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**On Rereading *Abandoned Children: Foundlings and
Child Welfare in Nineteenth-Century France***

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I am very grateful to the organizers of this salon for asking me to write about Rachel G. Fuchs's *Abandoned Children: Foundlings and Child Welfare in Nineteenth-Century France* (SUNY Press, 1984). It is rare to find the space in the world of historical scholarship to reflect on an older monograph, never mind one published more than thirty years ago. The discipline's appetite for new scholarship—and now, in the digital age, its celebration of “cutting-edge” modes of representing and diffusing knowledge about the past—renders the life of the traditional monograph ever more ephemeral. This is often, although not always, especially true of the “first book,” whose origins as a dissertation may sometimes render it suspect as a work of lasting significance. But why should this be so? Some older monographs, and even some first books, have lasting virtues and can exercise salutary influence on those who read it long after the last review is published. I like to think that this is especially true for readers trained in a discipline that claims a special relationship with the past.

To be sure, not every monograph, nor every first book, merits such attention. But my rereading of *Abandoned Children* was a wonderful reminder that some really do. In this first work, Fuchs aimed to explore “how families and societies care for their young” through a careful examination of the women who abandoned children, the legal and institutional framework for the reception and care of the abandoned from infancy through childhood, and cultural conceptions of children and the abandoned (xii). Most central to Fuchs's story is the transformation of the French state over the course of the century: the expansion of its provisions; the regularization of its policies and practices; and especially its philosophical reorientation from minimizing the burden foundlings placed on public resources to ensuring their survival and well-being. The book focuses on child abandonment in Paris, the conditions shaping the choices of poor mothers living on the edge of subsistence in the city, the Paris foundling hospital, and the Paris-based administrative body, l'Administration de l'Assistance publique, which oversaw both urban public institutions and the rural foster placement of those children who survived their first perilous days. Because of the many official reports on those foster placements, and because so many wet-nurses for the hospital were recruited from the countryside, *Abandoned Children* takes its reader beyond the boundaries of the capital to develop a picture of family life and values in those areas of rural France that were integrated into the Paris-based regime of care and surveillance.

A profoundly feminist study of both the state and those women and children whose lives were so powerfully affected by legal, administrative, and political change, *Abandoned Children* employs as its primary archive the documents generated by government institutions. Records from the maternity hospital, admissions registers from the foundling hospice, annual reports from l'Assistance publique that included statistical data on abandonment and mortality, memoranda, and official correspondence all provide Fuchs with empirical evidence for the significant patterns of change that the monograph identifies and explains (xv). *Abandoned Children* also aspires to show culture at work in the story of the abandoned. Works by Victor Hugo and Eugène Sue, and other non-official texts and images, Fuchs claimed, revealed widely shared perceptions of children, parents, and the state's stake in family life.

On this archival foundation, and using both quantitative and qualitative methods, Fuchs sought not only to tell a story of the transformation of the French state, but also to challenge certain theoretical and historiographical positions about women, their children, and the state that had found strong purchase in the scholarship of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Where Edward Shorter, echoing many nineteenth-century moralists, saw the high numbers of abandoned infants as evidence of deficient maternal feeling or the excesses of youthful sexual freedom, for example, Fuchs studied the patterns of admissions to the hospice and the data on abandoned infants' mothers.¹ She also read the record of the notes mothers left with their babies that not only provided names but also expressed their hopes of one day reuniting with their children. There was no "evidence for lack of maternal love," she concluded, but rather a century-long burden of extreme poverty that made abandonment a "realistic option." The pattern of rise and fall in abandonment rates correlated less with a rise in "modern feelings of maternal love," and more with transformations in state policy and the availability of aid (115). In this refutation of Shorter's argument about poor, young, unmarried women's failures of character, we can see the ways that *Abandoned Children* combined the weight of Fuchs's deep work in the archives with the strength of her feminist concern to document as fully as possible the lives of the working mothers whom she saw as human beings struggling under the heavy burdens of indigence and moral censure.

Similarly, *Abandoned Children* marshals the evidence on the decline of infant mortality and the improved life prospects for those abandoned children who survived and were integrated into rural community life to question some of Jacques Donzelot's most sweeping declarations about social control in *The Policing of Families*.² "Government intervention in decision-making about family matters may be viewed as a deprivation of personal freedom and individual liberty," she wrote. "In the case of the abandoned children, however, it was not detrimental to them" (279). By the end of the nineteenth-century, Fuchs insisted, the French state came to embrace an ethical responsibility to protect the weak and vulnerable. This was not a simply a disguise for the operation of an endless project of social pacification, she notes, but was instead the long-deferred realization of earlier Revolutionary-era promises to sustain citizens in need (281).

¹ Edward Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

² Jacques Donzelot, *The Policing of Families*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1979), originally published in France as *La Police des familles* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1977).

At the time of its publication in the SUNY Series in Modern European Social History in 1984, *Abandoned Children* impressed historians of France and the family in a number of ways.³ Widely reviewed in periodicals including *The Journal of Modern History*, *The Journal of Social History*, and *The American Historical Review*, the monograph received praise for the depth and breadth of the research underpinning its story, not surprising to those of us who ever had the privilege of sitting across from its author in the archives as she hummed away with her registers and tables. For Mary Lynn Stewart-McDougall, as for Katherine Lynch, *Abandoned Children* was to be celebrated both as a “pioneering study” and as a fresh look at a subject last investigated in depth in the late nineteenth century.⁴ John Sommerville and Stewart-McDougall lauded Fuchs’s robust quantitative work; the book’s “sophisticated statistical analysis,” Stewart-McDougall wrote, takes the story of state provision beyond the narrative of legal change to the effects of law and policy on mothers, foster parents, and children.⁵ In the aggregation and discussion of quantitative data on single mothers and their babies reviewers also found compelling evidence to support Fuchs’s adamant refutation of Shorter’s vision of unfettered female sexual freedom and her reworking of Donzelot’s claims about social pacification.

The reviews are particularly interesting for the two points of discussion that clearly mark the place of *Abandoned Children* in the history of European social historical writing in the United States. The first is the concern about how to write about culture and its relationship not only to social policy but also to the functioning of public institutions of care. Stewart-McDougall noted that, despite Fuchs’s frequent reference to common nineteenth-century attitudes, the “ideals of family life seem indistinct, even contradictory” and warranted “more attention.”⁶ Lynch likewise suggested that where culture was concerned Fuchs’s story was “too general in the depiction of attitudes towards these children.”⁷ Another reviewer, Paul Spagnoli, regretted that Fuchs’s emphasis on revolutionary ideals obscured the “original impetus” for the care of foundlings that was not political but religious.⁸

³ Other titles of the same vintage in this important series were, like *Abandoned Children*, required reading for many of us in the 1980s include Barnett Singer, *Village Notables in Nineteenth-Century France: Priests, Mayors, Schoolmasters* (1983), Laura S. Struminger, *What Were Little Girls and Boys Made of? Primary Education in Rural France, 1830-1880* (1983), Claire Goldberg Moses, *French Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (1984), and Linda Clark, *Schooling the Daughters of Marianne* (1984).

⁴ Mary Lynn Stewart-McDougall, review of *Abandoned Children: Foundlings and Child Welfare in Nineteenth-Century France*, by Rachel Ginnis Fuchs. *The American Historical Review* 89:5 (December 1984), 1337; and Katherine A. Lynch, review of *Abandoned Children: Foundlings and Child Welfare in Nineteenth-Century France*, by Rachel Ginnis Fuchs. *Journal of Social History* 19:2 (Winter 1985), 386.

⁵ Stewart-McDougall, review of *Abandoned Children*, 1336. See also John Sommerville, review of *Abandoned Children: Foundlings and Child Welfare in Nineteenth-Century France*, by Rachel Ginnis Fuchs. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 476 (November 1984), 181.

⁶ Stewart-McDougall, review of *Abandoned Children*, 1337.

⁷ Lynch, review of *Abandoned Children*, 387.

⁸ Paul Spagnoli, review of *Abandoned Children: Foundlings and Child Welfare in Nineteenth-Century France*, by Rachel Ginnis Fuchs. *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 15:3 (Winter 1985), 528.

Abandoned Children's treatment of cultural evidence and the questions regarding how to write about "ideals," "attitudes," and doctrine thus illuminate an important conjunction, not only in the history of the family, but more broadly in the history of historical writing. Were American feminist social historians going to take the cultural turn that was gaining so much momentum in the 1980s, reading word and image as constitutive rather than reflective or epiphenomenal? What was the best way to read "indistinct" representation or to parse contradiction? Readers of Fuchs's later works know well how much more elegant her treatment of text became, particularly in *Contested Paternity*. But *Abandoned Children* took important first steps in this direction; it still offers a great deal of food for thought on how to read many types of text together, not least in its ambitious efforts to bring the imaginative worlds of novels, moral treatises, and popular wisdom to bear on state policy and administration.

The second significant historiographical issue that *Abandoned Children* and its contemporary reviews can bring back into view is the disagreement of the 1970s and 80s about how best to bring the state into the frame of social historical analysis and, more specifically, how to write about the place of the individual legislator or bureaucrat in the story of the state. In one view, Fuchs's work in state records revealed how rich they could be for documenting material and social conditions in the provinces as well as in Paris.⁹ For Lynch, *Abandoned Children* demonstrated how investigating state policy could shed light on "broader social attitudes."¹⁰ Other reviewers, however, despite their extremely warm praise of the study overall, worried that Fuchs's relatively abstract story of the evolution of law, policy, and state bureaucracy left lawmakers and functionaries "largely faceless," or "overemphasized the degree of consensus among policy-makers and administrators."¹¹ Not all shared this position. A later review described Fuchs's less biographical approach as the far better model for bringing the state into social history of mothers and children, praising her for refusing to yield analytical space to the "prating and preening of politicians."¹²

Abandoned Children, in other words, confronted prominent social historians, and especially feminist social historians, not only with the question of the state but also with the problem of power, gender, and individual agency at a time in the history of American social historical writing when the authority of Marxian structural explanations was clearly fading. If the book granted women more rational behavior as historical subjects with agency—albeit an agency always located within the extreme constraints of poverty and social marginalization—should it not also present the authority of the state as a matter of the individual voices and decision-makers that comprised it? Was the story of the state that mattered for feminist social history primarily one of policy and institution, or one of

⁹ Sommerville, review of *Abandoned Children*, 181.

¹⁰ Lynch, review of *Abandoned Children*, 386.

¹¹ Stewart-McDougall, review of *Abandoned Children*, 133; and Lynch, review of *Abandoned Children*, 387.

¹² Bonnie G. Smith, review of *Abandoned Children: Foundlings and Child Welfare in Nineteenth-Century France*, by Rachel Ginnis Fuchs, *The Journal of Modern History* 58:1 (March 1986), 325.

individuated male figures, influenced by their backgrounds and political commitments, and personally empowered both to create the apparatus of government and to shape female lives?

The larger questions about how to write the state into social history of maternity that *Abandoned Children* raised among its readers may also be taken as evidence of the methodological and theoretical impasses that became visible in the 1980s with the widening circulation of the work of Michel Foucault. Although none of the reviews mentioned Foucault directly, and his work gets only two single-page references in the index and one footnote in *Abandoned Children*, four of his major works are in its bibliography. This, I think, explains why Fuchs's account of the state took the form it did, even as she drew on quite different methodological and theoretical approaches to read archival material through the lens of "experience" where it came to the lives of women and the children they abandoned. *Abandoned Children* thus quietly placed its stake in a more Foucauldian approach to the government of the family than readers gratified by the way her defense of poor women's painful choices or her revelation of the "concrete experience of child abandonment" may have expected.¹³

The methodological and conceptual seam between Fuchs's human tale of the mothers and the children they abandoned to state care, on the one hand, and her largely "faceless" account of French government, on the other, in short, makes visible a deeper fault line in the conversation about framing gender, agency, and authority that was emerging in feminist social history at the time of the book's publication. And although it is no longer such a fashionable subject of debate, neither is it an issue that has been resolved and left in the past. Here, then, we can see one of the most important benefits of reading or rereading *Abandoned Children* today. The monograph sensitizes scholars to the continuing challenge of bringing the history of individual agency and the story of governance together in one frame, even as the more focused theoretical conversation about the individual and the mechanisms of power has grown quiet—or been subsumed without being settled—in more recent historical writing on identity, culture, and politics.

I would like to offer a couple of final, more summative thoughts on what we might gain from reading *Abandoned Children* now. First, from my perspective as a teacher of doctoral students, this book, despite its engagement in debates that might seem dated to some, remains in many respects a model monograph. Beautifully organized, impeccably researched, and completely open in its assessment of the relative strength of its methods, analysis, and conclusions, *Abandoned Children* impresses me once again as a work of enormous scholarly integrity. I imagine no one who knew Fuchs would be surprised by my emphasis on her lack of pretension and her intellectual honesty, but for new historians who won't have the chance to talk with her over coffee in Paris—as I was so fortunate to do so many times at a café near the old Archives de l'Assistance publique—or hear her

¹³ It is curious, then, that, although it was available in both French and English by 1978, Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, and its important section on "power over life," is not cited in *Abandoned Children*. In retrospect, many aspects of Fuchs's robust empirical story of the French state's interest in life resonate with this part of Foucault's rendering of modern government. The phrase "concrete experience of child abandonment" comes from Lynch, review of *Abandoned Children*, 388.

give a paper at the Society for French Historical Studies meetings, this book distills much of her essence as a working historian. For all its scholarly virtues, moreover, *Abandoned Children* is still extraordinarily readable. This is no small feat for a study dedicated to explicating the technicalities of state policy while also relying on the language of numbers and the form of tables to tell its story of the hardships faced by poor French women and their offspring. We should encourage our students to marvel, finally, at the heavy lifting Fuchs did in so many hundreds of linear feet of archival material that was neither indexed nor searchable in digitized format.

My concluding thought on reading *Abandoned Children* again in 2017 is less about the structure of the work or its empirical foundation, but about tone and affect. Writing about children at risk is no simple matter. As Bonnie Smith noted in her 1986 review, Fuchs's account of child abandonment and the dire fate of so many foundlings in the nineteenth century added up to "one of the most chilling stories" in modern French history.¹⁴ Yet Fuchs managed to deliver her tale, even as it was inspired by Hugo's highly sentimentalized rendering of Gavroche and Cosette, without descending into the depths of the maudlin or soaring in the ether of melodrama. Smith's review stressed the usefulness of numbers for telling this even-handed "human story."¹⁵ Rereading *Abandoned Children* in light of the career it launched and the books she would write later, I want add a bit more to this explanation that I hope will help us remember and celebrate what was so special about Rachel. She was a master of the human story not only because of her methodology and her well-disciplined narrative, but because of her unrelenting generosity towards those who lived in the past and tried to make do under the worst circumstances. Her feminism was evident not only in her citation of the literature or her vibrant presence at the Berks, but in her personal respect for women as historical subjects, even—or especially—when they left so little direct archival evidence of their lives behind. This capacity for generosity and respect was always equally tangible in her warm relationships with colleagues and students. Rachel Fuchs's legacy cannot be separated from the love that motivated her work in the archives and her life in the profession. There are few better reasons to read *Abandoned Children* than to appreciate this.

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¹⁴ Smith, review of *Abandoned Children*, 325.

¹⁵ Smith, review of *Abandoned Children*, 325.

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