




BOOK REVIEW

Gregory Hanlon, *Death and Control in the West, 1500–1800: Sex Ratios at Baptism in Italy, France and England*

(New York: Routledge, 2023). Pages XIX + 307 + 18 Figures + 65 Graphs + 2 Maps. \$39.16 paperback.

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Gregory Hanlon and his co-authors present a straightforward yet compelling idea in their book: infanticide was a widespread practice in Western Europe. They suggest that the phenomenon was one of the most common *preventive checks* available to preindustrial populations for reducing fertility. Comparable to abortion in contemporary times, infanticide served as a readily accessible method in the absence of other contraceptive techniques. Hanlon argues that ‘Mothers learn to recognise their infant in the days after birth but do not fall in love with them right away’ (p. 15). Therefore, infanticide performed prior to baptism was likely informally and covertly accepted, even though historical demographers, referred to by Hanlon as *demographic historians*, often hesitated to acknowledge this practice.

The author reinforces his argument by presenting numerous examples derived from two decades of prior research, meticulously examining church records, predominantly baptismal registers, in Italy, France, and England. Hanlon’s work is an example of the legacy of the ‘*École des Annales*’ and his book serves as a noteworthy illustration of ‘*histoire totale*’ presented in a didactic manner. It adeptly delineates the sources used, their historical context, and interpretative inferences concerning infanticides. Notably, these inferences find stronger support in anthropological literature than in demographic studies.

The initial distinctive contribution of the book lies in its portrayal of baptismal registers as a more solid source for discerning selective mortality compared to, for instance, burial records. This approach contrasts with the traditional perspective held by previous historical demographers, who often speculated that mortality prior to baptism was merely residual. Additionally, they tended to minimise the time gap between actual births and baptisms. In contrast, Hanlon’s research reveals that, despite being subject to prosecution since the counter-reform, delayed baptisms, when chosen strategically, facilitated the concealment of instances of infanticide, identifiable through patterns of imbalanced sex ratios.

Hanlon's argument gains robust support from examples in post-Council of Trent central and northern Italy, where the Catholic Church displayed heightened awareness and efforts to combat child abandonment and infanticides, despite prevailing imbalanced sex ratios. An illustrative case is the chapter on Castello of Montefollonico, a relatively small Tuscan village that, despite its size, provided an abundance of data for comprehensive family reconstitution and a revealing examination of concealed infanticides. Through a meticulous comparison of sources such as *Status Animarum* and baptismal records, the author uncovered evidence of systematic female infanticide, manifested in sex ratios dramatically skewed, ranging from 250 to 150 boys per 100 girls (as opposed to the biologically normal range of 110 to 102, having 105 as its mode). This phenomenon, especially prevalent during periods of elevated grain prices, underscored the economic underpinnings of such practices. Hanlon further revealed that, particularly within peasant families, female infanticide was not merely a response to short-term economic shocks but also a manifestation of long-term deprivation. Extending the analysis to larger localities like Torrita di Siena and Pavia, a consistent pattern emerged – female infanticide persisted throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries among peasants but not among the urban commoners. Clarifying mechanisms for this discrepancy became apparent in the remarkably low frequency of twins within these peasant populations.

Using high-quality microfilm data from Parma, Hanlon augmented the understanding of systematic infanticide, particularly of girls, in rural areas. This examination contributes significantly to our comprehension of the multifaceted factors influencing infanticidal practices in different societal contexts during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Additionally, the book also presents a well-fitted argument for today's research agenda, highlighting how climate played a role in increasing the trend of imbalanced sex ratios, particularly in relation to the exposure of mountain villages during the Little Ice Age.

In the context of France, the author delves into a comprehensive exploration of infanticide across various localities in Aquitaine. The analysis encompasses the entire spectrum of social classes. The examination of French evidence leads to the argument that imbalanced sex ratios persisted even within wealthier segments of the population. This challenges the notion that infanticide solely served as a response to extreme hunger or immediate threats, suggesting instead that it could function as a coping mechanism during prolonged periods of uncertainty. Hanlon and his collaborators propose that covertly accepted practices of infanticide align with established theories such as Resource Dilution, Sibling's Rivalry, and the Quality-Quantity trade-off. These theories posit that larger sibship sizes pose challenges for households and parents in terms of investment in their children.

The authors explore additional mechanisms to identify evidence of infanticide, including the absence of twins and a deliberate preference for boys. The higher prevalence of female bastards in foundling hospitals further corroborates the selective choice for male offspring. Notably, the French examples contribute to strength the argument for the universality of infanticide practices, revealing their prevalence among both Catholics and Calvinists. Concluding the examination of infanticide practices, the book shifts its focus to England in its final two chapters. Beyond providing additional evidence of imbalanced sex ratios with a particular emphasis on

missing girls, these chapters also criticize some of the traditional literature in historical demography, which neglected the existence and significance of infanticides.

Although signifying an important contribution to future historical demography, the book is not without limitations, which, despite the author's attempts to convince otherwise, cannot be overlooked. Most importantly, it relates to the strong interpretations made with sex ratios that can obviously incur important measurement issues. Sex ratio estimates prove highly susceptible to the size of the samples employed. A sex ratio calculated over a sample of 5,000 observations may vary between 94.6 and 105.7 within a 95 percent confidence interval, even if the true ratio is 100. Consequently, estimates derived from smaller sample sizes provide only imperfect approximations. It is consistently preferable to place greater reliance on larger samples to enhance the accuracy and reliability of the estimates. In this regard, this cannot invalidate the argument in favor of the widespread use of infanticides, but the mere use of descriptive sex ratios needs to be backed by more sophisticated methods as, for instance, Bayesian time-series.

Moreover, although Hanlon's argument is credible, interpreting high sex ratios (more boys than girls) as evidence of female infanticide, while the contrary is argued as a biological response to higher masculine frailty, may be limiting. For instance, the author does not take into consideration the possibility that diets with a higher concentration of sugars, as seen in peasants consuming certain grains, could contribute to an increase in male births, as contemporary studies are indicating.

Overall, Hanlon delivers a didactic contribution to Historical Demography, significantly benefiting young scholars seeking to explore a topic traditionally absent from research agendas. However, the manner in which Gregory Hanlon positions himself in opposition to historical demography may not do justice to the new generations of historical demographers and economic historians who are actively researching missing girls using alternative sources such as censuses. In this regard, a more inclusive bridge should be drawn to enhance the visibility of this important contribution.

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