yet ready to cede to what would be called the linguistic turn. This was a period in which historians began to turn with confidence toward the family and to women and gender as subjects of analysis; 1986 had seen the publication of Joan Scott's signal article on gender in the *American Historical Review*.¹ When Rachel published *Poor and Pregnant in Paris* in 1992, she was already far beyond the focus on the so-called "women worthies" who had been studied by early historians of women – by expanding on the initial work on poor mothers that she had presented eight years earlier in her first book, *Abandoned Children: Foundlings and Child Welfare in Nineteenth-Century France*, she was taking on the study of the most marginalized women of all.

Poor and Pregnant in Paris was not only a sign of the times but also a bellwether of what was to come. By its focus, content, methodology, and themes this book offers a map of Rachel's career and perspective on the historian's craft. As I reread it after twenty-five years, I felt as if I held the key to Rachel's entire oeuvre and was able to discern four primary threads of her work.

Most fundamentally, *Poor and Pregnant in Paris* demonstrates how Rachel strained to hear the voices of poor women—so muffled in the administrative and court documents available to us. Rachel's eagerness to discern the concerns of her subjects brings to mind Chandler Davis's "Envoi," the poem that opens Natalie Davis's *Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays*, published in 1975: "The songs you think are vanished once they're sung,/ The pleas you think are wasted if turned down,/ Jokes you dismiss if no one laughs or winces,/ She listens for. You speak sometimes too soft."² As Rachel was researching and conceptualizing her book in the 1980s, she and I were in conversation about ways to express the missing testimonies we sought

¹ Joan Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91:5 (1986): 1053-1075.

² Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), xiii.

and came up with the powerful metaphor of the stage appearance that appears throughout *Poor and Pregnant in Paris*:

Much of the central drama of the poor and pregnant is played on a stage in which the women confront legislative and administrative rulings, public welfare, charitable institutions, public hospitals, and the criminal courts. The women are illuminated only when on stage with people who ran these institutions and kept the records.... Once they step off that stage the poor women exit through the side door, down the narrow streets and back alleys on which they live, and on which little historical light shines. The men, however, exit the theater through the front door, into the glare of the spotlights; they grant the interviews, meet the press, write the reviews, and shill their production.³

The introduction of this metaphor reveals Rachel's quest to hear the women's voices, but it also reveals her understanding that the male legislators and administrators of France's 19th century were a key part of this scenario not to be ignored, because policy set the parameters of relief for the poor. Nonetheless, hearing the poor was the challenge to the end. Indeed, Rachel counseled a young scholar later that "you'll find their voices" when this researcher was discouraged.

It was this proximity to the poor that attached Rachel to court records: a source that she relied upon for *Poor and Pregnant in Paris* as well as *Contested Paternity* and her subsequent work on abortion.⁴ Although the ears and pens of male magistrates mediated court records, they nonetheless revealed the web of personal connections among the poor, their daily lives, and in some cases their network of gossip. Concierges were rich sources of information; laundresses held on to crucial secrets – or not. Rachel had a deep desire to eavesdrop, and came as close to doing so as she could.

Nonetheless, Rachel's interest went beyond the women to the policy-makers and the state, and as a consequence, *Poor and Pregnant in Paris* offers a complete history of schools of thought about the poor in France and their impact on charity and welfare policies. This interest in the wellsprings of state policy—and the men who created it—is a second thread of her work. Rachel carefully delineates the turn from a focus on the poor as immoral to the poor as producers of babies who are likely to die, and who would thus diminish the imperiled population of the nation, in contrast to the robust population of Germany. The reader sees the history of a nation whose bourgeoisie came to care for the survival and health of its poor infants (something we may not take for granted) and the creation of welfare policies to ensure their survival, if primarily for cannon fodder. This

³ Rachel G. Fuchs, *Poor and Pregnant in Paris: Strategies for Survival in the Nineteenth Century* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 5.

⁴ Rachel G. Fuchs, *Contested Paternity: Constructing Families in Modern France* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); *idem*. "Angel Makers (Faiseuses d'Ange) of the Quartier Notre Dame des Champs: Community and Personal Networks in 1870s Paris" *Genre et Histoire* 17 (Printemps); this last article was to form one aspect of her forthcoming book, "The Angel Makers of Mission Street: Abortion and Community in Late-Nineteenth-Century Paris."

interest in policy went on to inform the masterful concluding chapter of international comparisons in *Gender and the Politics of Social Reform* three years later, then *Contested Paternity* in 2008.⁵

As *Poor and Pregnant in Paris* was underway, Rachel regularly gave presentations about this work (many of which opened with her standing joke that the book was not autobiographical) and published six articles and essays using material that would appear in the book. The creation of this work, that is to say, was intensely social—articulated primarily at meetings of the Society for French Historical Studies. It was in such gatherings that the authors of *Gender and the Politics of Social Reform* (Elinor Accampo, Linda Clark, Theresa McBride, Mary Lynn Stewart, and Judith Stone) discovered that they had in common a group of like-minded French policy makers about whom they would write in this volume. Indeed, the intensely social aspect of Rachel's work was a strength and a source of our widespread love for her. This was a two-way street, for as she said in her presidential remarks at the 2000 meeting of the SFHS, the organization's membership was a source of friendship that meant everything to her.

If social in production, *Poor and Pregnant in Paris* is intensely informative in content, like Rachel's other works. New information spills from every chapter in the form of data, explanations of ideologies, and step-by-step tracking of choices for the poor. Each is studded with life histories of poor women, laboriously reconstructed from archival records or drawn from fiction of the time—Fantine of Hugo's *Les Misérables* and the beleaguered heroine of the Goncourts' *Germinie Lacerteux*. The first chapter highlights a socioeconomic and demographic portrait of the poor mothers, drawn from systematic samples of the records of two public hospitals (La Maternité and l'Hôtel-Dieu) and the list of mothers aided by a Public Assistance midwife; from these Rachel draws a portrait of the age, occupation, and geographic origin of the poor and pregnant. This chapter—and its endnotes—are chockablock with data of all kinds.

The subsequent chapters dissect the relationships among state power, class, and gender relations as they affected charity and welfare. Rachel begins with an explanation of Social Catholic and socialist views of “fallen women” using 1848 as a watershed year. She then tracks the shift to a concern with depopulation that reverberated in attitudes toward the poor and pregnant after 1870, focusing first on politics, then on Protestants and Social Catholics. The following chapter on women who voiced their concern with the poor and pregnant attends to writings about materialism and charity to 1870, then to feminism and the poor to 1870, then the shift to maternalism after 1870 and finally to feminism and motherhood after 1870. On reading the endnotes, the reader is struck by the range of more and less obscure publications Rachel scoured to resuscitate and render legible this world of judgment and concern.

Chapters five through seven lead the reader through the relationship between the pregnant poor woman and the merging institutions of charity and public welfare. The first focuses on the pregnant. It includes, for example, such details as the list of documents required to marry and the exact cost of procuring them, in the context of working women's wages; this chapter also delineates the development of shelters for pregnant women across the city. The second focuses on charity and welfare for new mothers and their infants: here we learn of the institutions for new mothers that developed after 1870 and the home visits, day care, and well-baby clinics. We learn

⁵ Elinor Accampo, et. al., eds., *Gender and the Politics of Social Reform in France, 1870-1919* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

that some visitors brought “used clothes for the family, food, a layette, and a crib (including mattress and sheets);” we are told the number of day-care centers in the city; and we are informed of the marital status as well as mother’s and father’s occupations in the case of those who gave their infants to the care of the Crèche Saint-Ambroise in Popincourt.⁶ In the seventh chapter, we meet the systems of welfare for the poor mother—the process of application, aid for wet-nursing and housing, and the ideals by which mothers were evaluated; this concludes with observations underwriting the theme of the study: that poor women were less judged by their marital status than by their care of their infants as the nineteenth century drew to a close.

The tone shifts in chapter eight with the topics of birth control and abortion – subjects that Rachel would continue to develop in the twenty-five subsequent years. After dispensing with meager sources of birth control, Rachel introduces abortion—therapeutic and spontaneous abortions, abortion as a crime, methods of abortion, criminal prosecution of abortionists, and attempts at abortion reform. This includes grisly information. Chapter nine takes on infanticide and child abandonment—and the law, once again: infanticide and the law, witnesses for the prosecution, reasons for acquittal. With these two final chapters, and with the lively detail of court records, the reader sees Rachel’s trajectory move forward into work on paternity suits and abortion.

Reviews came quickly, with the prestigious *Annales: E.S.C.* first out of the gate. Cécile Dauphin was quick to identify the “double mérite” of *Poor and Pregnant in Paris* as reading facts and reading discourse: of making a profound investigation into the impact of the economic change on women via archives such as those of public assistance, on the one hand, and of shedding light on the evolution of the conception of social assistance by jurists, philanthropists, doctors, and politicians, on the other.⁷ Most reviewers commented on Rachel’s sympathy for her subjects and her frustration at not being able to hear directly from them, and all commented on her heroic mining of sources to investigate a group marginalized by poverty and uprooting that rarely has had sustained historical analysis. A few found the book hard to read: “This is not a book for the squeamish,” opined one male reviewer; a sociologist commented “this is not April in Paris.”⁸ The most insightful recognized the implications of *Poor and Pregnant in Paris* for its policy and use in international comparisons, suggested by Rachel’s comments about the twentieth-century U.S. in the introduction. The most careful readers appreciated the importance of Rachel’s focus on the politics of welfare policy formation—a French reviewer praised the book as “un grand livre d’histoire politique”—while the least careful read the book simply as a gut reaction to social injustice.⁹ There would be no such careless comments today.

⁶ Fuchs, *Poor and Pregnant*, 134, 142-144.

⁷ Cécile Dauphin, “Poor and Pregnant in Paris,” *Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 48:1 (Jan-Feb 1993): 55-57.

⁸ Anthony Copley, “Poor and Pregnant in Paris,” *History* 79:257 (1994): 522-523; Lisa Brush, “Poor and Pregnant in Paris,” *Contemporary Sociology* 23:1 (1994): 56-57.

⁹ See the above reviews as well as Ralph Gibson in the *European History Quarterly* 23:4 (1993): 607-609; Katherine Lynch, *American Historical Review* 98:4 (1993): 1266; Donald Reid, *Journal of Social History* 27:3 (1994): 621-622; Tessie Liu, *Journal of Economic History* 54:1 (1994): 205-206; and Francis Ronsin, *Mouvement Social* 171 (1995): 98-100.

Poor and Pregnant in Paris has had a long life in scholarship, having established its subjects with thorough and profound study. Most immediately upon its completion, Rachel edited a special issue of *French Historical Studies*, “Population and the State in the Third Republic,” which appeared in 1996 with offerings from four historians of the period.¹⁰ Because Rachel offered an analysis of women’s poverty as well as of political discourse and the resultant state policies, her study has lived well beyond the days of social history and the borders of French studies. Subsequent investigations of the poor, welfare, the family, and childhood in France have drawn on the analyses and insights of this foundational book—in this century most recently, for example, from Guy Brunet and Jean-Luc Pinol’s study of unwed mothers in Lyon to the new studies of French immigration and welfare policies toward immigrant mothers.¹¹ From the first months after publication, researchers abroad have drawn on *Poor and Pregnant in Paris* because it, like Rachel’s subsequent work, offers material for international comparisons that has been utilized especially by American scholars of policy and law.¹² Reading the study now serves as a lesson, and a vivid reminder, of the close ties between economic distress on the one hand, and links between ideologies about the poor and public policy on the other. It continues to make the case for spending prolonged periods in the archives, for knowing the staff, and for using one’s historical imagination.

Rachel’s trajectory would ultimately lead her away from strict adherence to the archival documents. She often spoke of how she planned to write her next book, which she was going to focus on the study of nineteenth-century abortionists and their customers, by using her historical imagination more freely than in writing standard history. Such work can be well done – but nobody could have done such work better than she, precisely because Rachel had so thoroughly become acquainted with every sort of documentation of poor women’s lives and the world in which they lived. Indeed, it is the years of attentive research that make such work possible.

The traits of *Poor and Pregnant in Paris*—its concern with poor women, on the one hand, and policy, on the other; the social nature of its production and its wealth of information—were all evident in the work that Rachel and I did together in preparation for an article when she was on leave in West Lafayette, Indiana, and I lived in East Lansing, Michigan.¹³ We would rendezvous in Fort Wayne—a midpoint—to discuss our creation. Our first concern was finding a French

¹⁰ *French Historical Studies* 19:3 (1996) includes articles by Joshua Cole, Cheryl Koos, Jean Pedersen, and Andrés Reggiani; Rachel wrote the introduction.

¹¹ Guy Brunet and Jean-Luc Pinol, “Vulnerable and Unsteady: Life Histories and Changes of Residence of Unwed Mothers in Lyon at the End of the Nineteenth Century,” *Continuity and Change* 25 (2010): 263-284; Linda Guerry, *Le genre de l’immigration et de la naturalisation: L’exemple de Marseille (1918-1940)* (Lyon: ENS Editions, 2013); Nimisha Barton, “‘French or Foreign, so long as they be mothers’: Immigrant Women, Welfare, and the Politics of Pronatalism in Interwar Paris,” *Journal of Women’s History* 28:4 (2016): 65-88.

¹² To offer but one early and one late example: Jane E. Larson, “‘Women Understand So Little. They Call My Good Nature Deceit’”: A Feminist Rethinking of Seduction,” *Columbia Law Review* 93:2 (1993): 374-472; and Kathleen Frydl, “The Criminalization of Distress: The Government’s Response to Foundlings in the Postwar United States,” *Journal of Policy History* 26:2 (2014): 188-218.

¹³ Rachel G. Fuchs and Leslie Page Moch, “Single, Pregnant and Far from Home: Migrant Women in Nineteenth-Century Paris,” *American Historical Review* 95 (1990): 1007-1031.

restaurant in which to dine and talk, and this was a bust; the one place that made itself out to be French was overwhelmed by its red-flocked wallpaper and mediocre food. We took to meeting at the art museum or the zoo, and eating in a nearby Chinese restaurant. We spoke for hours about our work, but also about our marriages, our children, and our collegial dilemmas. Our primary focus rested on the poor women of our piece, but also about the welfare held out to them – and time and time again we came back to the question of how much information we should include in order to support our argument. Rachel always had more to offer.

And perhaps this is one of the most acute ways to remember Rachel Ginnis Fuchs and her work: she always had more to offer.

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