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The past of the European family influences its present, both its continuities and its discontinuities. There is much talk today of the end of the family or for an earlier period of invention of childhood or the emergence of the ‘affective family’ (each implying radical change from what went before). The thrust of this account is that there is no end to the family; some kind of sexual coupling and child care is essential for the vast majority of humankind. Non-reproductive families are certainly more common than in the past, but they constitute a minority in Europe as elsewhere. Meanwhile new reproductive techniques seem hardly likely to replace for most of humankind the pleasures of sex.

Changes in its structure have taken place over time but I would challenge whether these are best described in terms such as the emergence of the nuclear or affective family, of parental or conjugal love. There have been important continuities as well as discontinuities, if only because the demands of social reproduction have hitherto promoted some kind of small family structure as well as a strong link within and between the generations. Too much has been made of the distinctiveness of the modern family, especially in the West, some features of which have been in place since the late Roman times as well as in other parts of the world.¹

The early roots of the European family lie in the classical Mediterranean civilizations of Greece and Rome as well as in the

Germanic and Celtic tribal societies that dominated much of the north and west of the continent when those civilizations flourished to the south. Both strands have been held responsible for significant aspects of the family in later Europe, especially Rome for family law and the Teutonic tribes for features such as the bilateral reckoning of kin and the stress on 'individualism'. Classical legal texts are not always easy to interpret from a behavioural standpoint, while for the early Germans we are largely dependent upon the writings of outsiders, since they themselves were non-literate. Although some of the specific attributions need to be corrected, Romanists and Germanists, classicists and tribalists, are surely both right in perceiving influences on later family structures. But some of these features, such as the endowment of women at marriage, were not confined to European societies. Moreover, the greatest influence of all resulted from the advent of Christianity, ultimately from the Near East, when the church, in the process of converting, introduced a number of changes that transformed the earlier patterns of domestic life.

Common Features of Family Life

Before elaborating these topics, let us begin by considering certain general points about family, kinship and marriage, derived from comparative studies, that we need to recall in dealing with Europe. Firstly we know of virtually no society in the history of humanity where the elementary or nuclear family was not important, in the vast majority of cases as a co-residential group.

Secondly, even where that family is not jurally monogamous, it often is in practice; and the basic unit of production and reproduction is always relatively small. The variations in size of households cover quite a narrow band.

Thirdly, and consequently, even where unilineal descent groups such as the patrilineal *gens* exist, as in Rome, there is always a reckoning of consanguinal (bilateral) ties through both parents, including the one through whom descent is not reckoned (what Fortes called 'complementary filiation'). For example even in patrilineal societies, the mother's brother is always an important figure and that is no indication of an earlier matrilineal organization.

Fourthly, in no society are the ties between mother and child (and in the vast majority, between father and child) unimportant, sentimentally and jurally, even though in some ideological contexts

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those ties may be played down (for example, among the upper class in the literature in earlier Mediterranean societies).

From these features we can conclude on general grounds that there is no serious sense in which Europe, let alone capitalism, has invented the elementary or nuclear family or even the small household. Different societies give different weight to domestic relationships and the wider ranges of kinship reckoning also vary. In classical times, Greece and Rome both gave some emphasis to unilineal descent groups (patrilineal clans and lineages) but these largely disappeared in Europe under the impact of the German invaders with their bilateral kindreds and under pressure from the Christian church which weakened all wider kinship groups by effectively limiting their extent and initiating an alternative system of ritual relations, of godparenthood. This weakening suited both the ecclesia and the feudal lords. Gradually such wider bilateral ties shrank in importance until, today, with a few exceptions, the effective range of kin relations in Europe is rarely more than the descendants of a grandparental couple, that is, immediate uncles and aunts (parent's siblings) and their children (first cousins).

Did this change already take place in Roman society from the second century BCE?² We may be suffering here from lack of adequate information since it is not easy to visualize a society with agnatic (unilineal) descent groups that does not also have a bilateral reckoning of kin. Since we know that the Romans had the *gens*, the important question in this case is not whether they also recognized bilateral ties but why did unilineal groupings disappear? The diminution of the importance of the *gens* and the *familia* has been alleged to have favoured 'the emergence of two other groups, the complex family, created by remarriage, and the cognate family or cognates, centered on one person, and including relatives in both the male and female lines'.³ But no reason is offered for the diminution nor for the timing of the final disappearance of the *gens*. That fact does not seem to have been considered as a problem. In Europe descent groups (clans) that were more than patronymics (that is, surnames) are found in Ireland as was the case in the Highlands of Scotland, and in some mountainous areas of the Balkans (for example, Albania). Interestingly there was some recognition of what I have called *lignages* in Italy, for example among the nobility in Florence⁴ and in Genoa, as well as in some other Mediterranean areas such as Corfu.⁵ I use this word to distinguish them from African *lineages*, which kept male property within the group,

whereas with diverging devolution it was always being dispersed through women by marriage, involving a different relationship between group and property. Did these collectivities have any continuity with earlier descent groups? In other parts of Europe, clans and lineages had either disappeared or had never existed. There seems no evidence that the Anglo-Saxons ever had anything other than bilateral kindreds (of a variety of kinds) which regulated defence and offence in a similar way to unilineal clans elsewhere. Did other Germanic peoples have unilineal groups? The early legal codes make that possibility seem unlikely.

Nor did Europe, as has been widely claimed, invent childhood, nor yet affection (even 'love') between husband and wife nor parents and children. Parents have always mourned their children and spouses each other. Mourning behaviour, like affection, is universal and it is only the crudest history of mentalities, combined with an overpowering and ignorant ethnocentrism that suggests otherwise. Once again there are differences of emphasis, but emotions are poor material for historians who are likely to make untold mistakes in assessing them.⁶ The care of children within a conjugal relationship which is defined by relatively exclusive sexual and marital rights is a quasi-universal. Mourning for children is one consequence; so too is emotional attachment between spouses. It is wrong (in my opinion) to see these features as coming into being in the sixteenth, seventeenth, or nineteenth centuries. This cannot be correct,⁷ just as it is also wrong to seek their origin in later Rome. There is undoubtedly a 'history' of emotions but not in the crude, unilineal terms proposed by many European historians.

Eurasia and the Bronze Age

Some of the features of family life that have been seen as unique to Europe are simply variants of universal human features, like mother love and sexual attraction. Others are characteristic not of Europe but of Eurasia as a whole, of the great civilizations that emerged during the Bronze Age.

The Bronze Age created new conditions that affected the family right across Eurasia; such an assumption runs directly contrary to the Marxist, Weberian and predominant European view that Orient and Occident diverged at an earlier unspecified period – a notion that fits easily into the ideas not only of the western public but of the vast majority of European historians and social scien-

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tists, that there was some longstanding differences between the two that were relevant to the later process of modernization.

What was it about the Bronze Age? I have suggested that it introduced new forms of stratification, in contrast for example with Africa, that were based on the ownership of land. The land was now capable of being cultivated by more intensive methods (by ploughing, irrigation, etc.) producing a larger surplus above subsistence that could sustain the crafts and specialisms of urban living.

These changes of a socio-economic kind had profound effects on family structures. Clearly other socio-economic changes also affected family structures, the slave economies of the classical world, the feudalism of the Middle Ages. The main discussion among modern scholars has obviously centred upon what happened since the Renaissance and the effects associated with the development of mercantile capitalism, with the Reformation and above all with the coming of industrial capitalism towards the end of the eighteenth century. Those shifts have inevitably influenced the formation and operation of domestic groups which earlier constituted units of production and now no longer did for much of the population, although property remained important for the majority; as units of reproduction, however, they have been less clearly affected until the present century since in that sphere they had a measure of autonomy which provided them with a degree of continuity. As units of reproduction, families had a permanent job to do both at an individual and at a societal level. Then again there was the very important factor of religious ideology and practice, as we see in contemporary debates about abortion, which partially insulated these areas from the pressures of the major socio-economic changes. It is an intertwining of these considerations that sets the scene for any treatment of the history of the European family.

The major societies of Europe and Asia practised an advanced agriculture using the plough and irrigation, so the differences on this score were not as marked. There is good reason to set aside some of the more extreme views of the differences in kinship systems between east and west, embodied in the arguments of those who see the pre-existing European family as linked to the modern achievements of that continent, as being very distinct from the wider-ranging and often unilineal systems of the East.⁸ But while each society or sub-group displayed its own selection of kinship variables, they also had much in common. And even the choices themselves can sometimes be seen as offering different solutions to

similar problems, for example, in relation to strategies of heirship or to household management.⁹

A large part of the continent certainly acquired some unity by the widespread adoption of Christian norms by peoples with very different backgrounds. This relative uniformity touched upon many aspects of family life, such as the marriage prohibition on kin, on affines and on that newly invented category of 'ritual kin', god-relatives, spiritual kin. But the later religious divide between Catholic and Protestant also becomes important with regard to the family, especially for prohibited degrees of marriage (at least in England and among Huguenots in France), and for their complement, the 'incest taboo', as well as for divorce which becomes possible, but not common, in all Protestant countries except England.

A consideration of the particular features of Christian Europe has nothing to do with the usual notions of the Uniqueness of the West in relation to modernization, which involve seeing others (especially Asia) as backward, unable to make the necessary breakthrough.¹⁰ Uniqueness can obviously only be established by systematic comparative enquiry, not by ethnocentric speculation.

Given these general features of post-Bronze-Age Eurasia, we need to ask why we should isolate Europe for the study of family institutions. For it is only a fictional continent, not bounded in any decisive geographical way but only by an imaginary frontier along the Bosphorus and the Urals.¹¹ The basic reason has to do with Europe conceived firstly as the Christian continent and secondly as leading the world in modernization, industrialization and capitalism. Both notions suggest a search for unique factors, including the family, in the former case as a consequence, in the latter possibly as cause of its lead. Regarding the first factor it has to be remembered that the continent had its non-Christian roots, both Germanic (plus Celts and other 'tribes') and classical (both Greece and Rome), and that Christianity itself owed much to the traditions of the Jewish Old Testament. Moreover, the continent continued to include substantial minorities, of Jews and Muslims, not to speak of Gypsies and other travellers, who were committed to alternative beliefs and ways of living, and of more recent migrants from the West Indies, from North Africa, from Africa south of the Sahara and from India. Regarding the second, Europe, even Christian Europe, formed part of the wider Eurasian area which had a considerable number of important features in common, developed or inherited from post-Bronze-Age cultures, such as the endow-

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ment of women and the associated 'women's property complex'.¹² In most societies women have been considered 'jural minors', anyhow until recently, and that has been an aspect of their frequent subordination and even oppression. Their position has varied not only from society to society and from time to time, but also by class and depending upon the composition of their natal families. In post-Bronze-Age societies a woman without brothers might be an heiress, capable of attracting a man to live with her and 'of wearing the trousers' as many a peasant proverb points out. An heiress was superior in important ways to a penniless man, even to many a younger son in her own class. While this system of endowment was modified by the Christian church to its own design, the considerations regarding family strategies (as distinct from charity) that gave rise to that complex of variables remained potentially active. This complex of variables emerged as countervailing forces at various points in European history, modifying in turn the prescriptions of the Church, as in the history of Henry VIII of England.

Mode of livelihood, whether of landless, peasant, merchant or noble, greatly influenced family life, for example as when many rural workers shifted from agricultural production to cottage industry. In the latter case they were no longer subject to the same constraints that peasant agricultural production entailed, constraints of limited resources to feed and distribute to children, the need to adjust land to labour, the constraints (and advantages) of inheriting rights to property, which profoundly affected relations between the generations. 'Inherited property as the "tangible" determinant of household formation and family structure receded in the face of the overwhelming importance of the family as a unit of labour'.¹⁴ Women's earnings encouraged early marriage and the employment available for children promoted larger families.¹⁴ It meant that the women were often the 'vanguard of peasant household industries'¹⁵ but more often there was a merging of the division of labour without, apparently, all the disastrous consequences that some foresaw in its disappearance.

Internal Differences

While the influences of Christianity and the Bronze Age were strong, there were many variations in family structure over time and over place. No one is suggesting uniformity. A recent book on the Italian family since Antiquity takes up the question of the

diversity of the European family and the problem of generalization.¹⁶ Rightly so. But it fails to replace what the authors see as unsatisfactory paradigms, developmental and comparative, by anything else. My intention is to try and provide some very general suggestions that go beyond the mere assertion of diversity, which seems unconstructive. For what appears infinitely variable and flexible from within does not always seem so from without. That is partly why one needs a wider perspective. In that context, for example, the absence of divorce and the presence of godparenthood stand out as important features of Christian Europe which distinguish these societies from many of the surrounding and many of the earlier ones. Some of these factors are not in themselves entirely unique to Europe – divorce is equally impossible in India, ritual kinship of different kinds exists elsewhere. But in Europe these features are part of a package introduced by the Christian church.

Inheritance systems vary widely in Europe. But there are some widespread factors that distinguish much of that continent not so much from the rest of Asia but from Africa, mainly in the devolution of parental property to daughters as well as to sons (as inheritance, as dowry or as both). And linked to this there is the devolution to brotherless daughters as heiresses before collateral males (cousins); the latter are by and large excluded. Both these factors distinguish European from African inheritance in a radical way. That I have argued is a feature of post-Bronze-Age societies and related to their economy and system of stratification in which it was deemed essential to preserve the status of daughters as well as of sons (in other words, the status of the whole natal family), as is not at all the case in Africa. The very fact of partitioning property between sons and daughters may tend to produce smaller families (that is, numbers of offspring) than when a couple are aiming for a maximum holding of males.

Some of these difference may arise from the shift between functionally similar institutions which does not necessarily require the intervention of any major extraneous event. In examining strategies of heirship, the act of adoption can have as an alternative, at least in those cases where there are daughters, the possibility of transmitting property to a daughter's son, in apparent breach of the dominant agnatic inheritance. Or, what is effectively the same, the contraction of a fili-centric (uxorilocal) union, where the incoming son-in-law acts as a temporary manager for the daughter and her parental property; as the French say, 'il fait le gendre'.

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When this practice occurred at the end of Antiquity, it has been seen as indicating a shift away from agnatic reckoning to consanguinity ('blood') and alliance (or marriage).¹⁷ In some ways adoption placed a greater emphasis on direct descent. However daughters too are agnates so that blood (even agnatic blood) was being favoured rather than the 'fictional' kin created by adoption. I doubt if we should account for such a change from adoption in these general terms but rather look for more specific reasons. One of these would be the growing influence of the Christian church at this period, for Salvianus was already fulminating against adoption in the fifth century on the grounds that such an act deprived God of his own things and the church of property. In any case this particular substitution of the heiress could obviously take place only in those cases where daughters had been born to the family.

Not all of Europe was equally influenced by Christianity. Early in the eighth century most of the Iberian peninsula was conquered by Moorish armies and became part of the World of Islam. So too did Malta, Sicily and sections of the Balkans, which remain Muslim to this day. The influx of Jews and Gypsies also gave rise to communities whose family system differed in significant ways from the rest of Europe.¹⁸

Regarding the Islamic presence there has been a tendency to stress the continuities of life in Andalusia with that of the earlier pre-Islamic inhabitants. But another current insisted upon the substantial differences.¹⁹ The Muslims brought along the notion of 'tribe' and although these larger units tended to become less important from the tenth century onwards, the relevance of patrilineal lineages remained. Within such lineages preference was given to close kinship marriages, especially of a man to the father's brother's daughter, as is customary throughout Islam.

One of the arguments for the supposed continuity (and hence the rejection of Islamic influence) has been the claim that Andalusian women had greater freedom than others in the Arab world and that this freedom was part of the heritage from those earlier populations. But as elsewhere religious leaders decreed that women should be secluded and wear the veil; the freedom characterized the behaviour not so much of ordinary folk but rather of the *quiyān* or cultured slaves who sang, danced and engaged in conversation at male gatherings, and whose role resembled that of the *geisha* of Japan and the *hetaira* of Ancient Greece.

Christianity

Are there any general features that are specific to the European family? That depends upon when and to some extent where one starts. In order to make any such statement we have to take a comparative perspective, looking at the contrast or similarities with Africa and Asia. Continental distribution is not in itself the major factor in any differences. Africa south of the Sahara differs significantly from both Europe and Asia because it had a simpler productive system which had implications for the nature of ownership and of stratification; and that in turn affects the nature of inheritance, marriage and ties of kinship.

Europe began to differ substantially from Asia and from the surrounding Mediterranean when it adopted Christianity with its very specific selection of new norms. And those new rules were not simply diacritical features used to differentiate themselves, for example, from Jews and pagans (though this they often did) but were introduced for specific reasons connected with the establishment and maintenance of the church as a major organization in society.

If we look at the long run of the history of the family in Europe, a number of features stand out. The influence of the Catholic church on marriage and the family, especially in the context of its accumulation of funds which were shifted there from family and municipality, had important consequences.²⁰ The effects of these specific norms and general pressures ran against the strategies of heirship that Eurasian families had used to continue their lines and to prolong the association between kin and property which preserved their hierarchical status. There were recurrent conflicts throughout European history between ecclesiastical and lay interests in the accumulation of funds, just as there were between the interests of church and state in matters well beyond the family but arising out of the church's emergence as a 'great organization'.

Resistance

Since some of these strategies were set aside, one would expect an undercurrent of resistance to the demands of the church and this is exactly what one finds. One would also expect other religions with different priorities to be more accommodating to these underlying

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concerns, closer to the 'Eurasian tradition' and that was true of the Jewish and to some extent of the Muslim groups in Europe, who for example permitted, even encouraged, close marriages as well as allowing divorce. Such accommodations also became characteristic of 'heretical' movements which broke away from the dominant Catholic and orthodox churches. Eventually the most influential of these movements, Protestantism, dispensed with some of these restrictions. Consequently one of the major differences in family structure lay between religious communities, for example, in the specific role provided for widows in Catholic communities, on which Florence Nightingale remarked. An even greater change was to occur when the religious-backed norms were affected by an ongoing secularization and the decreasing role of ecclesiastical courts, in England from the eighteenth century, which eventually allowed greater freedom, among other things, in changing marital partners.

The nature of the imposition by the church of important norms concerning marriage and the family which were then internalized or otherwise accepted in various degrees by the inhabitants of Christian Europe, can be seen in the way such rules were evaded in the course of European history. There is always deviance from behavioural injunctions but that to which I refer forms a regular pattern pointing to links with the practice of Asia and even of pre-Christian Europe, in so far as we can reconstruct them. When religion becomes of less significance because of secularization or conversion to some other cult, as it did after the Renaissance and Reformation, those norms will obviously change. That change has occurred in the case, for example, of the approval of artificial birth control, of abortion and of divorce. Birth control was certainly practised in France as in Catholic Italy but practice was private whereas divorce was public. Since the regulation of divorce shifted in many cases from ecclesiastical to state courts, it has become increasingly available, opening up the possibility of remarriage, except for the members of a few congregations. Even today the inheritance of the English crown has up to now depended upon the avoidance of divorce and remarriage.

It is difficult to argue that this shift is related to any of the factors that are often seen as encouraging the promotion of a close nuclear family deemed to be essential to capitalism²¹ or to the modern affective family²², for it surely points in quite another direction, that is, to the break-up of marriages, to the disappearance of religious sanctions. The direction of change is more ambiguous than many

such theories imply. Prohibitions are being lifted without being replaced by any alternative norms, except that of providing more freedom of choice for the adult partners. The result produces many of the complexities of contemporary family life.

The secularization that promoted this change was part of a wider shift in society that accompanied the development of knowledge and educational systems after the Renaissance in the context of the flourishing of merchant cultures. Knowledge assisted the invention of new technologies, as did the increasing wealth that accompanied the exploration and conquest of overseas territories, the opening up of European trade on a world-wide basis, a process that has been curiously described as the 'primitive' accumulation of capital.

I argue that the secularization of which I speak is not at all the equivalent of modernization, though many sociologists have seen it in this way. Modernity is a slippery concept, with no firm base in time or place and with no clearly defined characteristics; with its counterpart 'traditional' its features differ with each authority. Secularization on the other hand refers to the decay of the influence of the church, the shift of family affairs to lay courts, the dissolution of the monasteries as well as the increased emphasis on secular ideologies and explanations. That process was one aspect of the Enlightenment and growth of knowledge in eighteenth century Europe but had long been a prominent element of Confucianism in the Far East and the established Lokāyata trend in India. Of course, scepticism and agnosticism were features of both western and eastern thought over the centuries but in the West they became a dominant concern only in the eighteenth-century, although the Catholic pressures on family life were obviously modified by the widespread movement towards Reform in the sixteenth.

The concern with secularization is not only a matter of ideology but of property. When the Catholic church ceased to hold or acquire property as it had done earlier, its relationship with the rest of society, and especially with the family, necessarily changed. The less the church acquired, the more remained in private or in public hands.

Continuities and Discontinuities

This discussion returns us to the question of continuity and change in family structures. There are two approaches to the history of the family in Europe.²³ One emphasizes the continuities in the family,

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particularly in England, as critical to the process of modernization, whereas the other tends to view the causal link as taking the opposite course. In reality there was both continuity and change, and the main job is to try and draw a balance between the two.

What are the kind of pressures that result in a particular set of family relationships? There is always 'tradition', persistence, inertia. A particular system may be well adapted to other features of the society in a vaguely functional way. As we have seen, the job of reproduction has some basic parameters (sex, care of children, etc.). Once a set of practices has become established, it tends to be transmitted from generation to generation. Domestic groups are ones that organize living space and also serve as units of reproduction and consumption; as such they have some functions that are relatively autonomous, not entirely subordinated to wider changes, and that have to be fulfilled in all or most human societies, even though the working out of those functions may take different forms. But there are clearly some important changes that are broadly related to productive systems since domestic groups in agricultural societies are often units of production. These relationships also respond to the imperatives of church, of state (and its judicial system) and to some extent of landlords, as well as of the market.

Equally it seems to me mistaken to look at these features as purely English or even European phenomena; both the discontinuity and the continuity arguments are misplaced in that context. The arguments relate to the earlier discussion of Malinowski, Westermarck and others about the universality of the elementary or nuclear family.²⁴ While there may indeed be some situations/structures such as that of the Nayar of southwestern India which one agrees to see as lying outside these definitional boundaries, there is no doubt that the vast majority of human societies are built upon social-economic and affectionate relationships within the couple/child unit. This relationship emerges very clearly in funeral arrangements; the 'indifference' thesis, the notion that earlier societies, other cultures and other classes neglected their children, which has been adopted by some historians of 'mentalities', is disastrously ethnocentric and thoroughly misleading.

The main variables with which I deal, namely, economic and religious, operate on a pan-European scale. What is remarkable in recent changes in the family in Europe is the way these have taken place, not necessarily at the same time or same speed, throughout the continent. Other writers, concentrating on 'mentalities' or upon

demographic factors, have often dwelt on differences between the regions of Europe, especially those writers who try to relate such variables to the advent of 'modernization' in one country (primarily England) or in one area (western Europe). The attempt to define mentalities on such a basis is, as will be discussed, less than adequate, while some of the demographic differences such as household size are less clear cut, and possibly less relevant, than have been maintained. On the other hand a late age of marriage for both sexes and the associated practice of unmarried in-living servants is certainly a general feature of European regimes dating from the late Middle Ages that has to be borne in mind.

I pursue a number of arguments in the chapters that follow but I have been principally interested in following up the idea that many of the early rules introduced by Christians, in opposition to the dominant Eurasian mode, helped the church to accumulate property at the expense of families and of wider kinship groups. If the church's influence was so great, the process of secularization that was encouraged by the New Learning of the Renaissance led to the modification of these particular rules, initially in some Protestant countries. Subsequently, when agriculture was supplemented by proto-industrialization and then by industrialization, the family was no longer tied to access to land in the same way and in the end rarely a productive unit. Those transformations had radical effects on domestic life and were pushed further by the Second Industrial Revolution later in the nineteenth century and by the socio-economic changes (or Third Industrial Revolution) that followed the Second World War. Those are the main factors that I examine in the chapters that follow.