HOUSEHOLD HISTORY AND
SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

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Abstract

This review examines one of the most fundamental issues of family history, the nature of domestic groups in which people lived in the past. The focus is further limited to the evolution of family forms in Europe. Although such models as those originally proposed by Laslett and Hajnal for western family history have been shown to be wanting, they have served an invaluable role in stimulating and guiding family history research. We are now able to begin to grasp the contours of a much more complex western family heritage than earlier scholars recognized.

INTRODUCTION

Western family history has long intrigued sociological theorists, ranging from the evolutionists of the nineteenth century to feminists today. Until recently, sociological theorizing on changes in family life in the west was based primarily on speculation and folk wisdom. The boom in family history which began in the 1960s and gathered steam over the past two decades has provided unparalleled opportunities for sociologists to take a new look at family life in the past and the forces responsible for molding family organization. Many sociologists have indeed dipped into this historical literature in the interest of drawing sociological lessons, but their work has been hampered by the speed with which new historical evidence is changing previous understandings of
family life in the past. As a result, new generalizations which are historically untenable are being introduced into sociology.

In this review, I examine one of the most fundamental issues of family history, the nature of the domestic groups in which people lived in the past. Here, focus is further limited to the evolution of family forms in Europe, a field of research that has had a major impact on the development of sociological theory. Of special interest in this connection are the changes that took place with the transition from agricultural to industrial society from the eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries.

While our focus is on forms of coresidence, it is important to keep in mind the complex relationship between coresidential groupings and the workings of various kinship principles. Household and family, for example, are not synonyms, and when the two are confused analytical and theoretical confusion can result. Household refers to the group of coresidents, people who live under the same roof and typically share in common consumption. Family is a much more ambiguous term; it refers to close kin, but the exact reference of the term tends to vary contextually. From an anthropological viewpoint, the key distinction is between a domestic group, on the one hand, and a kinship system—with its attendant categories of kin—on the other. Very different kinship systems may have identical domestic groups, or households, and similarly, the same kinship system may result in a diversity of households at any one time. Kinship systems are themselves, however, related to rules of coresidence in rather complex ways. For example, there is a link between patrilineal kinship systems and patrilocal postmarital residence systems. However, even a knowledge of residence rules of this sort cannot, in itself, lead to a prediction of the frequency of any particular household form. Households are not simply the product of residence rules but are also affected by demographic, life course, and political economic factors, as is detailed below. The historical study of family or kin relations involves much more than research on household forms, for kinship relations are not constrained by coresidential boundaries. In this review, however, we limit ourselves to the study of household forms; we ask how these vary, and how we can explain this variation.

We concentrate here on research developments over the past decade, though we first briefly review the work that, 20 years ago, radically altered traditional sociological ways of looking at family life in the rural past. I argue that the understandings that gained currency in the 1970s, and that have subsequently become widely accepted among sociologists, can no longer withstand historical scrutiny. I show (a) why those who claim that the European preindustrial past was characterized by nuclear family households have misled us; (b) that the whole enterprise of branding major areas of Europe as having a particular type of household system is misleading, and that
there are theoretically significant differences in household forms within such regions; and (c) that rather than focusing on the limited issue of whether or not industrialization entails household nuclearization, we need to address the basic question of what determines coresidential arrangements in any time or place. In this effort, I suggest, we need to adopt an approach that focuses on the interplay of political economy, demography, and culture.

THE NEW ORTHODOXY

On Myths Old and New

Sociologists have long delighted in disabusing us of “myths” of family life in the past. In his influential work of three decades ago, Goode (1963:239) took issue with the image of the “classical family of Western nostalgia,” noting that in every generation, people think of family life in the past as having been wholesome and untroubled in comparison with family life in the present.

Peter Laslett (1965, 1972), later joined by various British colleagues, attacked another “myth” of family life in past time, the notion that European society had for centuries been characterized by large, complex family coresidence. Arguing that, on the contrary, western family life had long been lived in nuclear family households, Laslett rejected the previously dominant view that industrialization brought about family nuclearization. Indeed, many scholars began arguing that causality worked in the opposite direction, that the preexisting nuclear family system made Europe fertile ground for the rise of modern industry (Greenfield 1961, Wrigley 1977, Lee 1982, Todd 1985, Levine 1985). Further turning conventional wisdom on its head, Anderson (1972, 1978) maintained that industrialization and urbanization often brought about an increase in extended family living arrangements.

The impact of Laslett’s work on sociology has been impressive, if often misinformed. In a recent review of family history, Cherlin (1983:52) cites Laslett as his source in concluding that the finding of the universality of the nuclear family in preindustrial Europe “is by now so well-known and well-established as to require little elaboration.” In sociological texts on the family, the new orthodoxy now reigns. Goode (1982:95) concludes that in “Western societies, for hundreds of years in the past, neolocality has been the rule.” Skolnick (1987:124) assures us that “The myth of the large extended family household in times past was laid to rest by Peter Laslett and his associates.” Similarly, Collins (1988:120) refers to the “myth” of the extended family in the European past, and Duvall & Miller (1985:10) write that “Contrary to popular opinion . . . contemporary scholars are quite certain that the majority of European . . . families were rarely extended to include nonnuclear relatives.” These examples could be multiplied many times.
Revising the Revisionism

While Laslett's early work has been transformed into a new sociological orthodoxy, its progenitor has been rapidly retreating from it in the wake of the growing body of historical studies in Europe that show a much more complex and interesting picture than Laslett's original formulation suggested.

Not one, but several different systems of family and household organization characterized preindustrial Europe. The most influential early statement of this proposition, albeit in indirect form, came from Hajnal (1965), who heralded a European marriage pattern which was unique in the world, and which "extended over all of Europe to the west of a line running roughly from Leningrad . . . to Trieste" (p. 101). The principal features of this system were a late age for females at marriage and a large proportion of people who never married. Although with understandable Anglo-centrism, Hajnal referred to this as the European marriage pattern, his model made clear that another marriage system was to be found in eastern Europe.

More recently, Hajnal (1982) has taken his original argument further, distinguishing two kinds of household formation system in preindustrial times. In Northwestern Europe, a simple household system was marked by late age at marriage for both men and women, neolocality, and a premarital life stage in which youths circulated among households as servants. Hajnal contrasts this with a joint family household system, found in parts of Asia, with earlier marital age for women (under 21 as opposed to over 23 for the simple household system), patrilocality, and hence the coresidence of two or more component conjugal family units. Note the key role played by female age at marriage in Hajnal's model, for it is this variable that links demographic constraints to household composition. This is based on the proposition that, given high mortality rates in preindustrial times, in areas where women marry late there is little opportunity for three-generation households to form. Citing the insufficiency of evidence outside northwestern Europe, Hajnal makes no commitment as to the kind of household system that characterized southern and eastern Europe in the past, though he notes the presence of a joint family system in fifteenth-century central Italy (Herlihy & Klapisch-Zuber 1985). Meanwhile, Richard Smith (1981), influenced by Hajnal's work, expanded on this observation to propose a Mediterranean marriage pattern, with the age at marriage for women earlier than that found in the northwest of Europe and, consequently, higher proportions of complex family households.

Here we may pause to define some of the key terms used in historical household analysis. The nuclear family household consists in its full form of a married couple and their children. This is contrasted with the complex family household, which includes kin beyond the nuclear family. Historians have
tended to distinguish between two kinds of complex family households. In the *stem family* form, one child, and one child only, brings his or her spouse into the parental household. In the *joint family* form, more than one child (generally all the sons) are supposed to bring their spouses into the parental household, leading to a coresidential unit that may have more than two component conjugal units. Using a somewhat different approach, Hammel & Laslett (1974) distinguish between complex family households that are extended and those that are multiple. An *extended family* household consists of one in which kin beyond the nuclear family are present, but there is only one nuclear family unit in the household (e.g. a nuclear family plus the wife’s widowed mother). A *multiple family* household consists of two or more coresiding nuclear family units.

In the face of growing evidence for a diversity of family systems in preindustrial Europe, Laslett (1977, 1983) moved away from his earlier emphasis on “the European family,” identifying instead four different systems: (a) northwest; (b) west/central; (c) Mediterranean; and (d) eastern. According to Laslett, the nuclear family household dominated in just one of these four regions, the northwest, though it was also found in the west/central region. On the other hand, neolocality was uncommon in Mediterranean and eastern Europe. Following Hajnal’s logic, Laslett argued that the nuclear family household system of the northwest was propped up by a high female age at marriage (see also Wall 1983), and marked by a pattern of premarital life-course service. In eastern and Mediterranean Europe, by contrast, low female age at marriage and an absence of life-course service accompanied a system of complex family households.

French scholars never joined this revisionist bandwagon (Burguière 1986, Collomp 1988), a fact partly attributable to LePlay’s (1982 [1872]) legacy. However, what really prevented French family historians from embracing the new view was that preindustrial France was characterized by a wide diversity of household systems, a fact the French historians could hardly ignore.

**OVERTURNING THE NEW ORTHODOXY**

*The Northern European Evidence*

Confronted with the growing evidence against them, proponents of the new orthodoxy have attempted to salvage their thesis in a number of ways. Some, following Hajnal’s earlier efforts, simply exclude the eastern portion of the continent, identifying western Europe with Europe in general. One problem here, as we shall see, is that southwestern Europe does not fit the nuclear family model. This has been dealt with by excluding Iberia, southern France, and Italy from western Europe, in a rather odd redefinition of historical
geography. The logical outcome of this retreat is what we find in Laslett’s (1983) new approach, with the nuclear family household system said to characterize only northwestern Europe.

Yet, even if we limit consideration to this portion of the continent, it is by no means clear that the nuclear family household system was everywhere dominant. We know, for example, that complex family household systems characterized northern Sweden for centuries (Egerbladh 1989) and stem family households were prominent in Ireland (Gibbon & Curtin 1978, Varley 1983). Jannsens (1986) followed members of a Dutch community over their life course in the late nineteenth century and found that a majority spent part of their lives in extended family households of some kind. But it is the evidence from the rest of Europe that most effectively destroys both the notion that preindustrial European family life was based on a nuclear family household system and, with it, the thesis that the process of industrialization could not have entailed household nuclearization.

**The Evidence from Southern Europe**

Throughout the 1970s, historical sociologists regularly lamented the dearth of information on southern European family systems. Partly in response to Peter Laslett’s stimulus, though, the 1980s witnessed tremendous growth in historical family studies in southern Europe, and many studies focused on the household. Laslett’s (1983) proposal of a Mediterranean family system, characterized by complex family households, young female age at marriage, and lack of life-course servants, came in response to some of this work. The actual historical evidence, however, points to a much more complex reality. We look here at the evidence for Italy, Iberia, and southern France.

There is now no doubt that complex family households predominated in major portions of Italy. Most notable is the sharecropping belt extending throughout much of central Italy and into some of the northern regions. There, in many communities of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a majority, sometimes a large majority, of people lived in households containing two or more component conjugal families (Torti 1981, Doveri 1982, Angeli 1983, Barbagli 1984, Kertzer 1984, Kertzer & Brettell 1987, and Tittarelli (1991). This system resulted, in part, from the power held by landlords, who sought families that would improve their return on the land. With sharecropping contracts generally renewable at the landlord’s pleasure every year, households were under heavy pressure to maximize their adult family workforce or risk losing their farms.

Complex family households were also commonly found elsewhere in northern Italy, where sharecropping was not practiced. Complex family households were thus not limited to a sharecropping economy. Most often, such complex family arrangements were found in settings—especially common in the
mountains—where people were under ecological pressure to diversify their family economy (Ramella 1977, 1983, Mabilia 1980, Sella 1987). A variant of this pattern has been examined by Viazzo (1989, Viazzo & Albera 1990) in the Western Alps, where multiple family households provided the labor power to divide the family work force between agriculture and pastoralism.

It is not just the existence of non-nuclear household systems that makes Italy such an interesting case, but also the diversity of systems found there. Indeed, Barbagli (1991) has identified three different household formation systems in Italy operating until the early twentieth century. The first, illustrated by the cases discussed above, combines patrilocality and late marriage age and characterizes much of central and northern Italy. The second, combining neolocal residence and early female marriage, predominated in southern Italy, while the third, combining neolocal residence and late female marriage age, typified Sardinia. Da Molin (1990) ties the nuclear family system of the south to various economic and ecological forces, including the large mass of landless or near-landless laborers, and the tendency for agriculturalists not to live on the land they farm, but in densely settled agrotowns. In transitional areas, such as Molise, lying between central and southern Italy, rates of complex family households are higher than in the south, but lower than in central Italy (Douglass 1980, 1991).

The Italian evidence undermines Laslett’s and Hajnal’s newer formulations regarding European marriage systems. Hajnal’s hypothesis of a connection between neolocality and late female marriage age is belied by the fact that it is in southern Italy, where neolocality was the norm, that women married young, while in central Italy, where joint family households were the norm, female marriage age was similar to northwestern European levels. Moreover, the tie between a young female marriage age and low proportions of people who never married is belied by southern Italy, which had relatively high rates of celibacy (Benigno 1989). Finally, the association between neolocality and life-course service is undermined by the fact that such service was common in the joint family households of sharecroppers in central Italy, but rare in the nuclear family households in southern Italy.

Curiously, in a geographical pattern which both parallels Italy and reflects poorly on the notion of a uniform Mediterranean complex family household system, nuclear family households in Iberia predominated in the south, with more complex family households typifying many parts of the north. Lisón-Tolosana (1977) identified a patrilocal stem family system as the norm throughout much of northern Portugal, the northwestern Spanish provinces of Galicia and Asturias, the Basque country of northeastern Spain, and Aragon and Catalonia. Subsequent research has largely borne this out (Douglass 1988a,b, Flaquer 1986, Comas d’Argemir 1988). The stem family household is linked to an impartible inheritance system, found in the north, which
contrasts with the partible inheritance of the south. Moreover, the south was characterized by large landholdings and many landless farm laborers (Reher 1988, Carrion 1988, Bastos 1988). However, even in the nuclear family household system of the south, newlyweds often began marital life coresiding briefly with the parents of either bride or groom (Reher 1987).

Like Italy, Spain, and Portugal, France too had a diversity of household systems in the preindustrial past. As a general rule, neolocality and nuclear family households, linked to partible inheritance, characterized the north, while much of the south, with its tradition of impartible inheritance, had complex family household systems. Various forms of the stem family were prevalent in different parts of the south. In general, a single son (typically, but not always, the oldest) remained in the parental household after marriage, inheriting the farm (Fauve-Chamoux 1987, Collomp 1988). In some parts of the south, however, a daughter could inherit, bringing in her husband (Fine 1988, Lebrun 1988).

In the sharecropping areas of central France, on the other hand, as in sharecropping Italy, joint family households were common. Here, there was no limit to the number of sons who could bring their wives into the parental household, and households could become considerably larger than those found in stem family areas (Shaffer 1982, Darrow 1989; Bideau et al 1986). Finally, while nuclear family organization predominated in the north, variations on the pattern can easily be found. For example, Fine (1988:407–408) discusses the practice in Breton of each child, in turn, bringing his or her spouse into the parental household upon marriage. The newlyweds were displaced upon the marriage of the next sibling.

**The Evidence from Eastern Europe**

Although eastern European family history remains less well known, we now do know that a diversity of household forms prevailed there in preindustrial times. It is symptomatic of the expansion in eastern European family history that while Serbia was the only eastern European area represented in Laslett & Wall’s (1972) landmark collection, the more recent Cambridge Group collection (Wall et al 1983) contained chapters on five different east European societies.

The paradigmatic east European case is described by Czap (1978, 1982, 1983) who examines Russian serf society in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The Russian case belies the common sociological claim that, even where patrilocality is the cultural norm, demographic constraints would prevent people from spending much of their life in complex family households. Indeed, Czap describes a system of “perennial” complex family households, in which most people spent the majority of their lives in households containing at least two simple, patrilaterally related family units.
Women married early and, in part due to landlord pressure, marriage did not involve founding a new household, but rather the expansion of a pre-existing one.

Although Czap proposed this as a model for an eastern European household type, this is not the only kind of household system found in eastern Europe, a point made earlier by Sklar (1974). While accepting multiple family households as a regional characteristic of eastern Europe, Plakans (1987) notes that in many areas household complexity was, in fact, only found at a particular phase of family development. Strikingly, different communities within the same areas could vary substantially in the prevalence of complex family households (Plakans 1983). Thus, Palli (1983) finds complex family households common in southern Estonia but nuclear family households typical of northern Estonia. The most thorough study in eastern Europe of this kind of variability has been carried out by Andorka and colleagues (Andorka & Farágó 1983, Andorka & Balázs Kovács 1986) on preindustrial Hungary. They find that complex households typified areas that had serf-peasant populations, while nuclear family households were more typical of communities of landless cotters.

What all this adds up to is that eastern Europe, like western Europe, displayed a diversity of household systems in preindustrial times, and these were linked in part to regional differences in political economic arrangements and ecological conditions (Mitterauer & Kagan 1982). Many of the prevailing generalizations about the “myths” of European family history turn out to be themselves ill-informed and lead to a dead end in construction of sociological theory. Beginning with this understanding of the actual diversity of family systems in the European past, we can reconsider just what forces may be responsible for producing the household systems that shaped western family life. The following sections are devoted to two of these forces: economic factors, and the influence of demography.

THE ROLE OF ECONOMIC FORCES IN DETERMINING HOUSEHOLD SYSTEMS

The Household as Labor Force

The traditional model of rural life in preindustrial times depicts a society in which peasant households were the unit of production. Indeed, the preindustrial household is often contrasted in this regard with the modern household, the latter being a unit of consumption, but not of production. Historical work over the past two decades has overturned this simple dichotomy, with the growing realization that a good deal of preindustrial agriculture involved landless laborers for whom the household was not a unit of production. However, since preindustrial households often did serve as units of produc-
tion, it is important to ask in what ways household composition may be explained by labor force requirements of the household as an economic entity. Here Chayanov’s (1986) work has been influential, with its insistence that the peasant family follows its own, noncapitalist logic (see Thorner 1986).

In a household-as-labor-unit model, the composition of the household is a product of the labor demands of the economic operation, whether it be a farm or a protoindustrial home workshop. A good example is provided by attempts to understand the diversity of household forms in the Alps, where complex family household systems predominated in some areas and nuclear systems in others. Viazzo (1989) emphasizes the delicate balance between farming and herding in Alpine communities, along with the need to scatter agricultural plots in different microclimatic locations to minimize risks. He concludes that the vulnerability of a household that cannot provide a labor force sufficient both for herding and for farming in scattered fields places heavy pressure on people to come together in complex households. How, then, can Alpine villages typified by nuclear family coresidence be explained? In the Swiss community of Törbel, studied by Netting (1981), the same economic/ecological pressures are dealt with differently, demonstrating the complex interplay of economy, ecology, and culture. Rather than each household having to provide a workforce sufficient for both farming and herding, herds are tended communally, and nuclear family households are thus viable.

A parallel example comes from Sardinia, where recent research (Oppo 1990) reveals that two residential systems co-existed. A nuclear family system prevailed in the cereal-producing villages of the coastal plains, while in the mountains, residence was organized around uxorilocal principles. Husbands either moved into their wives’ natal home or, more commonly, a cluster of homes took shape, organized around a group of married sisters and their mother. The explanation for this pattern is that, in this pastoral economy, women remained in the villages, tending the family’s local holdings, while the men spent long stretches of time away in the mountains herding the flocks. In such circumstances, cooperative groups of kin-related women provided the backbone of village economic and social organization.

Political Economic Forces

Family labor force requirements, however, must be placed in a broader political economic framework. The influence of such political economic forces is perhaps most apparent in eastern Europe, where not so long ago serfdom was widespread and the manorial lords controlled the land on which people depended. In this setting, the rules governing household composition were largely determined by the lords, based on their calculation of what would best serve their economic and political interests. The complex nature of
the Russian serf household, Czap (1982, 1983) tells us, was due to the fact that the lords who controlled the estates discouraged the serfs from dividing their households. Plakans (1983, 1984) finds a similar pattern in the Baltic, where the serf estate system imposed the rules governing coresidence. With the demise of serfdom in the nineteenth century, the percentage of complex family households began to decline.

In Poland (Kochanowicz 1983), where labor was scarce, lords forbade their serfs from leaving the village in which they lived, and tried to encourage marriages within the estate. On the other hand, because the serfs’ labor obligations to the lord were based on household units, the Polish lords encouraged neolocality, often against the wishes of the peasants who saw advantages in larger, complex family households which would have a lower proportion of their productivity taken from them by the lords. As this case shows, peasants often struggled against the pressures of landowning and political elites, and peasant household forms must be understood not simply as outcomes of elite interests, but also as the product of attempts to circumvent these pressures. Thus, for example, in parts of what is now Czechoslovakia, the conscription of unmarried men led serf families to encourage the early marriage of their sons, which led, in turn, to a higher proportion of complex family households (Gaunt 1983).

**Inheritance Systems**

Insofar as peasants owned their own farmland, their household strategies were directly affected by state rules governing inheritance, and they were vulnerable to changes in inheritance laws which they were in no position to influence. France provides the most dramatic instance of such change, with the imposition at the beginning of the nineteenth century of the new Civil Code, banning impartible (indivisible) inheritance. Impartible inheritance had been a pillar of the stem family system found in much of southern France. It gave parents the means to pressure a child into remaining with them in the household after marriage and gave the child the incentive to do so. Through much of the nineteenth century, peasants struggled to find ways to get around the new legal requirements, but the effect of the new law was the progressive decline in complex family households (Collomp 1988, Fine 1988, Lebrun 1988, Darrow 1989).

The diversity of inheritance systems across Europe, together with the link between inheritance and household systems, offers an obvious basis for explanations of the geographical distribution of different European household systems (Gaunt 1987). At the most general level, impartible inheritance systems have been linked to stem family households, with partible inheritance linked to nuclear family households. Thus, in explaining the stem family
system that prevailed in Iceland in the 1700s, Egerbladh (1989) points to the prevailing system of impartible inheritance. Likewise, the emphasis on impartible inheritance in northern Spain has commonly been cited as an explanation for the presence of stem family households in the north, as opposed to the nuclear family arrangements that prevailed in the south (Flaquer 1986, Carrion 1988, Reher 1988).

Not all stem families are organized in the same way, however; one of the major distinctions among them regards the timing of transmission of authority over the property. In some German-speaking regions, the heir took over the headship of the household upon his marriage, with the parents effectively retiring. In southern France, by contrast, the father typically retained control over the household until his death (Collomp 1988, Plakans 1989, Sorensen 1989).

To understand the role of inheritance systems in explaining household dynamics in the past, it is important to realize that not all segments of the rural population had land they could pass on to their children. We have already seen that under serfdom—prevailing in parts of eastern Europe until the nineteenth century—it was not inheritance but rights to land obtained by relationships with lords that influenced household formation systems. In the Baltic in the late eighteenth century, for example, hereditary serfs had certain rights to land which could be passed on, and they thus lived in large, complex family households. However, a substantial part of the population lacked such rights; they had little to pass on and lived in nuclear family households (Plakans 1983).

In western Europe, too, an important segment of the agricultural population had rights to land without owning it, and thus their household dynamics were not directly tied to inheritance in the usual sense. These were the sharecroppers, found especially in central and parts of northern Italy and in parts of central and southern France. In both countries, sharecroppers were associated with joint family households (Lebrun 1988, Darrow 1989, Kertzer 1977, 1984, Kertzer & Hogan 1988). This system was unaffected by inheritance laws; thus, for example, the above-mentioned changes in French inheritance law, which undermined the stem-family system of the peasant proprietors, left the sharecroppers unaffected. Their complex family households were rooted not in inheritance but in the political economy of sharecropping. As long as sharecropping continued, so would the joint family households (Shaffer 1982).

**Economic Differentiation**

The close link between economic arrangements and household composition has implications not only for explaining differences among regions in Europe, but also for understanding the diverse systems that coexisted within local
populations. Full appreciation of the importance of this differentiation has been hampered by the tendency of many scholars to identify whole areas (e.g. the Mediterranean, or even central Italy) by a single household system (Kertzer 1985). As Anderson (1980:32–33) put it, “even in peasant societies by no means everyone has ever been a peasant.”

Research on protoindustry—the putting-out system of manufacture that turned rural homes into workshops throughout major areas of Europe from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries—has emphasized one such nonpeasant population (Mendels 1972, Medick 1976). Aside from the attention they have paid to such protoindustrial populations, though, scholars have been so taken by the idea of a European countryside populated by peasant farmers that they have often failed to recognize the sometimes large populations of landless agricultural laborers.

Studies that distinguish within individual communities between landed peasants and landless workers (agricultural or not) have consistently found the latter to be characterized by much lower levels of complex family coresidence (Comas d’Argemir 1988, Shaffer 1982, Darrow 1989, Sella 1987, Angeli & Bellettini 1979, Kertzer & Hogan 1989, Andorka & Balázs-Kovács 1986). Landless workers typically lived in tiny, cramped quarters that they had to rent. Because adults sold their labor on the market as individuals, they did not face the kinds of pressures favoring complex family coresidence felt by those for whom the household was the unit of production.

In societies where peasants owned their own land, a positive relationship generally exists between the size of the holdings and the complexity of the household (Brettell 1988, Egerbladh 1989). This should not, however, be simply translated into an equation of greater wealth with greater household complexity, as some scholars have been wont to do (e.g. Ruggles 1987:39). In sharecropping Italy, for example, sharecroppers had larger and more complex households than those who owned the farms. Even the commonly held assertion that the poor lived in small households has recently been reexamined. Sokoll (1987) argues that many of the studies that have made this claim are methodologically flawed. In his own study of a late eighteenth-century English community, Sokoll finds that pauper households were larger than others, because they contained more children, and more complex than others, in part because they often contained an elderly widowed parent.

One inference we can draw here is that poverty was connected to certain points in the life course. Accordingly, it may be misleading to think in terms of a distinguishable segment of poor families with its own household system. (On the importance of life course perspectives in historical household study, see Elder 1978, 1987, Vinovskis 1977, 1988, Kertzer 1986, and Hareven 1987.)
**How Nuclear Were Nuclear Family Households?**

Even where stem family norms are widely shared, people may spend a significant proportion of their lives living in nuclear family households (Berkner 1972). This is attributable to life course patterns, since once the older generation dies off, and before the members of the third generation can marry, the household will be nuclear. What is not commonly recognized, however, is that so-called nuclear family systems often entail spending part of one’s life in a complex family household. There are a number of reasons why this is the case, but probably the single most important diagnostic element involves how the elderly are treated (Laslett 1988).

Wall (1989: 374), part of the Cambridge Group which has championed the notion that complex family arrangements were rare in northwestern Europe, notes the “curious paradox” that while preindustrial English households were “overwhelmingly simple,” “the majority of older residents still reside with relatives.” He largely attributes this to the fact that, in the past, because parents bore children until relatively late in their lives, the elderly were more likely to have young unmarried children still living with them.

However, the weight of the evidence from populations with nuclear family household systems suggests that widowed parents were often taken in by one of their married children. For example, Darrow (1989) describes the eighteenth-century French case where workers, who generally lived in nuclear family households, regularly took in elderly relatives. Similarly, Jannsens (1986) actually followed adults through their life course in Tilburg, Holland, in the nineteenth century, and found that a large majority spent part of their adult life in a complex family household due to the taking in of kin. Old folks there rarely lived alone, being taken in either by a married child or by another relative. It is notable that Wall (1986:269) himself finds that in Colyton, England, in the mid-nineteenth century, 32% of the farmers’ households contained a relative beyond the nuclear family.

The boundaries of nuclear family households were not nearly so impermeable as we have been led to believe, and kin often flowed in and out, as the need arose. Indeed, if we focus on the treatment of the elderly, it may be possible to distinguish between two types of nuclear family household systems: one in which, upon the death of a spouse, the widow(er) remains living alone; and one in which, upon the spouse’s death, the widow(er) coresides with a married child.

**The Impact of Industrialization**

The new orthodoxy neatly disposed of the problem of the impact of industrialization on household systems, for if nuclear family households characterized the preindustrial past, the old thesis of industrialization bringing
about household nuclearization could hardly be sustained. Indeed, discussion shifted to the opposite perspective, one which argued that industrialization and urbanization brought about an increase in extended family living arrangements. A number of arguments were offered to support this revisionist thesis, including that grandparents were needed to take care of small children and the household when both of the parents had to be away at work, and that extended kin were useful in facilitating the integration of new immigrants to the city (Anderson 1971, 1978, Wrigley 1977).

For the past decade and a half, in fact, the most active area of historical research concerning households and industrial work has concerned not the impact of modern industrialization, associated primarily with developments in the nineteenth century, but rather the implications of an earlier economy, that associated with protoindustrialization. In line with the theory that household composition is largely the product of economic arrangements, scholars have argued that the protoindustrial household had distinctive features based on its relationship to the means of production.

According to this view, for the protoindustrial laborers as for the peasant farmers, the household was the unit of production; all members took part in the family enterprise. However, unlike the prototypical peasant family, dependent on inheritance of the family farm, the protoindustrial workers needed little to create their own firm. The result was that parents had less control over their children as they grew to adulthood, and there were fewer impediments toward marriage for children. Unlike other landless rural dwellers—who in many areas sent their children off at a tender age to serve as servants or apprentices in other households—the protoindustrial families kept their children at home as long as they could, since their labor could be productively used in the family firm (Medick 1976, Levine 1977).

More recent studies have taken issue with some elements of this protoindustrialization theory (Gutmann 1987). Some have questioned whether protoindustrial households did exhibit distinctive demographic characteristics (Houston & Snell 1984, Poos 1986). Of particular importance is the conclusion found in the more recent literature that in many, perhaps most, areas of Europe, there was no separate category of protoindustrial households. Rather, a wide variety of both landless and peasant households took up protoindustrial labor.

For example, Pfister's (1989) study of a rural portion of the canton of Zurich in 1762 finds that much of the protoindustrial labor was done in farming households, and that farming households with protoindustrial activity were richer than those without. He argues that protoindustrial activities were entered into when the household was at a phase of complex family composition, allowing excess labor to be productively occupied in the agricultural off-season and generating cash income which could be used to invest in farm
improvements. This analysis complements Barbagli’s conclusion, based on a study of the impact of industrialization on households in Italy, that the advent of industrial labor did not necessarily undermine complex family household arrangements, since households could sometimes benefit from them in mixing their investments in both the agricultural and industrial sectors (Barbagli 1984:107).

Research on the impact of modern industrialization on household arrangements in Europe has concentrated almost entirely on England. There is considerable evidence there that modern industrial development and the urban expansion that went with it often led to a higher degree of household complexity, at least until the modern welfare state could develop alternatives to kin dependence. However, England cannot be taken as typical of Europe as a whole, and thus the old question of the impact of industrialization on household arrangements remains unanswered. In areas of Europe where complex family households prevailed in the countryside, the increase in the proletarian proportion of the population meant an increase in nuclear family households. This does not mean that modern industrialization necessarily entailed the advent of a new household system in these areas, since other proletarianized segments of the rural population (such as agricultural wage laborers) often predated modern industry, and typically lived in nuclear family households (Kertzer 1978, Lehning 1980, Accampo 1989).

THE ROLE OF DEMOGRAPHIC FORCES IN DETERMINING HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION

The Relevance of Demography

As we have seen, household arrangements are in good part the product of political economic forces, and they also reflect cultural norms regarding where one should go to live upon marriage, what should be done with aged parents, and so on. But households are also the product of demographic forces that affect what kin are available for coresidence. Patrilocal postmarital residence, for example, is not necessarily found just because the prevailing economic system and cultural norms make patrilocality desirable: If a man’s parents have died before he marries, patrilocality (at least in a strict sense) is impossible. Likewise, under certain demographic conditions, such as various migration patterns, new forms of complex family coresidence may become common, despite the lack of cultural norms favoring such coresidence (Brettell 1986, Carrion 1988).

Demographic explanations of household systems first became important in family history in the wake of claims that, even where complex family households are the cultural norm and are an optimal adaptation to land tenure arrangements, most households most of the time would be nuclear (Berkner
1972, 1975, Wheaton 1975). These claims, in turn, were based on earlier work by Levy (1965), who argued that high mortality rates prevailing in the past prevented large numbers of complex family households from developing, even in societies which favored such arrangements. This view has itself become part of the new orthodoxy, as expressed, for example, by Goode (1982:108), who maintains that in the past high mortality rates “made it inevitable that most families would not be able to create and maintain a large household.” Likewise, Ruggles (1987:61) cites Levy in making the claim that “the frequency of extended families was low in the preindustrial period.” He goes on to argue that patterns of household composition in the past are in good part “simply reflections of variation in demographic conditions during the past four centuries” (Ruggles 1990:22).

Microsimulation

As family historians have turned to demography for help in sorting out the effects of demographic forces on household formation, they have encountered demographers who have themselves been struggling with the complexities of examining household units (Bongaarts 1987, Clarke 1986, Keilman 1988, Willekens 1988, Watkins et al 1987). A variety of modeling procedures have been proposed in dealing with these questions, but in recent years microsimulation has received the most attention. Through microsimulation, the impact of varying demographic rates (e.g. mortality, age at marriage) on the distribution of household types can be tested, at least in theory. Thus, for example, one can ask what proportion of households would be complex at any given time if certain stem family rules were followed, under demographic rates prevailing in eighteenth-century England. Moreover, one can ask how much impact a change of a specified amount in any demographic rate would have on this proportion.

Indeed, much of the early work in household microsimulation has been done on just this problem. Wachter, Hammel & Laslett (1978, Wachter 1987) tested Levy’s demographic constraint thesis by asking whether such constraints could account for the low proportion of complex family households in preindustrial England. They concluded that demographic forces did not preclude higher proportions of complex family households, and thus there must have been other pressures—economic or cultural—which favored a nuclear family household system.

Yet the notion of severe demographic constraints has been hard to kill. In an influential recent book, Ruggles (1987) resurrects Levy’s hypothesis, using a different microsimulation model to reach conclusions diametrically opposed to Wachter et al. Ruggles (1987: xviii) asserts that “there were few extended families before the industrial revolution primarily because most people had a shortage of living relatives.” The microsimulation results, he
argues, show that a large majority of those in preindustrial England "who could have resided in stem families actually did so" (p. 121), and that therefore the stem family household was the preferred family form. The implications of this analysis are far-reaching, for Ruggles concludes that historical changes in household structure are due to changing demographic rates rather than changing economic pressures. Predictably, members of the Cambridge Group have found Ruggles' analysis to be flawed (Smith 1989).

That such contradictory conclusions can be reached through microsimulation methods has led some to be wary of this approach to solving the problem of demographic constraints (King 1990). The technical sophistication required to evaluate competing microsimulation models, and the fact that an informed evaluation would necessitate examination of the actual algorithms used, puts the user of such results at a great disadvantage. It is also easy to misinterpret the findings, for they are based on precise models of household formation rules that may have little relationship to any particular historical setting.

As we have seen, for example, stem family rules were not the only ones that led to the formation of complex households in the past, and thus any attempt to conclude from models based on such stem family principles that most households in the past must have been nuclear is logically flawed. Both Ruggles (1987) and Wachter (1987:223) have been guilty of this leap. Kertzer (1989), for example, has shown that the joint family household formation rules prevalent in sharecropping Italy led to high proportions of complex family households; he disproves the common assertion that such high proportions of multinuclear households could only be found where female marriage age was low, as in Russia. The existence of high proportions of complex family households depended not simply on prevailing demographic rates, but on cultural norms regarding postmarital residence and the principles governing household fissioning. These, in turn, are closely tied to prevailing political economic forces. This is not to argue that demographic constraints play no role. However, the claim that such constraints are more influential than economic or cultural forces cannot be sustained.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS OF HISTORICAL HOUSEHOLD STUDY

The burst of quantitative studies in European family history in the 1970s initially seemed to herald the end of the old wisdom regarding the complex nature of family forms in the western past, and, with it, a rejection of earlier views that equated industrialization with household nuclearization. The research of the 1980s, however, has undermined this new orthodoxy, with evidence of household complexity pouring in from much of preindustrial
Europe. This new evidence has been piling up faster than its theoretical implications can be assimilated, and we now have no new theoretical paradigm comparable either to the older modernization model or the newer model of the “myth” of the complex family household in the European past.

The theoretical implications of the debates we have here chronicled go beyond an understanding of coresidential arrangements themselves, for they figure centrally in the efforts to understand the remarkable economic and political developments in the west during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In short, what was it about the western societies that led to modern industrialization and the growth of modern forms of capitalism and, even, parliamentary democracy? In trying to determine what might have been distinctive about these societies, and what element may have been conducive to the accumulation of capital and the necessary mobility of labor, scholars have often turned to the presumed “individualism” of western culture (Macfarlane 1979, 1987), epitomized by nuclear family co-residence, together with the related feature of late age at marriage (especially for women). Indeed, Todd (1985, 1987) has gone so far as to argue that nuclear family co-residence lay behind the evolution of political democracy, while multiple family household systems produced Communist rule. What the studies discussed in this review demonstrate, however, is that before sociologists go too far in theorizing the role of household systems or related systems of marriage in economic and political development, they must recognize the complexity of the distribution of these systems, and the factors that affect this distribution.

Studies of European family life have clearly become more theoretically sophisticated over the past decade. Debates on the relationship between the individual and the family or household group, often linked to concerns over the use of the concept of “family strategies,” have shed light on household processes as the outcomes of complex negotiations among partially conflicting perspectives of individual family members, with both gender and age acting as important lines of conflict (Moch et al 1987). Laslett (1984, 1988), in this regard, has written of the family as a “knot of individual interests.”

Meanwhile, earlier, crude notions of family life cycles have been thrown out, as greater sophistication in interpreting the complex relationships between family relations and historical change has been made possible through the development of life course perspectives (Elder 1981, Kertzer & Schiaffino 1983, Kertzer 1986, Alter 1988, Vinovskis 1988). Moreover, households are increasingly being seen not simply as isolated social units, but as a key means by which individuals cope with the economic, political, and other pressures that confront them from the larger society (Rapp et al 1983). The relationship of households to larger kin networks has also been receiving more attention (Levi 1990). Yet, questions as to the “emergent” properties of the household
remain; households are not simply reducible to the sum of their parts (Netting et al. 1984).

As we struggle toward a satisfactory explanation for the diversity of western household systems, three elements merit particular attention: (a) political economic forces; (b) demographic forces; and (c) culture. As suggested in this review, political economic pressures may ultimately explain much of the diversity of household systems found in preindustrial Europe, ranging from the serf households and landless cotters of eastern Europe, to the sharecroppers and land-poor peasants of Italy, to the peasant proprietors of southern and central Europe. Demographic forces, while conditioning the kinds of coresidential arrangements that are possible and influencing life course patterns of coresidence, do not explain the differences in household systems found in preindustrial Europe. This follows from the observation that differences in household forms do not correspond neatly with differences in demographic rates. Moreover, the most crucial "demographic" variable of them all, age at marriage, is better viewed as the product of political economic arrangements and cultural norms.

The relationship between political economy and household composition is mediated by cultural norms, and these can have an independent influence (Reher 1988). For example, in sharecropping areas of Italy, the agricultural wage laborers, while not having nearly the proportion of complex family households as the sharecroppers, lived much more frequently in such households than did English agricultural wage laborers (Kertzer 1984). Laslett (1983:547–549), in this connection, has drawn attention to the distinction between settings in which the household is a unit of production (a "work group"), and those in which it is not. Where households are not work groups, he argues, their composition is not determined by the logic of the productive unit; they are thus free to take on "something of the form and structure normative to the society which surrounds them." Similarly, existing household systems have a kind of cultural momentum. A good example is provided by the industrialization that took place around the Spanish town of Bresalú. People did not abandon overnight their attachment to the stem-family norms that had long been associated with peasant agriculture. Rather, in this and in other cases, people used the preexisting stem family household system as a resource in adapting to the demands of a changed economic situation (Flaquer 1986).

We are now able to begin to grasp the contours of a much more complex western family heritage than earlier scholars had recognized. Although such models as those originally proposed by Laslett and Hajnal for western family history have been shown to be wanting, they have served an invaluable role in stimulating and guiding family history research. Further advances in this field
depend on the development of new theoretical constructs; I have tried here to sketch out what some of the building blocks of such theories may be.

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