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# A History of the Family

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It is now a decade since these volumes appeared in French and their translation into English, impeccably done, and subsidised by the French Ministry of Culture (would that such an institution existed in Britain) makes available to students and scholars a collection of thirty essays compiled by what looks like a roll call of the most distinguished French anthropologists and historians of the family, together with four or five selected foreigners.

Any composite work of this kind which claims to be a general history (this is also the case with the other large- scale French collections like the History of Private Life, or History of Women)lays itself open to charges of omission, or of giving priority to France or the West over other areas. The end result is rather like experiencing an exhibition of pictures. The reader/viewer of the exhibits falls into one of two categories. Either he/she reads/views the range of experiences and, the epic read accomplished, struggles to make some generalizations knowing that a great deal of other experiences are missing and that one is rarely comparing like with like; or he/she reads/views selectively, dipping into those chapters which relate to societies about which they know or wish to know something in order to fulfill the requirements of the next essay. Given the length of the books, the latter may be more numerous.

Nevertheless, although it is indeed the western family which receives most attention in these volumes, they

have a greater coherence than other collections for several reasons: first there are some excellent introductions to three broad sections by Claude Levi Strauss, Georges Duby and Jack Goody. Second,in the first volume in particular, a very careful attempt is made to assess the evidence on which generalisations have to be made, so that in the case of the ancient and medieval worlds as well as those societies which lack a written culture, the limits of available knowledge are made clear. Third, although each chapter stands on its own and can be read as such, there is an attempt to integrate through the sorts of questions asked about the relationships of generations,and the power dynamics among family members: father, mother, son, daughter. The care of the old, and family survival strategies such as child abandonment, and in particular the differential abandonment of male and female children also recur as themes. Fourth, while there is a concern to identify particular family types, nuclear or extended, vertical or horizontal, there is also a very conscious refusal to presuppose any kind of linear evolution towards one type or any sudden revolutionary switches.Given that a great deal of family history emanating from the western world has been predicated on sweeping generalisations and claims for the special position of the west in the evolution of romantic love and the valorisation of the child, claims now in process of constant modification, this can only be helpful.

The opening introduction by Levi Strauss sets the tone by asking why is a history of the family which does full justice to all cultures not possible?

> As a social institution with a biological foundation, the family must be a universal presence, whatever the type of society.But is it no also inevitable that each society,depending on its demographic structure, economic organization and religious beliefs, will stamp its own characteristics on the family?Is there then a model of the family that can be said to constitute the common basis of all human societies, or is the term `family'only a convenient label used to denote more or less heterogeneous groupings? (vol. 1,5)

The answers to these questions emerge as "yes", "no", "yes" and so the essays in the volume , stretching from pre-history to a kind of epilogue looking into the future of the family in a world of the new reproductive technologies, are intended to provide not a continuous narrative but comparisons and contrasts between different cultural choices and historical itineraries.

Why are we so interested in the history of the family? Duby asks (vol 1,315)and answers the question by reference to the obsession in post industrial society with the notion that the family is in crisis, divorce statistics are soaring, birth rates are falling in the west beyond levels of replacement, the old (who constitute an ever greater proportion of society) are more on their own and "family values" are crumbling, so that as a support structure the family is increasingly feeble. This means we are curious to know about the institution in the past. But are there dangers in making interpretations through the prism of the present? The answer is undoubtedly "yes" because of the tendency to consider change rather than continuity and to be misled by what may be reversible situations. For example there may have been more nuclear families in western Europe in the Dark Ages than the Middle Ages due to the extension of seigneurial control; or economic downswings may lead to an increase in family intergenerational dependency less apparent in good times.Jack Goody (vol2,1-5 ) makes a forceful case against arguing the case for change from partial knowledge."How can we talk about the disappearance of the extended family in modern society without understanding the nature of the wider kinships ties in pre-industrial societies?"In other words,we need to stand back somewhat from obsessions with change or value judgments interpreting the past from the present, and consider the context. Has divorce merely replaced death as a severer of unions? Does the increased number of old people living alone reflect anything more than the fact that they have pensions that permit them to do so, as in modern Japan, rather than a conscious severance from their kin. If delayed marriage (or no marriage at all), is now the norm in the West, if adolescence is prolonged and child bearing postponed, have the proportions of time spent single or cohabiting changed? Have we underestimated the effects of economic change and an oscillating consequence of dependence on/independence from the family. For example, recent unemployment in the West has led to a retention of the young adult within the family; family connections in securing work remain important as does support in cash or kind. Low birthrates in the

West could change as they have done in Sweden because of better state provision of child care.

No one emphasizes continuity in many aspects of family formation more forcefully than does Francoise Zonabend in a magnificent panoptic contribution "An Anthropological Perspective on Kinship and the Family".This chapter should be obligatory reading for anyone aspiring to comment on the family for any period, whether they be historian or anthropologist or involved in women's, men's or gender history.It teems with common sense and a keen sense of perspective. Matriarchies have never existed, anywhere:homogamy (marriage within one's social sphere) is still largely the order of the day though it has been reduced somewhat by increased mobility, but:

> Marriage bureaux, which are now enjoying unprecedented success in modern societies, merely apply systematically (sometimes with the aid of a computer)these principles of professional and cultural homogamy that demographers and historians have highlighted...the social and/or geographical space within which any individual is..."at risk of marriage"...is not very large, ranging in size from 3000 to 2000 people. Thus, for any given individual, the range of choice is not very extensive, scarcely any wider than in societies with an elementary system, even if the choices in these societies are precisely determined, while we have the impression, or illusion, of complete freedom in our choice of spouse. (vol. 1,37)

Polyandry and monogamy, and the choice whether husband and wife or wives should occupy one space or not cohabit are variants specific to certain societies. But all societies have rules, written or other and distinguish between formally sanctioned unions, concubinage or casual sexual relations; and in all traditional (non industrial) societies organised into age groups the married are regarded as the normal and the unmarried lack social status. Rituals occupy the transition from the unmarried to the married state and after marriage there exists a sexual division of labour in which the woman gets the most menial tasks. These may differ according to the culture but "this distribution is always biased in such a way that male supremacy over women can never be challenged"(vol 1 66) Other contributions make clear that most societies place a taboo on incest, father/daughter, mother/son, brother/sister, uncle/niece, aunt/nephew but degrees within which cousins can marry have varied considerably, since many societies have been obsessed with keeping property within the kin group.Christianity, prohibiting marriage within four/six degrees (allowing, of course, the rich to buy dispensations) in theory exercised the tightest control apparent in the societies reviewed here.

If one reads the work through sequentially the question of evidence as well as interpretation becomes crucial. For the ancient , classical and medieval worlds the evidence is decidedly patchy and indeed Duby suggests that the history of the family should be compared to a building site rather than a finished or even recognisable edifice.Claude Masset's chapter on the prehistory of the family demonstrates more than anything else that archeological evidence is not in itself sufficient to throw much light on the institution and that interpreting what there is is more of a game than a science. Indeed, the first big breakthrough in evidence, and that itself only part of the story, are the law codes which gradually emerged in the ancient world. Hence it becomes possible to piece together a framework on which to hang other fragments of archeological evidence, clay tablets recording transactions among vendors, a collection of maxims for Sumerian and Babylonian civilisations and so on. To these in "The Survival of the Family Name and the Pharaonic Order" Annie Forgeau adds more complex legal texts, wills, bas reliefs and fictional narratives which in Egyptian didactic literature extol the joys of conjugal bliss. From this evidence she argues that marriages between brothers and sisters were very limited in number and that polygamy, which was officially sanctioned at the royal court, was not common outside it. Family harmony was regarded as important. Some of the Pharoahs involved their wives in their deeds and some acted as regents but very generally the authority of wives did not extend outside of the house and the rearing of children.

Neither classical treatises such as those emanating from ancient Greece nor scriptural text can take us very far into real life practise.The chapter by Alvarez-Pereyre and Florence Heymann on the Hebrew family model covers a long period - about 1000 BC to the 16th century.Its archival base is the Talmud , both a code

and a commentary on religious and civil laws , the Torah and the Written Law, as well as the collective identity based on genealogical tables stretching back to Adam and Eve. Woman is helpmeet:for her man leaves his kin (a family paradox) and forms a new union: spiritual affinity is stressed: a man's partner may not be either his mother (incest) another man (homosexuality) or his neighbour's wife (adultery) to whom are added in the book of Deuteronomy, a bastard, a eunuch and a previously divorced wife if she has married another man. Bigamy in the ancient period was permitted in the case of sterility.

The real breakthrough in the history of the family is without doubt historical demography based on catastro, tax registers, parish registers of birth marriages and death and censuses, the type of material which exists in some countries from the fifteenth century but for most only from the late sixteenth or seventeenth, which has commanded a huge amount of research energy over the past three decades. The main advantage of this material for the history of the family is that it permits answers to the questions how is the family typologised at a given time and what difference does it make to belong to one kind rather than another? Terms such as nuclear, stem, extended, horizontal, vertical, and particular attempts to classify European family forms by Laslett and Hajnal are discussed by Andre Burguiere and Francois Le Brun in "The Hundred and One families of Europe (vol2 11-94).They prefer the three basic models used in the nineteenth century by Frederic Le Play "the nuclear model based on delayed neolocal marriage and centred on the conjugal group;the `stem- family'model linked to the permanence of a `house' or property transmitted to a sole heir;and the `communitarian ' model characterized by complex households of various forms and great size (lineage groups in which the parents co-reside with several married sons and daughters and their families" The nuclear model has been most open to society and dominated north western Europe during the modern age (and, other contributors argue, long before. The stem family was the preferred form of family organisation over large mountainous stretches of Europe and can be encountered from northern Portugal to the Baltic passing via France and the Alpine zone. The `communitarian' family retained all family members as unpaid workers to exploit either serf tenure, as in Russia or Poland, or undivided demesne, as in Poitou, Auvergne and Central Italy. Such divisions however, do not provide hard and fast instant behavioural patterns and all forms reacted differently to changing economic circumstances. Nuclear families gave rise to life-cycle servants of both sexes, who had to save up for marriage and did this most quickly when wages were high so that they could marry young. But they produced more children and hence a generational bloating of the labour market occurred causing a fall in wages and delayed marriage. Stem families could experience the same characteristics for all but the eldest son: jealousy and antagonisms could exist among the non inheriting children and ageing parents could be forced to make in support clauses to guarantee their future as they aged from the son who took over control of the holding. In many ways the "communitarian" model could be the most flexible in times of economic hardship and strategies could exist to tide certain members of the family over. However, the mantle of power in such families fell upon the patriarch and dissent among family members could be rife.

For wealthy families protecting land and wealth from over division demanded careful strategy: investing one heir but finding livings for the rest: often endowing one or more daughters with the liquid capital brought into marriage by the son's spouse. Dowries escalated in Italy from the late sixteenth century, and in France and Britain from the late seventeenth, multiplying the number of daughters who could not be married. For the French aristocracy recourse to family limitation was also made to limit outgoings.

Embodied in the demographic narrative, then, is a sub- text of further issues: the relationships between family members, questions of authority, and above all perhaps of the transmission of property, which can be amplified from more qualitative evidence. One returns again and again to the issue of the family and economic resources in land, wealth or work capacity and at the end of the volumes I regretted that this recurrent theme had not been given a section to itself. The family is a vehicle for transmission of land, goods, human and cultural capital; but family strategy to preserve landed wealth (for the rich) or viability (for the poor) very often resulted in different apportioning of the inheritance.This raises the question of women and property. A recurrent theme in those chapters looking at European pre-industrial societies and at contemporary societies in Asia and parts of Africa is that of the dowry, which is the single most important factor in determining the position of most women as wives and widows.In most parts of western Europe

before the late nineteenth century this was a sum (usually of money or goods rather than land) given to a woman on marriage by her father and intended for her support. Managed by her husband (who by the early modern period could alienate the asset generating disputes if she sought to reappropriate on widowhood), she had in vivo rights as wife to a portion of the usufruct. If widowed she had a right to reappropriation of the sum but, if still nubile, her family had a right to take it back and to renegotiate her in marriage. Under the statute law of some areas of Roman law, unless sons had been born to the marriage, the dowry should revert on her death to the woman's family of origin and pass to brothers and nephews but, at least from the fourteenth century, testaments made by women could override statute law by a will and daughters and nieces as well as the church could be made recipients. Except in widowhood, a woman did not control money, but she carried it as it were in her person. At the highest social levels her family of origin sought in a daughter's marriage an indication of their status, and in violent times, kin group support. It clearly helped to purchase for the couple a high standard of living. Lower down the social scale where a woman's dowry was put into a business for the family it could be difficult to disentangle in the event of the husband's death (and hence endless litigation) but even so it was at least theoretically something of a hedge against destitution. In European terms the dowry was always most strongly adhered to in Mediterranean countries. It broke down slowly from about the eighteenth century in the north, and at popular levels was totally eroded by the development of a female labour market other than domestic service which terminated on marriage.

The question that ought to be asked is whether the dowry was a source of strength or weakness for women in pre- industrial societies. This is an important question not directly addressed in these volumes. In the West dowry money was attached to a woman.She enriched her husband and to a degree his family but her money also gave her standing. Her position can be compared with the African and Arab and Chinese brides described in these volumes where either bride price existed (the husband purchased the wife) as in some African and Arab societies, or where no money was exchanged at all, as in China. In these cases,the wife, lacking "her own" belonged directly to the husband and lacked the status given by an endowment from her family. The Arab and Chinese women in this volume were brides bought by the husband and something of the low valorisation given to Arab and Chinese women even today could well stem from a historic legacy in which the bride did not historically bring property into union. In the Chinese case the ongoing value of women seems minimal. They have no association with wealth and in changed contemporary circumstances this may contribute to the outcome of the current social engineering in China in which the single son is emerging and his unfortunate sisters are shovelled off to the orphanage. On the other hand, the persistence and escalation of dowry in modern India (well covered in Roland Lardinois, India,:the Family, the State and Women"(vol. 2) shows a transmutation in which at one level a suitably endowed husband can purchase a middle class life style through his wife, or, at a lower social level, wife murder by his family gives the husband and his family access to more wealth through a new wife.

What difference did industrialisation make to the family? Martine Segalen shows that change was uneven and the British experience precocious and taken overall throughout Europe the effects were not the same. Co-residence of parents and adult children permitted child care while the mother earned though she hoped as the children in turn became earners and the effects of heavy physical work took their toll to pull out.In many senses the early industrial family was a close unit of mutual support. However, changes were built in. Fathers who were no longer the transmitters of land or artisanal skills to their sons were possibly "kept" in old age by their working children. In some senses the father figure is diminished, but increasingly from the late nineteenth century the joint effects of state intervention (interested in a healthier race) and the struggles of organised labour found common ground in promoting father as breadwinner and mother in the home. This is argued to be the imposition on the working classes of a bourgeois norm but it can also be argued from the evidence that in traditional societies married women did not enter the labour market unless the family was in severe straits, except on a very impermanent basis to realise certain targets, and so this return to the home was a reversion to a more ancient norm. In addition,the very conditions of nineteenth century life demanded a considerable domestic input from one partner, given limited technology and the struggle against dirt and lice.The failure of organised labour to fight for decent wages for women's work in a highly segregated labour market whilst pushing for a breadwinner wage helped in its own time to perpetuate wage differentials between the sexes and to make possible a retreat into the home. This section might have been developed

much more to look at the construction of early welfare states and their assumptions about the model family and how legacies from these assumptions are still with us at the end of the 20th century. Or, the effects of state policies under fascism to deal in strong patriarchal models are worth considering.

The two volumes include a number of attempts by differing agencies, largely church and state, to achieve some kind of social engineering through the family.Christianity was a very powerful factor in moulding the western family. It imposed upon it monogamy, the indissolubility of marriage-except for impotence and later adultery and the obligation for marriage to be consensual.Widows were discouraged from remarrying (Goody suggests for financial reasons as the church hoped to inherit) though there is biblical precedent. The fear of any form of sexuality outside marriage and of its soiling effects upon both parties concerned resulted in the construction of particular value systems. An interesting chapter by Carmen Bernard and Serge Gruzinski on the family in Meso America and the Indies(vol. 1,161) shows graphically the confrontation between a tradition of polygamy and the endeavours of the conquista to impose the Christian standard.

Religion whether in the form of Christianity or Islam or Hinduism etc has been far from the only agency seeking to mould the family. Communism has been another with its attempts to create a state in which men and women have equality in the market place and abortion is widely available (indeed used in the place of contraception) as well as divorce, and the old and unemployed have sufficient state assistance to emancipate them from dependence on their families. Basile Kerblay's "Socialist Families" (vol2,442) seeks to cover some of these experiments but it is perhaps here that the volume has most conspicuously dated since developments in eastern Europe have revealed tensions and generational disillusionment with the transference from a relatively protected environment to that of the free market economy. The closure of crèches, the threats to access to abortion , along with widespread unemployment schemes, have carried enormous significance for the family.

David Gaunt and Louise Nystrom " The Scandinavian Model" (vol. 2,476) well conveys the interesting collusion between the most highly developed welfare states in the world and family behaviour and by extension serves to highlight current malaise with cutbacks in societies where transfer payments have fundamentally redistributed wealth and have been the hall mark of advanced egalitarian societies. They urge that though divorce rates are high, the kin group is stable and that residence tends to be close to older family members. Almost a half of all retired people have at least one child living within 15km of their home:leaving out those with no children, two thirds of all the elderly have children living within this distance.The essay contrasts very markedly with that of Herv? Varenne on contemporary American society as does the contribution by Martine Segalen and Francoise Zonabend on contemporary families in France.These three contribution make apparent that there is no such thing as the modern western family. All these societies share low birthrates (though Scandinavia contrasts markedly with Italy and the Mediterranean countries with sub zero replacement), high levels of abortion and families planned to fit the mother's working life, women have achieved a more prominent place in the workforce, there is less frequent formalised marriage and when it takes place it does so later. However the chapter on North America, in my view something of a caricature, though presented with great fluency, marks out that culture from what is even its nearest approximation, the British experience. It argues that the founding principle of the American contemporary family is posited as the freedom of the individual primed by the belief/delusion that hard work can carry anyone to the top and that laggards deserve to go to the wall. The result is a very unstable family form. The child must be free in the sense that his/her mind must be emancipated from intolerance- American schooling with its bland educational fare designed to give offence to no one is a monument to that principle. Parental authority is very weak and soon cedes ground to the peer group and while the American bourgeois family continues to invest astronomical sums in a smart college education-sums which make a European reel- for their children, it emancipates itself from expectations of close contact. A romantic relationship between cohabiting partners, an ideology of love, is the right of every free individual and leads to frequent divorce in which the interests of the adult partners are prioritised. Serial monogamy contributes to weak family forms.Finally the old take off to Florida and housing developments that exclude the young. Generations are thus severed and rituals remain one of the few binding forces. Herve Varennes seeks to challenge the view of the stability of the white bourgeois family and the instability of the poor black family largely on the grounds of what is not

known:

> One may say that, even if they do not marry as often as other groups, blacks in poverty do have powerfully structured families. What that structure is remains a murkier matter. In fact no one knows for sure the exact ratios of long-lasting relationships in which adults take extensive care of their children.There is an institutional fact which must make us doubt the accuracy of current statistics about household organisation: there is no system in the United States directly to help families with children (on the model of allocations familiales in France) and welfare is given easily only to households where there are `dependent children' and no resident husband. There is thus no incentive to formalize a relationship that may still be real...there is no doubt that, among blacks as among whites, as soon as material conditions allow, families take a decidedly middle class shape.(vol2,437)

There are of course many different ethnic groups in North America and differing family traditions, many of which are very strong and hence any overview must end up reductive. In "Families in France" Segalen and Zonabend show that small families, working mothers,many of whom do a double day of paid and unpaid work and tailor their families accordingly, large numbers of people, particularly the old, living alone with Paris as the capital of loneliness (the proportion of persons living alone is one person in two) , almost all children in school by the age of three (the state considers it necessary to provide schooling for very young children in order to correct social and economic inequalities), are features which do not preclude strong family networks.These function not only through the transmission of goods and services but frequent and regular meetings with parents in retirement and their family connections-75% see their children at least once a week). If links are strongest among the working classes, for the bourgeoisie the existence of family houses in the country makes possible shared weekends and holidays. There is in this section a very evocative piece on how family memory is perpetuated through photographs, rituals and linkage vocabulary. The authors ponder whether France is unique in the preservation of such close linkages but anyone living in Italy would say of course not. Stand outside an Italian school and find out how many children are picked up by their grandparents after school or observe the rituals of cemetery visits on All Souls' Day or consider the custom of providing a child in whole or in part with a dwelling on matrimony: these might well make Italy head of this particular league.

The summing up at the end of volume two emphasizes that there is no sign of the standardization of family structures:Japan retains semi filial loyalties in industrial enterprizes: lineage solidarities persist in Africa, the ever increasing independence of women in the west is not replicated in Muslim societies where fundamentalism is strengthening. Some countries in the developed world seek to push up their dwindling birth rates; in the underdeveloped the move is to curtail them and the history of that curtailment looks very different in China with its single child policy than elsewhere.Finally there are questions with no answers about the impact of the new reproductive technologies. It would have been pertinent in this final section perhaps to speculate on how the dismantling of welfare states visible in parts of Europe involves shifting back care of the aged onto the family (and hence probably onto the shoulders of women) and how employment fragility and the linkage of pension entitlements with full time in the work force menaces those in part time work or the unemployed with a very difficult situation as they pass into old age.Or, to consider why the homeless, those whose families have rejected them or vice versa, are the most precariously situated of all. Nevertheless the message is loud a clear:the family, the maison toleree of the human race in its manifold forms, continues to prevail at the end of the twentieth century and none but a fool would put his money on its demise in the next.

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