

# 1

## *The New Confusion about the Family*

In Western industrialized societies, songs of praise were regularly sung to the family during the 1950s and 1960s. In West Germany it was enshrined in the constitution and given special state protection; it was the recognized model for everyday life, and the dominant sociological theory regarded it as essential to a functioning state and society. Then came the late sixties and early seventies, when the revolt of the student and women's movements against traditional structures exposed the family as ideology and prison, as site of everyday violence and repression. But then another counter-shift brought to the fore voices calling for 'defence of the bourgeois family' (Berger and Berger 1984) as a 'haven in a heartless world' (Lasch 1977). A 'war over the family' broke out (Berger and Berger 1983). Suddenly it was no longer even clear who or what constituted the family. Which types of relationship should be described as a family and which should not? Which are normal, which deviant? Which ought to be encouraged by the state and receive financial support?

Meanwhile, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the situation has become even more confused. Instead of the wild slogans of the early seventies, a new crusade – especially in the United States, but to some extent also in Britain and Germany – is developing in the name of 'family values' (see the Preface; and also, for example, Stacey 1995). It would be wrong to conclude from this that the clock is simply being turned back,

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since the fundamentalist rhetoric concerning the family is more in the way of a reaction than of an actual return to older forms and standards. As various surveys have shown, some groups in society do retain a traditional image of the family, but others have turned resolutely against it and most display a contradictory mixture of traditional ideals and new expectations distributed in different ways according to gender and generation. The ensuing landscape of hopes and disappointments has given rise to a wide variety of ways of living, loving and forming relationships – welcomed by some, endured by others, but also bitterly resisted by many. The result of all these changes is that, in politics, academic research and everyday life, it is no longer clear who or what is part of the family. The boundaries are becoming unclear, the definitions uncertain. There is a growing loss of security.

#### *The concepts no longer apply*

This being so, it is difficult even to speak of the family. For many of the familiar concepts no longer apply: they sound outdated, perhaps even a little suspicious; many of them can no longer catch the ways in which young people live and think about their lives. If we take the example of ‘marriage’, one of the main concepts in question, it is obviously not enough to focus on a paper certificate. In work, leisure and the routine of everyday life, even in official forms and invitation cards, the references are increasingly to ‘couples’, ‘partnerships’ or ‘relationships’. The tendency is toward ‘life companions’ or even, in one ironic expression, to ‘part-life companions’.

Official statistics still use the term ‘single people’. But it would be wrong to think they always live alone. Some of those who count as ‘single’ live with others in a communal household. Others have a stable relationship with someone, without sharing a household. In this common form of city life, ‘a single household and single status do not mean the foregoing of a relationship, but only that two people have not chosen the form of married life and prefer “living apart together”’ (Bertram 1994: 23). This example shows the emer-

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gence of finely differentiated lifestyles for which no room is provided in our usual categories (in this case, official household statistics). And any attempt to force these new forms into the old containers would inevitably falsify the reality.

Things become even more complicated when children are brought into the picture. In bourgeois society the model was a lifelong father–mother–child unit, legitimated by the registry office. In deviant cases one spoke of a ‘single mother’ or ‘unmarried mother’, always with the implication that she had been deserted by the man; a disreputable, ‘fallen’ condition, somewhere between exploitation and rejection. Nowadays, however, we have the respectable category of the ‘single parent’, which exists even in upper-middle-class circles. It includes women who used to be married, have subsequently divorced, and are now bringing up one or more children alone; women who have never been married and have brought up their child or children alone from the start (perhaps because they planned it like that, or because their relationship with a partner broke down before the child was born); and women who count as ‘single parents’ in the official statistics but who share their home and everyday life with the child’s father without having obtained a marriage certificate. Nor does this by any means complete the list. There are also, for example, widowed mothers, male single parents, and homosexual partners with children.

Thanks to the advances of medical technology and the various modes of artificial insemination, the very concept of ‘parenthood’ (fatherhood, motherhood) has become unclear. Whereas it used to be the case that *pater semper incertus*, that no one could say for sure who was the father of a child, now this can be conclusively demonstrated through a simple genetic test. On the other hand, we now have the sperm donor who is nothing other than a progenitor (and even that only by a technological detour), who often has not even met the mother – not to speak of having physical contact with her. At the same time, the *mater* herself has to some extent become *incerta*, as one sees in the case of the surrogate mother who, in return for payment, may have been artificially inseminated and gone through a pregnancy for an unknown couple desperate to have a child of

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their own. (Sometimes, though, they may all end up in court before a judge arguing over who is the child's 'real' mother.) Or take the case of the older, post-menopausal woman who becomes pregnant by having an embryo implanted from a younger woman (so that the child she bears is not biologically her own). All kinds of other, less-known variants may be found in the medical literature. But the most important point here is that, through the new operations of medical technology, forms of parenthood are becoming possible which have never before existed or even been conceivable. Biological and social parenthood are thus being separated from each other and fused together in novel combinations.

#### *The confusion of names*

In addition to the rapid development of medical technology, changes in family law have created various new options. With regard to names, for instance, the family name was once a visible sign to the outside world of who belonged to the family. Today, in a London school, there is a six-year-old boy who has no surname. He used to have one – or, rather, two; for his parents, who lived together for many years without ever marrying, decided officially to give their three children two surnames. As this was a little awkward, the parents agreed that for everyday purposes the two girls would bear their mother's name and the boy his father's name. But when the couple subsequently split up, in not very harmonious circumstances, the mother went along to the school to get the son's name changed. The father learnt of this only when the son showed him the end-of-term report. He then went himself to the school and demanded that the name be changed once more. The school administration agreed to this, but at the same time explained that it would again have to give its consent if the mother came back and demanded a further name change. The case has now been referred to the local authorities, and pending their decision the boy's exercise books and personal locker carry only his first name.<sup>1</sup>

This is admittedly a rather exotic case, and it would not have been possible under German law. Nevertheless, in Germany

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too new legislation has led to some interesting name changes. The times are gone when Section 1355 of the Civil Code could baldly state that 'the wife bears her husband's surname' and thereby also determine the children's name. Since 1977 new forms and combinations have gradually become possible, supplemented by regulations covering a fixed period of transition. A couple may now opt for a common surname (either the husband's or the wife's) or one partner may adopt a double name; both may revert at any point to the name of their birth and renounce their former partner's name; or they may, after years of living together, decide to adopt a common name. Both in Britain and Germany: 'Now that fewer women change their names when they marry and/or get divorced and/or have children by more than one man outside marriage, a family name no longer denotes a family.'<sup>2</sup>

In practice this often creates confusion, since the old expectations persist at many levels of everyday life:

The woman on the first floor simply can't make it out. After more than two years, she still says 'Herr Galal' to Bernhard Hammes. She often meets his wife – that is, Frau Galal – in the hall and she has taken note of their names. But she can't make head nor tail of the newfangled regulations. Shadea Galal and Bernhard Hammes have been married since 1991, yet they have kept their surnames. For Shadea Galal it was not just a question of the sublime sound of her Egyptian name; she also sees it as part of her identity.

But, where such a choice is made to keep separate names, everyday life becomes full of little nuisances: wrongly addressed letters; invitations to a non-existent Frau Hammes, Hammes-Galal or Galal-Hammes. It also becomes more difficult to complete forms, which, as in the case of tax returns, may have no place for the wife's own name. Things really hot up with the birth of a child. 'At the kindergarten or school and in the local neighbourhood, anyone who does not have the same name as the child is not treated as the father or mother unless they have positive proof. Or the offspring count as born out of wedlock.'<sup>3</sup>

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### *Much ado about nothing?*

The newly available name combinations are regarded by many as a pointless and impractical fashion that is more trouble than it is worth, 'because you can no longer tell who belong together and how'. This is a superficial view of things, however, which fails to grasp the deeper changes expressed in the outward signs. When Anna Kahn marries Walter Gruhl but wants to continue being called Kahn, this is symptomatic of a wider demand by women for 'a bit of a life of their own' (see Beck-Gernsheim 1983; Beck et al. 1995). Or, to put it in more general, more gender-neutral terms, the decision of a married couple to keep different names is symptomatic of the demand for autonomy which is nowadays (not always, but more and more) considered valid and reciprocally exercised within relationships – symptomatic, that is, of the emphasis on a biography, roots and identity of one's own, of the claim to a bit of a life of one's own within a life *à deux*. Here too, though neither expressed nor agreed, the lesson that marriage vows are not a long-term guarantee – that, however much one wishes it, the partnership will not necessarily last for life – must also play a significant role. This implies that it may be wiser, or anyway more prudent, not to adopt a new name which might one day be the cause of all sorts of trouble – whether because it has to be given up again, or because it means carrying around the memory of one's ex-partner.

Just as the names of family members are not empty words but bear within them a history of social change (of gender relations, for example), so are the relationships dealt with by researchers and policy-makers in the field of the family anything but insignificant. They too are markers of a change that has been taking place – and especially of the controversies that surround it. It is not an arbitrary matter, or academic hairsplitting, whether one speaks of 'family' in the singular or 'families' in the plural,<sup>4</sup> or whether the concept of the family is abandoned and stealthily replaced with others such as 'family lifestyles' or simply 'lifestyles'.<sup>5</sup> What are involved, rather, are a

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number of hotly contested issues. Should we stick to – and consider as correct, normal and appropriate – the traditional image of the family as a lifelong father–mother–child unit legitimated by the registry office? Should we regard other forms as incomplete and deviant, deficient and dysfunctional? Or, on the contrary, should the claims to precedence of the traditional form be rejected? Should more attention be paid to all the lifestyles and types of relationship that are developing outside what has traditionally counted as a normal family? And where these forms assertively demand recognition and equal consideration – for example, in the law of inheritance, in fiscal regulations or other dealings with public authorities – should their claims be granted? More specifically, to turn again to the case of medical technology, should the possibilities of artificial insemination be open only to married women, on the grounds that marriage still offers the best protection for the child's welfare? Or should they be available to anyone who so wishes – including unmarried and homosexual couples or women without a partner – on the grounds that the child's need will be for care and affection, not an official rubber stamp? Or is the idea to uphold in principle the right of the most diverse lifestyles to exist, but to require, in the name of the child's welfare (defined how?), at least a stable partnership for the application of medical technology to planned parenthood?

### *The contours of the post-familial family*

We are now at the heart of a topic that the following chapters will address from different angles and with different emphases. The key question, to outline it in advance, is what happens when the old certainties (rooted in religion, tradition, biology, etc.) lose much of their force without actually disappearing and new options redraw the areas for personal choice, not in a free space outside society but in one that involves new social regulations, pressures and controls. Or, in sociological terms, how does the individualization drive of the last few decades enter ever more strongly into the area of the family, marriage and parenthood, effecting a lasting change in relations between the

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sexes and the generations? How, under the conditions of individualization, does a historically new tension arise which, though certainly not making relationships simpler, perhaps makes them more stimulating and appealing?

So, how does this leave the provocative question: what comes next after the family? It is often thought that those who speak of individualization have in mind a straightforward end to the family and the emergence of a 'singles society' (e.g. Hradil 1995a: 82 ff). But this is a misunderstanding – and not a minor one at that. The picture that the following chapters will try to draw is not so simple or one-dimensional. For processes of individualization generate *both* a claim to a life of one's own *and* a longing for ties, closeness and community. The answer to the question 'What next after the family?' is thus quite simple: the family! Only different, more, better: the negotiated family, the alternating family, the multiple family, new arrangements after divorce, remarriage, divorce again, new assortments from you, my, our children, our past and present families. It will be the expansion of the nuclear family and its extension over time; it will be the alliance between individuals that it represents; and it will be glorified largely because it represents an image of refuge in the chilly environment of our affluent, impersonal, uncertain society, which has been stripped of its traditions and exposed to all kinds of risk (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995: 2).

Thus, it would be a misunderstanding to conclude that people become so egoistic and hedonistic that they live only in accordance with their own needs, and that unstable, even wildly unstable, relationships spread on all sides. What is to be expected is that for most people stable periods will alternate with others (before, alongside or after marriage, with or without a certificate) when they play, juggle and experiment with relationships, partly because they choose to do so, partly because they are more or less forced into it. And, please note, it is nowadays also to be expected that, even in the ordinary course of stable relationships, far more questions requiring a conscious decision may arise – whether because such options previously did not exist at all or only in exceptional cases, or because the binding assumptions of old have largely broken down – and that



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the resulting conflicts will often gain a momentum and drama of their own which catch the participants unawares. Let us look at a few hardly exotic questions from everyday life. They are ones to which we shall return.

Should we move in together, or should we at first (or perhaps for a longer time) keep our own apartments? Should we have children straightaway or later on or perhaps never, or should we keep our options open? If children do not come in the natural course of things, should we try artificial insemination or something else from the range of what medicine has to offer? If one of us gets a secure and well-paid job in another town, should the family move there or should we try commuting and a weekend marriage? Who will then look after the kids during school holidays? What do we do in the case of illness? And what if even granny goes away? If our parents-in-law need more help on a daily basis or grandad becomes in permanent need of nursing, who will take care of them? If my husband has left me or I him, and we both live in new relationships, should I go on inviting my former parents-in-law to the children's birthday? If my partner is a foreigner, should we stay here for good or one day go to his or her native country? Should the children be brought up speaking two languages and holding dual citizenship? What identity do we want to convey to them?

This catalogue of questions, which mirrors the hopes and disappointments, the opportunities and terrors of living under conditions of individualization, displays a subversive power in everyday life, and often enough a silent, dogged rancour. What it shows most clearly is that less and less is given once and for all in people's lives; that more and more often new starts must be made and new decisions taken. Where the dynamic of individualization imposes itself, more effort than before must be expended to keep the various individual biographies within the ordinary compass of the family. How much drama and diplomacy is involved! Whereas one used to be able to fall back upon well-adapted rules and rituals, we now see a kind of stage-management of everyday life, an acrobatics of discussion and finely balanced agreement. When this is unsuccessful, the family tie becomes fragile and threatens to collapse. People

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do still live within relationships, but these are different from before in terms of scope, obligation and duration.

This does not mean that the traditional family is actually vanishing, but it is clearly losing the monopoly that it for so long enjoyed. Its quantitative significance is declining with the spread of new lifestyles which do not usually aim at living alone but seek ties of a different kind: for example, cohabitation without a marriage certificate or without children; a single-parent family, 'conjugal succession' or a same-sex partnership; weekend relationships and part-life companionship; living in more than one household or between different towns. So, more and more intermediate forms, before, alongside and after the family, are appearing on the scene: these are the contours of the 'post-familial family'.

### *The variety of family forms in earlier times*

It may be asked what is so new or exciting about this diagnosis.<sup>6</sup> In previous centuries there were certainly various forms of the family, not just one uniform type: the history books tell of kings, princes and dukes who had a 'marriage on the side', keeping an official mistress and showering their illegitimate offspring with titles and possessions. Studies from social history show that as early as the nineteenth century many regions had a high proportion of births out of wedlock, sometimes even higher than today. And, if one looks at old church registers and family albums, one finds a large number of second or third marriages and all manner of step-relatives:

Let us take as an example the Frankfurt merchant Peter Anton Brentano, born in 1735. His first marriage was with a cousin, who bore him six children and died in 1770. Three years later he married a second time, to the 17-year-old Maximiliane von La Roche (twenty-one years younger than himself). She brought twelve children into the world during the twenty years they were married, then died in 1793 at the age of 37. Brentano subsequently took a third wife, again much younger, and before his death in 1797 he produced with her another two children. A

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similar but little-known case is that of the 27-year-old merchant Johann Peter Müllensiefen, who in 1756 married a landowner's daughter Anna Elisabeth Heuser. She died in 1763 after bearing three children, and a year later he wedded Anna Maria Birkenbach, who in turn passed on in 1770 after the birth of two children. Two years later, he married a third time and had another two children with his new spouse. His son from the second marriage – Peter Eberhard, born in 1766 – limited himself to two marriages: the first, in 1794, lasted only three years before Frau Minna died in her first childbirth; five months later the widower married again. His second wife, twelve years younger than himself, died at the age of 37 shortly after the birth of her ninth child. Müllensiefen, by now 48, did not enter into another marriage. (Frevert 1996: 5)

How much changing around, how much confusion even in those days! Fascinated by the sequence of abruptly ending and immediately resuming marriage, one glimpses only in passing what constitutes the difference and where the historical analogy has its limits. In earlier centuries the high number of successive marriages and families was caused by the high mortality, whereas today it is a result of high divorce-rates; then an external stroke of fate, now a deliberate act involving a decision of one's own (or at least of one's partner). This is not a casual difference – on the contrary. At the level of personal experience, the partner's death did bring feelings of loss, mourning and pain, but not that peculiar emotional bitterness, with its mutual recrimination and wounding but also inner feelings of guilt and failure, which often accompanies divorce; nor any post-marital disputes over custody, alimony or the division of property held in common, those typical elements which, from the social-structural point of view, involve an independent dynamic and drive the spiral of individualization onward (see chapter 2). Moreover, the successive families of old did not involve any offence against what was deemed right and proper; indeed, they literally corresponded to the ideal of 'till death do us part'. Today, however, successive families are a sign that the ideal is crumbling. When every third marriage ends in a divorce court, or even more in the case of some other Western

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countries, no one can seriously claim that lifelong marriage is a generally recognized and generally respected institution. The old ideal has gradually been replaced by a new one along the lines of 'So long as things are going well'. In other words, we stay together for as long as we want to – which, if only implicitly, keeps life open for new options, new attractions and ties.

And then there were the great and the mighty! Without wishing to go here into the history of their mistresses, concubines and playmates, we may consider it historically proven that, in this respect too, many were used to a lavish lifestyle. At least in times when their power was at its greatest, they could take many a liberty that was not allowed to their subjects – in sexual matters as in other areas of life. No one could dare to cross them, and anyone who did lived dangerously indeed. Take, for example, Henry VIII and his six wives. In order to get his way, he organized the execution of one of the spouses of whom he had tired and even founded a new state church into the bargain – not the least of its purposes being to make divorce a possibility. Obviously such courses of action were not open to everyone. And, when the times became more democratic, even the rulers had increasingly to bow to the prevailing precepts. Take Edward VIII, for example, a twentieth-century successor of Henry VIII. In the 1930s, when he lost his heart to the divorcee Mrs Simpson and wanted to make her his legitimate spouse, he was forced to give up the throne. The poor man – if only he had lived a little later! For by the end of the twentieth century the amorous adventures and marital dramas of the British royals were the daily fare of the tabloid gossip columns. This does not mean that the rulers live by laws of their own – but, on the contrary, that the old models are crumbling in a quite democratic way, from top to bottom of society. In a country like Britain, where today some 45 per cent of marriages end in divorce, the turbulent family sagas of various members of the royal family are not exceptions but part of the general trend. And what's the point of marrying, the divorced Charles now seems to ask, as he gives his heart but not his hand to the divorced Camilla. His great-uncle Edward had been neither able nor willing to get involved in such distinctions.

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### *The rise and fall of a model of the family*

The historical examples in the last section show us only discrete parts; they do not afford a full picture of 'the' family across different epochs, regions and sections of the population. But at least they give some sense of the fact that the family form which we know for short as 'traditional' does not at all go back to the beginning of human history, and that it is therefore not the only one to be 'natural' or 'proper'. In fact, as various historical studies have shown, it is a form which emerged quite late in the day, partly under the influence of Christianity and its teachings, and essentially with the transition from pre-industrial to industrial society, the change in the family from a working unit to an economic unit, and the rise of the bourgeoisie in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These were the conditions in which the model of the 'traditional' family – a lifelong officially legitimated community of father–mother–child, held together through emotion and intimacy – reached its highest form and began to spread far and wide, even if it initially had to overcome various kinds of resistance.

Let us now take as a final historical example those regions for which the nineteenth-century population statistics show a high rate of births out of wedlock. Should we conclude that morals there were more permissive, or even that 'illicit' relations were the rule? Anyone who thinks so will be disappointed. For the social background described in the historical studies makes it clear that the relations in question were structured, lasting and socially recognized. The obstacles in the way of an official wedding were external ones: the inheritance rules for peasants and the ban on marriage for those without property of their own. Thus we read in one study of births outside marriage in Austria:

this attitude to household service was the main reason why marriage did not occur. For it is customary on the land that the son or daughter serves as a farmhand on the father's or another person's farm, and that the son marries only when he has inherited the property from his father. The son and his

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intended must therefore often wait for years before entering into marriage. (Hecke, quoted in Haslinger 1982: 9)

‘His intended’: this formula already shows the basic intention. People wanted to marry, but were unable to do so before the farm was handed down. The strength of marriage as a norm in the nineteenth century, however, may be seen precisely in the fact that the battles over family law were battles for and over marriage, or rather for new regulations that would make a ‘legitimate’ tie available to people in all property categories and classes (Blasius 1992: 82). This is exactly what has changed. Today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the external obstacles to marriage have long been overcome – yet more and more couples live together without marrying, and quite a lot keep this up even when they have children. They do this not because of the external pressure of circumstances, but through a voluntary decision of their own. They can no longer see any point, or any need, to have their alliance rubber-stamped by officialdom.

Let us sum up the lessons of the historical material. It is true that in former times, too, there were various patterns and not just one uniform family type. But, whereas the variety then used to depend mainly upon external circumstances, it today depends mostly upon people’s own decisions. Those who do not live in accordance with the model of the so-called normal family often do so because the old judgements of what is ‘normal’ or ‘deviant’ no longer make sense to them; or perhaps also because they have given it a try and found that they could not keep it up. More pointedly, we might say that whereas there used to be many exceptions but also impressively solid rules it is now in many respects no longer clear what is the exception and what is the rule – especially as it is also unclear where people can find any guidance for the new questions and decisions that confront them, in a globalizing world marked by scientific and technological change, labour-market risks and other tendencies which spill over into the realm of the private.

In short, for quite a lot of the middle and older generation, and even more for the younger generation, the landscape of

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family life has opened up and the ground has become unstable. An ever greater number of people cobble together a lifestyle of their own from bits and pieces of assorted hopes, sometimes with and sometimes without success. This is the raw material from which the new variety is formed.