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Kristen Stromberg Childers, *Fathers, Families, and the State in France, 1914-1945*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003. xii + 261 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography and index. \$41.50 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8014-4122-6.

Review by Laura Lee Downs, Centre de Recherches Scientifiques, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales.

In 1938, Jacques Lacan took the heavy responsibility for child neurosis, so often blamed on deficient mothering in Anglo-American contexts, and laid it squarely at the feet of France's many fathers. "Our experience leads us to locate the principal source [of neuroses] in the personality of the father, always deficient in one manner or another," asserted the young psychoanalyst.[1] Lacan's observation points to a fascinating particularity of early-twentieth century French culture, namely the prolonged and explicit concern over the social and political functions of fatherhood. The anxious and lengthy debate was first joined in the late nineteenth century and continued across the life of the Third Republic and beyond, reaching a crescendo but also a "breaking point" during the final years of the Vichy régime (p. 191). Decades before "Iron John" ever thought to lead his motley male troupes into the North American woods in hopes of recovering their lost masculinity, family activists and policy-makers across France were already puzzling over the question of fatherhood and its relationship to masculinity. What did it mean to become a father? What kinds of relationships were fathers to establish with their children? And, in a context of rapid demographic decline, what kinds of rewards should the State hold out to those men who selflessly shouldered the burdens of paternity, turning their backs on the egotistical pleasures of bachelorhood in the interest of renewing France's dwindling population?

Kristin Stromberg Childers has written a thoughtful and original study that explores these questions as they were debated by social policy-makers and pro-natalist and pro-family activists in Third Republic and Vichy France. One of the great virtues of her study lies in her refusal to separate Vichy from the Republic that preceded it, for in this arena, as in many others touching on family and youth policy, the continuities across June 1940 are striking. Hence, "the Vichy régime marked the apotheosis of reactionary measures to reinstate fatherhood as the litmus test of good citizenship," writes Childers (p. 3). For, ever since the Civil Code of 1804 established the male head of the household as the principal intermediary between family and state, the role of the father has been politicised in a very particular way in France. Arching above the more vaguely-defined social, biological and moral/psychological aspects of fatherhood, then, we find a more precise definition of fatherhood as a political function: "the civil magistrates and cornerstones of society, law, and morality...the first essential link in the long chain that constrained the individual in the name of liberty" (p. 15). Attached to the function of "domestic magistrate" were a series of rights and duties that fathers exercised over dependent family members, their children in particular, a *puissance paternelle* that was delegated directly from the State to individual fathers in the name of upholding social order while guaranteeing the safety, well-being and interests of individual family members. Among these rights was that of *correction paternelle*, which permitted fathers to demand the incarceration of children they deemed wayward and undisciplined, a right that some 1,000 fathers exercised each year between 1851 and 1896. (This particular right would finally be expunged from the law books in 1935).

As Childers points out, the coherent structures laid down by the Civil Code were sorely tested in the early years of the Third Republic, when demographic anxieties, stirred by the defeat in 1870 at the hands of a more prolific Germany, inspired a host of new laws intended to protect the nation's most

precious resource, its children. While certain of these laws, notably the *loi Roussel* of 1874 regulating the wet-nursing trade, did not interfere directly with paternal power, the law of 1889 on *déchéance de la puissance paternelle* brought an abrupt end to the unbroken authority of fathers established by the Civil Code eighty-five years earlier. The consequences of this first breach were dramatic, for in the end, concludes Childers, the law of 1889 marked “a decisive change in the boundaries between public and private life established by Napoleonic law and signalled a new progression in the fortunes of paternity in France” (p. 19). As the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth, the ever-more-numerous advocates of increased social protection for children were haunted by the fear that “all-powerful and corrupt fathers” were too easily led to abuse their own children. Caught between the hope that fathers would perform their duties humanely and the fear that they would simply abuse their power, pro-natalist activists and social reformers alike pressed for increased checks on the right and capacity of individual fathers to rule their domestic spheres as they saw fit.

Fathers were thus coming to represent a “competing authority for state power and a rival of women for public resources, even as they were seen as essential to the project of reforming French families” (p. 7). And this was true across the political spectrum, as social Catholics and Republicans, though divided on most points, agreed that the future of the French family rested on the quality of individual fathers. All private and state efforts to assist women and children would have to take into account this incontrovertible fact. Yet despite the limits that were gradually placed on fathers’ previously absolute domestic authority, the status of fathers as the political representatives of their families remained a live issue throughout this period, Childers tells us. Much of the pro-family movement’s efforts to re-anchor French society in the family would turn on this fact; witness the multiple proposals for family-based suffrage reform that flourished in the aftermath of WWI. At the core of such proposals lay a powerful sense that the current régime of political equality that reigned between bachelors and *pères de famille* (each man having but one vote) was fundamentally unjust, granting undue favour to the selfish bachelor while failing to reward the patriotic sacrifices of the noble family man with a justly-deserved increase in political clout. Long after the law of 1889 began to chip away at the edifice of absolute paternal power, then, a man’s paternity continued to shape his relationship to the political world even as it defined the nature of his private virtue. Indeed, notes Childers, “it was in his role as representative of the family that a father negotiated the interchange between public and private worlds and that his masculinity intersected with the interests of the state” (p. 6).

Childers thus takes as her point of departure an important insight that has often been overlooked in the literature on gender, and that is that women were not the only gendered beings in the eyes of the French state. They were not “*the sex*” in Third Republic and Vichy France (although they may have been “of the *wrong sex*,” speculates the author), and Childers devotes the bulk of her study to demonstrating in detail how policy makers and family activists of all stripes strove to cast men in certain gender-specific moulds that would, hopefully, enhance the protection of the family while strengthening the French nation. Ideals of fatherhood, and the understandings of masculinity that underpinned those ideals were thus subject to constant revision in early twentieth century France. As a consequence, masculine identities were no more secure, and indeed, suggests Childers, may have been less firmly rooted than feminine ones across this particular period.

Fathers, Families, and the State in France defines its object with subtlety and intelligence, drawing upon a broad array of sources from the worlds of literature, the law and pro-family activism in order to unpack competing notions of fatherhood in early-twentieth-century France, and the changing understandings of masculinity that underwrote such fatherhood. Childers does a good job juxtaposing the precise notions of fatherhood enshrined in the Civil Code and the studiously vague prescriptions offered by pro-family activists such as that of Maurice Carité, who wrote, “The presence that a father owes his children is not measured by the number of hours he spends in their midst, and is not even necessarily linked to his physical presence. It is a disposition of the will, an openness of the soul” (p. 58). She also provides a

welcome alternative to Jacques Donzelot's crude and unhelpful analysis of social work as an attack on the masculinity and independence of working-class fathers mounted by interventionist state officials and their craven allies from within, working-class wives. Childers thus reveals to us a world in which fathers themselves openly crusaded for increased social assistance, thus encouraging state intervention into family life. In so doing, she moves beyond Donzelot's simplistic portrait to explore the complicated power struggles that arose around the family, as fathers and state officials perpetually re-negotiated the relationship between the uncertain authority of the nascent welfare state and that of a legally enshrined, if newly weakened paternal authority.

In the end, Childers tells us, policymakers and pro-family activists alike found it impossible to square the circle. The strong fathers so lauded in Vichy propaganda were, in fact, "inconvenient, even threatening to a state that wished to promote the interests of families, especially those of children." Paradoxically, or perhaps significantly, this discovery was made at the very apogee of Vichy's glorification of patriarchal authority, as officials found that powerful fathers, though "appropriate emblems" of Vichy's traditionalist and hierarchical social vision, were less "fitting accomplices" in the process of state intervention into family life than were mothers for the very simple reason that, unlike fatherhood, motherhood was presumed to carry with it no temptation to dominate and abuse children (p. 157).

The broader outlines of Childers' argument are thus both clear and convincing. As the movement to protect children progressively dismantled the politically-sanctioned prerogatives of fathers, the social aspects of parenting were severed from their political aspects in twentieth-century France. It is, however, in the demonstration of this important point that the reader is left wishing to learn more. Because, for all the interest of her argument, Childers rarely leaves the realm of textual and discursive analysis in order to demonstrate how this all might have worked out on the ground. For instance, Childers notes in passing that on 14 September 1941, Vichy passed a law requiring employers to favour fathers of large families in hiring decisions (p. 172). How was this law actually greeted by employers? One can only imagine their reaction was less than enthusiastic, given the potential for such a law to undermine their authority in matters of hiring and deployment, but we never learn anything more about the debate, if any, that surrounded the law's passage nor of the level of employer collaboration—or refusal—in its implementation. The law of 14 September 1941 is, rather, offered up as part of a longer list of laws intended to demonstrate the aggressively pro-*père-de famille* stance adopted by the Vichy régime. Whether and to what extent that stance may have taken on a meaningful life in the three-dimensional world outside the printed page is a question that remains unaddressed in Childers' book. Alas, this one specific example is typical of the author's approach, in which numerous texts are scoured for evidence regarding family policy, fatherhood and visions of masculinity on the part of policymakers and pro-family activists. Only rarely does the reader get a quick glimpse, here and there, of how these intentions may have translated into the field of everyday family life.

While it may seem churlish to ask that a historian do both the subtle analytic work that Childers has done at the discursive level plus some investigation of the actual social impact of these discourses, I think it is absolutely crucial to work on both levels if we are to understand what relationship the various and shifting images of fathers on paper bore to the everyday interactions of fathers and children, fathers and state officials, fathers and mothers across the period of the Third Republic and Vichy. For instance, about half-way through *Fathers, Families, and the State in France* one intriguing possibility suddenly occurred to me: were the shifting notions of ideal fatherhood a product of changing ideas about child development and the needs of children? The second half of the nineteenth century saw a veritable revolution in collective understandings of child development all across Europe, a revolution that prompted deep changes in the way children were treated in both family and society—the abolition of child labour in workshops and factories (though not in agricultural settings); the establishment of a network of primary schools that were both compulsory and free (or very nearly so, in the case of

England); the rise of institutions devoted to structuring children's leisure time (after-school clubs, summer camps, youth movements). Was it only when children's well-being began to be understood in developmental and psychological terms, as well as in moral and material ones, that absolute paternal authority came to seem incompatible with the welfare and best interests of children? So long as the analysis, however rich, remains at the level of discourse, we cannot hope to answer such a question. It is only in the movement back and forth between discursive and social historical analysis that scholars can hope to disentangle the different levels of causality behind the veritable sea-change in family politics that has marked so decisively the landscape of twentieth-century France, producing new notions of masculinity and femininity, while shifting the frontiers of interaction among fathers, mothers, children and the State.

NOTES

[1] Jacques Lacan, originally cited in "L'Affaiblissement de l'autorité paternelle: La notion de Ocarence, des pères au 20e siècle," *La Pensée* 261(1988): 40, cited by Childers, p.41.

[2] Maurice Carité, *Le Père de famille et le foyer* (Paris: Editions du temps présent, no date), p. 22, cited by Childers, p. 58.

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