The Family World System

By Perry Anderson

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Few topics of fundamental importance have, at first glance, generated so much numbing literature as the family. The appearance is unjust, but not incomprehensible. For the discrepancy between the vivid existential drama into which virtually every human being is plunged at birth and the generalized statistical pall of demographic surveys and household studies often looks irremediable: as if subjective experience and objective calibration have no meeting point. Anthropological studies of kinship remain the most technical area of the discipline. Images of crushing dullness have been alleviated, but not greatly altered, by popularizations of the past--works like *The World We Have Lost* (1965) by Peter Laslett, the doyen of Cambridge family reconstruction--fond albums of a time when "the whole of life went forward in the family, in a circle of loved, familiar faces," within a "one-class society." The one outstanding contemporary synthesis, William Goode's *World Revolution and Family Patterns* (1963), which argued that the model of the Western conjugal family was likely to become universal, since it best fulfilled the needs of industrialization, has never acquired the standing its generosity of scope and spirit deserved. Family studies are certainly no desert. They are densely populated, but much of the terrain forms a featureless plain of functions and numbers stretching away to the horizon, broken only by clumps of sentiment.

Over this landscape, Göran Therborn's *Between Sex and Power* rises like a majestic volcano. Throwing up a billowing column of the boldest ideas and arguments, while an awesome lava of evidence flows down its slopes, this is a great work of historical intellect and imagination. It is the fruit of a rare combination of gifts. Trained as a sociologist, Therborn is a highly conceptual thinker, allying the formal rigor of his discipline at its best with a command of a vast range of empirical data. The result is a powerful theoretical structure, supported by a fascinating body of evidence. But it is also a set of macro-narratives that compose perhaps the first true example we possess of a work of global history. Most writing that lays claim to this term, whatever other merits it may display, ventures beyond certain core zones of attention only selectively and patchily. In the case of general histories of the world, of which there are now more than a few, problems of sheer scale alone have dictated strict limits to even the finest enterprises.

Therborn, by contrast, in focusing on just one dimension of existence, develops a map of human changes over time that is faithful to the complexity and diversity of the world in an arresting new way, omitting no corner of the planet. Not just every inhabited continent is included in this history; differences between nations or regions within each--from China and Japan to Uruguay and Colombia, north to south India, Gabon to Burkina Faso, Turkey to Persia, Norway to Portugal--are scanned with a discriminating eye. Such ecumenical curiosity is the antithesis of Barrington Moore's conviction that, in comparative history, only big countries matter. Not surprisingly, the challenge is the attractive product of a small country. Therborn's sensibility reflects his nationality: In modern times Sweden, situated on the northern margins of Europe, with a population about the size of New Jersey's, has for the most part been an inconspicuous spectator of world politics. But in the affairs of the family, it has more than once been a pace-setter. That a comparative tour de force on them should be written by a Swede is peculiarly appropriate.
Surveying the world, Therborn distinguishes five major family systems: European (including New World and Pacific settlements), East Asian, sub-Saharan African, West Asian/North African and Subcontinental, with a further two more "interstitial" ones, Southeast Asian and Creole American. Although each of the major systems is the heartland of a distinctive religious or ethical code--Christian, Confucian, Animist, Muslim, Hindu--and the interstitial ones are zones of overlapping codes, the systems themselves form many "geocultures" in which elements of a common history can override contrasts of belief within them. This cultural backdrop lends color and texture to *Between Sex and Power*. The book's tone recalls aspects of Eric Hobsbawm, in its crisp judgments and dry wit. While Therborn is necessarily far more statistical in style, something of the same literary and anecdotal liveliness is present too. Amid an abundance of gripping arithmetic, novels and plays, memoirs and marriage ads have their place in the narrative. Most striking of all, in a field so dominated by social or merely technical registers, is the political construction Therborn gives to the history of the family in the twentieth century.

What are the central propositions of the book? All traditional family systems, Therborn argues, have comprised three regimes: of patriarchy, marriage and fertility (crudely summarized--who calls the shots in the family, how people hitch up, how many kids result). *Between Sex and Power* sets out to trace the modern history of each. For Therborn patriarchy is male family power, typically invested in fathers and husbands, not the subordination of or discrimination against women in general--gender inequality being a broader phenomenon. At the beginning of his story, around 1900, patriarchy in this classical sense was a universal pattern, albeit with uneven gradations. In Europe, the French Revolution had failed to challenge it, issuing in the ferocious family clauses of the Napoleonic Code, while subsequent industrial capitalism--in North America as in Europe--relied no less on patriarchal norms as a sheet anchor of moral stability. Confucian and Muslim codes were far more draconian, though the "minute regulations" of the former set some limits to the potential for a "blank cheque" for male power. Arrangements were looser in much of sub-Saharan Africa, Creole America and Southeast Asia. Harshest of all was the Hindu system of North India, in a league of its own for repression. As Therborn notes, this is one of the very few parts of the world where men live longer than women, even today.

By 2000, however, patriarchy had become "the big loser of the twentieth century," as Therborn puts it, yielding far more ground than religion or tyranny. "Probably no other social institution has been forced to retreat as much." This roll-back was not just an outcome of gradual processes of modernization, in the bland scheme of structural-functional sociology. It was principally the product of three political hammer blows. The first of these, Therborn shows, came in the threes of the First World War in Sweden, where full legal parity between husband and wife was first enacted, and then, in a more radical series of measures, the October Revolution dismantled the whole juridical apparatus of patriarchy in Russia, with a much more overt emphasis on sexual equality as such. Conduct, of course, was never the same as codification. "The legal family revolution of the Bolsheviks was very much ahead of Russian societal time, and Soviet family practices did not immediately dance to political music, however loud and powerful." But the shock wave in the world generated by the Russian example was, Therborn rightly emphasizes, enormous.

The Second World War delivered the next great blow on the other side of the world, again in contrasted neighboring forms. In occupied Japan, General MacArthur's staff imposed a Constitution proclaiming "the essential equality of the sexes"--a notion, of course, that has still to find a place in the American Constitution--and a civil code based on conjugal symmetry. In liberated China, the victory of Communism "meant a full-scale assault on the most ancient and elaborate patriarchy of the world," obliterating all legal traces of the Confucian order.
Finally, a third wave of emancipation was unleashed by the youth rebellions of the late 1960s, which segued into modern feminism. (When the revolt of May 1968 erupted in France, the country's High Court was still upholding the French husband's right to forbid his wife to move out, even if he was publicly maintaining a mistress.) Here the inauguration by the United Nations of an international Decade for Women in 1975 (also the ultimate outcome of a Communist initiative, on the part of the Finnish daughter of one of Khrushchev's Politburo veterans) is taken by Therborn as the turning point in a global discrediting of patriarchy, whose last legal redoubt in the United States—in Louisiana—was struck down by the Supreme Court as late as 1981.

The rule of the father has not disappeared. In the world at large, West Asia, Africa and South Asia remain the principal holdouts. Islam itself, Therborn suggests, may be less to blame for the resilience of Arab patriarchy than the corruption of the secular forces once opposed to it, abetted by America and Israel. In India, on the other hand, there is no mistaking the degree of misogyny in caste and religion, even if the mediation of patriarchal authority by market mechanisms has its postmodern ambiguities. Surveying the "blatant instrumentalism" of the matrimonial pages of a middle-class Indian press, in which "more than 99 per cent of the ads vaunted socio-economic offers and desires," he wonders: "To what extent are parents the 'agents' of young people, in the same sense as any money-seeking athlete, musician or writer has an agent?"

At the opposite extreme is Euro-American postpatriarchy, in which men and women possess equal rights but still far from equal resources—women enjoying on average not much more than half (55-60 percent) the income and wealth of men.

In between these poles come the homelands of the Communist revolutions, which did so much to transform the landscape of patriarchy in the last century. The collapse of the Soviet bloc has not seen any restoration in this respect, whatever other regressions it may involve ("the power of fathers and husbands does not seem to have increased," though "that of pimps certainly has"). Therborn speculates that in both Russia and Eastern Europe, the original revolutionary gains may prove Communism's most lasting legacy. In China, on the other hand, there is much further to go, amid more signs of recidivist urges in civil society. Still, he points out, not only is gender inequality in wages and salaries far lower in the PRC than in Taiwan—by a factor of three—but patriarchy proper, as indicated by conjugal residence and division of labor, continues to be weaker.

The first part of Therborn's story is thus eminently political. As he remarks, this is logical enough, since patriarchy is about power. His second part moves to sex. In questions of marriage, Europe—or, more precisely, Western Europe and those of its marchlands affected by German colonization in the Middle Ages—diverged from the rest of the world far earlier than in matters of patriarchy. In this zone a unique marital regime had already developed in pre-industrial times, combining late monogamy, significant numbers of unmarried people and Christian norms of conjugal duty, contradictorily surrounded by a certain penumbra of informal sex. The key result was "neo-locality," or the exit of wedded couples from parental households. Everywhere else in the world, Therborn maintains, the rule was universal marriage, typically at earlier ages, as the necessary entry into adulthood. (He does not make it clear whether he thinks this applies to all pre-class societies, where such a rule might be doubted.)

Paradoxically, although patterns of marriage might be thought to have varied more widely around the world than forms of patriarchy, Therborn has much less to say about them. Polyandry is never mentioned, the map of monogamy is unexplored, nor is any taxonomy of polygamy offered beyond a tacit distinction between elite and mass variants (the latter peculiar to sub-Saharan). The base line of his tale of marriage is set by a contrast between two deviant areas and all other arrangements. The first of these is the West European anomaly, with its subsequent overseas projections into North America and the Pacific. The second is the
Creole, born in plantation and mining zones of the Caribbean and Latin America with a substantial black, mulatto or mestizo population, where a uniquely deregulated sexual regime developed.

Some startling figures emerge from Therborn's comparison. If sexual mores in Europe first became widely relaxed in aristocratic circles of the eighteenth century, flouting of conventional norms reached epidemic proportions among the lower classes of many cities in the nineteenth, if only by reason of the costs of marriage. At various points in the latter part of the century, a third of all births in Paris, half in Vienna and more than two-thirds in Klagenfurt were out of wedlock. By 1900 such figures had fallen, and national averages of illegitimacy had become quite modest (Austrians still outpacing African-Americans, however). Matters were much wilder in the Creole system, readers of García Márquez will not be surprised to learn. "Iberian colonial America and the West Indies were the stage of the largest-scale assault on marriage in history." In the mid-nineteenth century between a third and half of the population of Bahia never tied the knot; in the Rio de la Plata region, extramarital births were four to five times the levels in Spain and Italy; around 1900 as many as four-fifths of sexual unions in Mexico City may have been without benefit of clergy.

These were the colorful exceptions. Throughout Asia, Africa, Russia and most of Eastern Europe, marriage in one form or another was inescapable. A century later, Therborn's account suggests, much less has changed than in the order of patriarchy. Creole America has become more marital, at least in periods of relative prosperity, but remains the most casual about the institution. In Asia, now mostly monogamous, and sub-Saharan Africa, still largely polygamous, marriage continues to be a universal norm--with pockets of slippage only in the big cities of Japan, Southeast Asia and South Africa--but the age at which it is contracted has risen. If divorce of one kind or another has become nearly universal as a legal possibility, its practice is much more restricted--in the Hindu "cow belt," virtually zero. At the top end of the scale, in born-again America and post-Communist Russia, any wedding guest is entitled to be quizzical: Half of all marriages break up. But with successive attempts at conjugal bliss, the crude marriage rate has not fallen in the United States. Globally, it would seem, the predominant note is stability.

In one zone, however, Therborn tracks a major change. After marrying as never before in the middle decades of the century, Western Europeans started to secede from altar and registry in increasing numbers. Sweden was once again the vanguard country, and it still remains well ahead of its Scandinavian neighbors, not to speak of lands farther south. The innovation it pioneered, from the late 1960s onward, was mass informal cohabitation. Thirty years later, the great majority of Swedish women giving birth to their first child--nearly 70 percent--were either cohabiting or single mothers. Marriage might or might not follow cohabitation. What became a minority option, in one country after another--Britain, France, Germany--was marriage before it. In Catholic France and Protestant England alike, extramarital births jumped from 6-8 percent to 40-42 percent in the space of four decades. Manifestly, the sexual revolution of the 1960s and '70s lay behind this spectacular transformation. Therborn notes the arrival of the pill and IUD as facilitating conditions, but he is more interested in consequences. What did it add up to? In effect, a double liberation: more partners and--especially for women--more pleasure. In Finland in the early 1970s, women had bedded an average of three men; in the early '90s the number had risen to six (by then the gap in erotic satisfaction between the sexes had closed). In Sweden the median number of women's lovers more than tripled during the same period, a much greater increase than for men. "More than anything else," Therborn concludes, "this is what the sexual revolution has brought: a long period for pre-marital sex, and a plurality of sexual partners over a lifetime becoming a 'normal' phenomenon, in a statistical as well as in a moral sense."
How far does the United States conform to the emergent European pattern? Only in part, as its different religious and political complexion would lead one to expect. Europeans will be astonished to learn that in 2000 about a fifth of American 18- to 24-year-olds claimed to be virgins on their wedding day. Only 6 percent of American couples cohabited. More than 70 percent of mothers at first birth are married. On the other hand, the United States has nearly twice as many teenage births per cohort as the highest country in the EU and an extramarital birthrate higher than that of the Netherlands. Without going much into race or region, Therborn describes the American system as "dualist." But from the evidence he provides, it might be thought that electoral divisions are reflected in sexual contrasts, blue and red in the boudoir too.

In the last part of Between Sex and Power, Therborn moves to fertility. Here the conundrum is the "demographic transition"--the standard term for the shift from a regime of low growth, combining lots of children and many early deaths, to one of high growth, combining many children but fewer deaths, and then back to another one of low growth, this time with both fewer deaths and fewer children. There is no mystery about the way medical advances and better diets led to falling rates of mortality in nineteenth-century Europe and eventually reached most of the world, to similar effect, in the second half of the twentieth century. The big question is why birthrates fell, first in Europe and North America between the 1880s and 1930s, and then for the majority of the human race from the mid-1970s onward, in two uncannily similar waves. In each case, "a process rapidly cutting through and across state boundaries, levels of industrialization, urbanization and levels of income, across religions, ideologies and family systems" slashed fertility rates by 30-40 percent in three decades. Today, the average family has no more than two to three children throughout most of the former Third World.

What explains these gigantic changes? The first nations to experience a significant fall in fertility were France and the United States, by 1830--generations in advance of all others. What they had in common, Therborn suggests, was their popular revolutions, which had given ordinary people a sense of self-mastery. Once the benefits of smaller families became clear in these societies, neolocality allowed couples to make their own decisions to improve their lives before any modern means of contraception were available. Fifty years later, perhaps triggered initially by the onset of a world recession, mass birth control began to roll through Europe, eventually sweeping all the way from Portugal to Russia. This time, Therborn's hypothesis runs, it was a combination of radical socialist and secular movements popularizing the idea of family planning, together with the spread of literacy, that brought lower fertility as part of an increasingly self-conscious culture of modernity. This was birth control from below.

In the Third World, by contrast, contraception--now an easy technology--was typically propagated or imposed from above, by political fiat of the state. China's one-child policy has been the most dramatic, if extreme, example. Once lower birthrates became a general goal of governments committed to modernization, family systems then determined the order in which societies entered the new regime: East Asia in the lead, North India and black Africa far in the rear guard. Here too it was a sense of mastery, of human ability to command nature--not always bureaucratic in origin, since the better-off societies of Latin America moved more spontaneously in the same direction--that powered the change. The consequences of that change, of which we can still see only the beginnings, are enormous. Without it, the earth would now have some 2 billion more inhabitants.

In Europe and Japan, meanwhile, fertility has dropped no less dramatically, falling below net reproduction rates. This collapse in the birthrate, from which the United States is saved essentially by immigration, promises rapid aging of these nations in the short run and, if unchecked, virtual extinction of them in the long run. There is now a growing literature of public alarm about this prospect, what the French historian Pierre Chaunu denounces as a "White
Death" threatening the Old World. Therborn eschews it. Negative rates of reproduction in these rich, socially advanced societies do not correspond in his view to any birth strike by women but rather to their desire to have two to three children and careers that are the equal of men's, which the existing social order does not yet allow them to do. In denying themselves the offspring they want, European parents are "moving against themselves," not with the grain of any deeper cultural change.

Between Sex and Power ends with four principal conclusions. The different family systems of the world reveal little internal logic of change. They have been recast from the outside, and the history of their transformations has been neither unilinear nor evolutionary but rather determined by a series of unevenly timed international conjunctures of a decidedly political character. The result has not been one of convergence, other than in a general decline of patriarchy, due more to wars and revolutions than to any "feminist world spirit." In the South, the differential timing of changes in fertility continues to shift the distribution of global population further toward the subcontinent and Africa and away from Europe, Japan and Russia. In the North, European marriage has altered its forms but is proving supple and creative in adapting to a new range of desires: Conventional jeremiads notwithstanding, it is in good shape. Predictions? Serenely declined. "The best bet for the future is on the inexhaustible innovative capacity of humankind, which eventually surpasses all social science."

In due course, an army of specialists will gather round Between Sex and Power, like so many expert sports fans, to pore over its multitudinous argument. What can a layman say, beyond the magnitude of its achievement? Tentatively, perhaps only this. In the architectonic of the book, there is something of a gap between the notion of a family system and the triad of patriarchy, marriage and fertility that follows it. In effect, the way these three interconnect to form the structure of any family system goes unstated in the separate treatment accorded each. But if we consider the trio as an abstract combination, it would seem that logically--as the order in which Therborn proceeds to them itself suggests--patriarchy must command the other two as the "dominant," since it will typically lay down the rules of marriage and set the norms of reproduction. There is, in other words, a hierarchy of determinations built into any family system.

This has a bearing on Therborn's conclusions. His final emphasis falls, unhesitatingly, on the divergence between major family systems today. After stressing continuing worldwide dissimilarities between fertility and marital regimes, he concedes that "the patriarchal outcome is somewhat different." His own evidence suggests that this way of putting it is an understatement. For what his data show is a powerful process of convergence, far from complete in extent but unequivocal in direction. But if the variegated forms of patriarchy are what historically determined the main parameters of marriage and reproduction, wouldn't any ongoing decline of them across family systems toward a common juridical zero point imply that birthrates and marriage customs are eventually likely to converge, in significant measure, at their own pace too? That seems, at any rate, a possible deduction sidestepped by Therborn, but which his story of fertility appears to bear out. For what is clear from his account is that the astonishing fall in birthrates in most of the underdeveloped world has been the product of a historic collapse in patriarchal authority, as its powers of life and death have been transferred to the state, which now determines how many are born and how many survive.

What, then, of marriage? Here, certainly, contrasts remain greatest. In speaking of "the core of romantic freedom and commitment in the modern European (and New World) family system," Therborn implies this remains specific to the West. But while the caste system or Sharia law plainly preclude extempore love, does it show no signs of spreading, as ideal or realization, in the big cities of East Asia or Latin America? The imagination of urban Japan, he shows, is already half-seized with it. Not, of course, that the decline of marriage in Western Europe, with the advent of mass cohabitation, has so far been replicated anywhere else. But
here a different sort of question might be asked. Is it really the case that the negative rates of reproduction that have accompanied this pattern are as unwished-for as Therborn suggests? He relies on the discrepancy between surveys in which women explain how many children they expect and those they actually have. But this could just mean that in practice their desire for children proved weaker than for a well-paid job, a satisfying career or more than one lover at a time. Voters in the West regularly say they want better schools and healthcare, and in principle expect to pay for them, and commentators on the left often pin high hopes on such declarations. But once such citizens get to the polling booth they tend to stick to lower taxes. The same kind of self-deception could apply to children. If so, it would be difficult to say European marriage was in such good shape, since there would be no stopping place in sight for its plunge of society into an actuarial abyss.

Therborn resists such thoughts. Although Between Sex and Power pays handsome homage to the role of Communism in the dismantling of patriarchy in the twentieth century, it displays no specially Marxist view of the family. Engels would not have shared the author's satisfaction that marriage is flourishing, however ductile the forms it has adopted. In expressing his attachment to them, Therborn speaks with the humane voice of a level-headed Swedish reformism that he understandably admires, without having ever altogether subscribed to it. In looking on the bright side of the EU marital regime, he is also consistent with the case he has made in the past for its welfare states, which have survived in much better condition than its critics or mourners believe. It is in the same spirit, one might say, that he insists on the persistent divergence of family systems across the world. Uniformity is the one condition every part of the political spectrum deplores. The most unflinching neoliberals invariably explain that universal free markets are the best of all guardians of diversity. Social democrats reassure their followers that the capitalism to which they must adjust is becoming steadily more various. Traditional conservatives expatiate on the irreducible multiplicity of faiths and civilizations. Homogeneity has no friends, at least since the French Hegelian philosopher Alexandre Kojève prepared the end of history for Francis Fukuyama. But when any claim becomes too choral, a flicker of doubt is indicated. It scarcely affects the magnificence of this book. In it, you can find the largest changes in human relations of modern times.

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Retreat of the Male

Eric Hobsbawm

- *Between Sex and Power: Family in the World 1900-2000* by Göran Therborn

The family is a subject on which, for obvious reasons, there is no shortage of public or private views. Google records 368 million items under the word ‘family’, as against a mere 170 million under ‘war’. All governments have tried to encourage or discourage procreation and passed laws about human coupling and decoupling. All the global religions (with the possible exception of Buddhism) and all the 20th-century ideologies have strong convictions on these matters. So have masses of otherwise politically inactive citizens, as the rise of electoral support for religious fundamentalism indicates. It has been plausibly argued that ‘moral issues’ (i.e. abortion and homosexual marriage) won George W. Bush his second term in office.

The passion with which these opinions are held is almost always inversely correlated to knowledge of the facts, even in the holder’s own country: most of the public discourse on the relations between men, women and their offspring is both unhistorical and deeply provincial. Göran Therborn’s comparative survey of the world’s family systems and the ways in which they have changed (or failed to change) in the course of the past century, the result of eight years of intensive thought and research, is a necessary corrective in both respects. Thanks to its global perspective and unique accumulation of data, it should from now on be the standard guide to the subject. In addition, it makes available the sometimes surprising results of a generation of demographic, ethnographic and sociological researches recorded in a bibliography of more than forty pages. How many people knew, for example, that up to the middle of the 20th century by far the highest rate of divorce ever recorded – up to 50 per cent – was to be found among nominally Muslim Malays, that there is less gender bias in domestic work in Chinese cities today than in the USA, that the highest divorce rates in the second half of the 20th century were to be found among the main protagonists of the Cold War, the USA and Russia, or that the most sexually active Western people are the Finns? It is far from common knowledge that the two or three decades of the mid-20th century ‘were the age of marriage and of intra-marital sexuality in modern Western history’ – in 1960, 70 per cent of American women aged between 20 and 24 were married, as against 23 per cent in 2000.

Therborn, whose previous books include *European Modernity and Beyond: The Trajectory of European Societies 1945-2000* (1994), is here particularly concerned with three themes, all of them involving changes both in family values and in actual practice, although the text does not always make it easy to follow them. (Therborn’s Scandinavian commitment to ending ‘humanity’s long patriarchal night’ is not an analytical asset.) Two of these themes – the decline of patriarchy and growth of birth control – are unproblematic, unlike the third, clumsily described as ‘the role of marriage, and non-marriage, in regulating sexual behaviour, and sexual bonding in particular’.

Despite some common global developments, notably the spread of birth control, the world’s family patterns have not converged; the process of ‘family change . . . has been neither evolutionary nor unilinear’. The world in 1900 was divided broadly into five family systems – the European (including the New World settlements), the sub-Saharan African, the East Asian, the South Asian and the West Asian/North African – belonging to the two major branches which the social anthropologist Jack Goody has taught us to recognise, the African and the Eurasian. Therborn prefers a ‘geocultural’ division to one based on religion, since, as he sees it, geoculture generally prevails. Hindu and Muslim family practices in North India are similar but markedly distinct from Hindu practices in South India, and African Christianity has had to make substantial practical concessions to African polygyny. The South East Asian and Creole
American are ‘interstitial systems’. In the former, ‘the rigid patriarchies of Confucianism, Islam and Catholicism were mellowed by Buddhist insouciance in family matters’; and in the latter, European conquest created the curious combination of rigid patriarchy among rulers, mass miscegenation, and an uprooted non-marital family pattern among the conquered indigenous and the imported slave populations. The imperial conquest of the Western hemisphere, Therborn suggests, produced the first sudden transformation of family structure before the 20th century.

Among Creole Americans male power was macho rather than institutional, but for the great majority of family systems up until the 20th century it was patriarchal, even in the minority of matrilineal systems. It rested on the power of older males over the young of both sexes and on the institutionalised superiority of men over women, though Europe, South-East Asia and Africa proved less unfavourable to women than elsewhere. The West European family, we are reminded, ‘was by far the least patriarchal in a very patriarchal world’. Unexpectedly, women also benefited in the only region of systematic mass polygamy, south of the Sahara, thanks perhaps to the fact that the African family was essentially non-nuclear (‘kin was always more important than spouse’) and to the early public recognition that sex is a legitimate human pleasure. Patriarchy also rested on the overwhelming prevalence of marriage, not necessarily indissoluble, even in South-East Asia and Africa, where weddings are not central rites of passage.

Therborn holds plausibly that, unlike social structures of power and production, ‘family systems do not seem to possess an intrinsic dynamic – their changes are exogenous’: i.e. in the absence of any push from outside, they will reproduce themselves. Of course, the ways in which human groups earn their living – both limitations and opportunities – have always led to adjustments in marriage (by abstention or varying the age of partners) and in child-bearing (by varying the birth-rate or infanticide). The very earliest 18th-century demographers regarded it as almost axiomatic that in any year the number of marriages varied inversely with the price of corn. More generally, the long-established ‘West European marriage system’ that prevailed west of the historic line from Trieste to St Petersburg, the original ‘Iron Curtain’, assumed that marriages would lead to new households (‘neo-locality’), which required the new couple to have initial resources – in agrarian societies, access to land. But, Therborn argues, in settled regions like those of medieval and early modern Western Europe this required systems of land transfer between generations by inheritance. This, he suggests, is what led to the characteristic ‘Western’ marriage system (later exported to settler societies overseas): late marriages at variable ages, a high proportion of the never-married, and ‘a combination of . . . non-hierarchical sexual informality . . . with a strongly normative sexual order’. On the other hand, in Africa, where the majority of subsistence farming, not to mention, in some parts, commerce, was carried out by women, marriage was more than elsewhere a crucial form of labour supply.

What are the outside impulses that lead to changes within the family of unparalleled historical rapidity? Somewhat unexpectedly, what Therborn feels obliged to explain is the long delay in the 18th and 19th centuries before the rapid decline and fall of Western patriarchy in the 20th. Would we not have expected industrialisation to weaken it by severing the place of work from the place of residence, proletarianisation to deprive fathers of power both because they had no property to transmit and because they were now clearly themselves dependent on the owners of land or capital? Did urbanisation not weaken authority as such? Indeed, had male dominance not appeared to retreat, at least among the poor, in the era of ‘proto-industrialisation’ (what used to be known as the putting-out system)?

In fact, the rise of industrial capitalist society protected and reproduced patriarchy, not least because up until the rise of corporate business it was not, and could not yet be, a system operating primarily, let alone uniquely, by market rationality (in many countries this is still the
case). The patriarchal family was not only ‘a heavy social anchor’ but an essential mechanism of economic enterprise. Moreover, as 19th-century British industrialisation shows, a prosperous industrial capitalism was to turn its proletarians into a manufacturing working class, very probably class-conscious, but also increasingly composed of males functioning as the primary bread-winners of their family. This became ‘the normative aspiration of the European working classes’.

Perhaps some of Therborn’s surprise is due to what he sees as the priority of anti-patriarchal argument over changes in actual behaviour, although he shows that ideas were not translated into national state action before the 20th century. He dates the argument back to the emergence in the 18th-century Scottish Enlightenment of the idea that the position of women in society was an indicator of social progress, though this did not yet mean equal rights of the sexes. Possibly, it had links to radical Protestantism which, with (atheistic) socialism, Therborn sees as the major 19th-century challengers to patriarchy. While the American and French Revolutions were not concerned with the liberation of women, this was to be a central element in socialist and Communist ones. Hence, in the 20th century he sees the major ‘broad ideological currents behind determined thrusts into the fortress of patriarchy’ as, in order of importance: the revolutionary socialist/Communist movement (notably via the vast effects and influence of the Russian Revolution); the non-Western ‘nationalist developmentalists’ (notably in Turkey); feminist women’s movements, which he does not think were of major significance outside the Anglo-Saxon regions; and ‘a secularised liberalism mainly of Protestant Christian or Jewish – seldom Catholic – provenance’.

From a global point of view it makes obvious sense to insist, with Therborn, that ‘international Communism played a crucial, if not overwhelming role’ at all the major leaps forward in the 20th-century retreat of patriarchy – World War One, the aftermath of World War Two and the great turn from the mid-1960s to the 1980s. However resistant actual family behaviour was to the imposition of Lenin’s model of egalitarian modernism or Ataturk’s westernisation, the massive 20th-century changes between the Balkans and the China Seas could hardly have happened but for the impact of revolutionary supercharged state power. Though Therborn antedates its death, the best expert in the field (Karl Kaser) holds that it was the decades of Communism that put paid to the traditional Balkan zadruga, the ultra-patriarchal extended family.

In the West the decline and fall of patriarchy, far greater than elsewhere until the last third of the century, was based on indigenous dynamics. The impact of organised ideology and state power – the latter chiefly concerned, until the unexpected post-1945 ‘baby boom’, with encouraging childbirth – was therefore less significant and less necessary. Compulsory primary state education for girls as well as boys and the prohibition of child labour, both of which raised the costs of children to parents, were the main ways in which state action directly affected the family. The modern model was pioneered not in the core countries of capitalist development, but on its margins – among (non-Catholic) white settler societies, in Australasia and the North American Midwest and West, but especially in Scandinavia. (Therborn warns us against simple and unilinear models of the relations between economic and cultural transformation, apart from the patent economic correlation of variations in the age of marriage and family planning.)

The general Western pattern appears to be that ideas favouring modernity spread within societies from secularised and educated (middle-class) elites and ‘progressive’ political movements, and onwards by the imitation of influential models of modernity abroad. The progress of birth control in Sicily, analysed in a beautiful study by Jane and Peter Schneider, is an excellent example. Even so, except for the mass decline in child-bearing from 1880 onwards, ideology and legal change ran far ahead of change in actual family and sexual behaviour until the 1960s. This did not become dramatic until the last third of the 20th century even in the
West. In fact, the last third of the 20th century saw the most rapid and radical global change in the history of human gender and generational relations, though it has not so far penetrated very deeply into the rest of the world. Therborn is better at recording and monitoring this unprecedented revolution in human behaviour in the developed capitalist countries, and the corresponding upheavals in the post-Communist regions, than in analysing its causes and its relation to the extraordinary acceleration of socio-economic growth and transformation of which it is a part.

Somewhat unexpectedly, his conclusions about the state of the family at the end of the last quarter-century of behavioural revolution are undramatic, not to say trite. Humanity is likely to continue to carry on with varieties of the old family (‘the modal pattern of long-term institutionalised heterosexual coupling’), only – at least in the post-1968 West – in a less standardised bourgeois form. Some recent developments are worrying, notably the ‘commodification’ of sexual and personal relations, but none is ‘necessarily fatal or even threatening to the existing institutional set-up. They only indicate that the future will have its problems too.’ Such statements are surprising, because they are at variance both with Therborn’s own analysis and with some of the evidence to which he draws incidental attention.

He has himself formulated the problem lucidly: family systems are held in balance. When they are disturbed by internal contradictions or – in this case – exogenously, a given set of social arrangements is destabilised. The disruption may or may not be managed by re-equilibrating, restabilising mechanisms. If it isn’t, ‘there arises the need for a second phase of change . . . a phase of setting a direction of change and of organising the institution anew.’ But if this does not succeed ‘there will be a shorter or longer period of anarchy, after which the institution in question will either change (including disappear) or relapse into its previous form.’ It can hardly be denied that the developments surveyed by Therborn amount to a historically sudden and spectacular disruption of the long-lasting norms and arrangements by which genders and generations were linked in societies, at least since the invention of agriculture. When the number of extra-marital births in developed countries rises, in 40 years, from 1.6 to 31.8 per cent (Ireland), 1.4 to almost 25 per cent (Netherlands), 3.7 to 49 per cent (Norway), or when, as in Canada, the mean number of children per woman falls from 3.77 to 2.33 in the single decade of the 1960s, we are clearly facing a revolution in social and personal behaviour. One might have expected a less superficial enquiry into the consequences of this extraordinary disruption. The only aspect Therborn considers seriously is the strictly demographic, which is likely to reduce Europe from holding a quarter of the world’s population in 1900 to a fifteenth in 2050.

Here Therborn’s own strong identification with the Scandinavian ideals of progressive gender and sexual emancipation gets in the way of his analysis, skewing his view of the family’s historic social functions. It is perhaps no accident that the book’s index contains more references to ‘divorce’ than to ‘children’, to ‘sexuality’ than to ‘inheritance’, far more to ‘marriage’ than to all these put together and none to any form of ‘adoption’ or other constructed forms of kinship. His book considers marriage primarily as a sexual order, separate from though intertwined with the social order, which incidentally allows him to open it to same-sex partnerships. For him this comes before its other functions (‘a choice deriving from early 21st-century experience’): as an arrangement for procreation and bringing up children, as a mechanism for social exchange and integration into wider communities, and as an establisher of social status of age-groups and householding. Curiously, he seems to show little interest, at least in this context, in the parent-child or tri-generational unit as a medium of material and cultural transmission and as a system of social support within and between generations, or with the married couple as an income-generating unit.

Is it still adequate since the 1970s, as economic inequality rises sharply within developed capitalist societies, to see the decline of ‘the housewife family’ from its mid 20th-century zenith
as entirely ‘driven not – as later in many poor countries – by poverty but by a new life-course priority, of independent income and of a career’? Incidentally, Therborn’s own findings suggest that marriage as a sexual order is historically a social norm or ideal rather than a description of reality, except insofar as in some systems it forces all women into formal marriage as virgins and makes (heterosexual) sex virtually impossible for them outside it. Quite apart from the Creole zone, ‘the classical area of centuries of massive coupling outside the norms of the Church and of the law’, he observes the historic informality of the sexual order in sub-Saharan Africa, in parts of which the frequency of marital sex runs a clear second to non-marital sex, and in some regions of Europe, e.g. in the Austrian Alps and north-west Iberia, with their ‘historically accepted proletarian or minifundist deviants from the law of the Church’ and, he might have added, from the celibacy of the priesthood.

Therborn’s own data suggest a less complacent view of the situation created at the start of the 21st century by the earthquake shaking the traditional family. Probably the basic trend of the 20th century – essentially, the emancipation of women from their age-old position of social and institutional inferiority to men – still prevails, but he also observes that ‘where fathers and husbands do not rule, phallocracy or asymmetrical male sexual power may dominate the socio-sexual order, as in popular Creole societies or in the swollen slum cities of Africa.’ Or, as he notes in the post-Communist context, ‘while the power of fathers and husbands does not seem to have increased, that of pimps certainly has.’ In the very period of the most dramatic collapse of traditional standards of sexual morality and behaviour, the male-dominated family has been reinforced by strong religious revivals, ‘often with intense patriarchal preoccupations’. Strongest though this is in Islam, it is far from clear that the victories of US Christian fundamentalism are as ‘Pyrrhic’ as Therborn suggests. Indeed, at present it looks as though under George W. Bush it is about to score further victories in ‘the first and so far the only country to see a successful anti-feminist backlash in the area of the European family system’.

Therborn also acknowledges that the supremacy of the ideal which liberal emancipation shares with consumer capitalism – namely, the satisfaction of individual desires, including the sexual – has some aberrant consequences: not merely the fall of Western fertility far beyond replacement rates but the birth of fewer children than women actually want. He does not mention the consequences, especially in a market society, of the novel and rapidly increasing human capacity to manipulate the genetics of our species (cloning etc). They will inevitably be substantial, unpredictable and almost certainly troubling. The problems created in male-prefering societies in the 1990s, by the combination of birth control and parents’ ability to discover the sex of embryos, are already obvious. In 1995, the Chinese sex ratio at birth was 117 boys to 100 girls. I refrain from commenting on Therborn’s own prediction that the market will solve this in the long run by raising the scarcity value of girls.

This is a deeply impressive book by a major sociologist, original and mostly persuasive in its historical analysis and remarkable in its survey of the global marital and sexual scene. However, it underestimates the actual and potential effect of the recent revolutionary changes in the human family, unprecedented in their scale and speed, both globally and in the Western societies in which it has gone furthest. In my view it also underestimates the relationship between effects on the family of the Western cultural revolution of the last third of the 20th century and its economic equivalent, the belief in a theoretically libertarian capitalism which thinks it can function without the heritage that gave it much strength in the past, the rules of obligation and loyalty inside and outside the traditional family, and other proclivities which had no intrinsic connection with the pursuit of the individual advantage that fuelled its engine. As neo-liberalism triumphed in economics its inadequacy could no longer be concealed. In the light of the contents of this book, it may be suggested that we are also reaching this point in the ideology of cultural libertarianism.
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