

1

Introduction

RICHARD WALL

Our initial approach to the subject of the household and family took its cue from prevailing expectations about the shape of the family in the past. It was almost inevitable that the discussion should focus on whether families were larger or smaller than now, and in particular whether households were more or less likely to contain relatives beyond the immediate nuclear core of head, spouse, and unmarried child. Even so, *Household and family in past time*, when published in 1972,¹ contained within it a great deal more than a simple statement about the predominance of the nuclear family in pre-industrial society, although the information on children, servants, and marital status is often by-passed by those eager to denounce, or defend, its major theme.

In the present volume it is our intention to look in more detail at all the constituent parts of the household and to place the household within the broad economic and social context. There is much more attention paid than was possible in 1972 to the life cycle of the household and to the influence of occupation on its structure. The questions that we have set ourselves include the following: What structure of the household is implied by a given inheritance pattern or work pattern? If we know the occupation or age of the head of the household, how much can legitimately be inferred about the overall composition of the household? In fact, as the study of Bruges in 1814 shows (see chapter 14 below), the occupation of the household head was a good guide to the number of servants and relatives within, and even inmates attached to, the household. The age of the household head, however, was a less successful predictor of household composition, and neither age nor occupation matched the influence exerted by the sex of the head.

Elsewhere in the volume the emphasis is on regional variations in

¹ P. Laslett and Wall (eds.), *Household and family* (1972).

household structure, in Austria or England for example. Urban–rural differences also come in for particular attention. All this tends to blur the distinction between western Europe and the ‘rest’, so clearly drawn by Peter Laslett in 1977.² We will have to consider below whether there is any useful sense in which even the Flemish farmers and labourers can be said to share common characteristics with their counterparts across the North Sea. Antoinette Fauve-Chamoux in her study of early-nineteenth-century Rheims in chapter 15 raises the issue as to whether there may not have been a distinctly urban familial form, in which the characteristic, if not the numerically dominant, element was the broken or denuded family and the solitary individual rather than the conjugal family.

Nevertheless, it is still possible to identify major differences between the household systems of eastern and western Europe, systems which it has long been suspected lie at opposite ends of the spectrum. John Hajnal in chapter 2 picks out nuclear-family households and life-cycle servants (young men and women who lived in the households of their masters) as characteristic features of western households and contrasts these with the multifamily households and the absence of life-cycle servants in the east, moving indeed well outside the frontiers of Europe to make clear the unique nature of north-west Europe. In the last section of this introduction we will set out some further characteristics that might be added to Hajnal’s list. We need to do more than that, however, for it is not enough to establish the differences between east and west. We must try to explain them. Inevitably we have to face the question of why the households of enserfed Russia were so complex. Was it due to the power of the landlord? Or the reaction of the peasant family to the demands made on it? Or indeed some older custom of communal living that conditioned both the demands of the landlord and the response of the peasant?

A particularly fruitful approach to such questions is through detailed case studies of individual communities, in which the shape of the household can be explored in relation to well-documented estate management practice. This is the line taken by Peter Czap in his study of the divisions of serf households on the Mishino estate on the fringe of the Black Earth region of Russia (see chapter 3), by Jacek Kochanowicz in documenting the use of labour on farms in Poland (chapter 4), and by Andrejs Plakans in describing serfs of the Baltic provinces (chapter 5). All these contributions give prominence to the ability of the landlord to

² P. Laslett, *Family life and illicit love* (1977a): ch. 1.

regulate the flow of people into and out of households. Yet all equally suggest that there was some peasant autonomy, some meeting of interests between peasant and lord – and equally there can be no doubt that the household systems are far from being identical. There are parallels to be found in Carl Hammer's account of the management of the estates of Abbot Sigifrid at Lauterbach in Bavaria (chapter 7), although the lists he uses were drawn up a millennium earlier than those used for Russia and Poland.

Where peasants could pass land freely to their descendants or could move freely from one rented farm to another, the relationship between land and the household may be expected to have been different but, it has been thought, no less strong. As an example of such a western-type community, we have selected a number of villages in West Flanders (chapter 12) and shown that in this instance the ownership of property had little impact on the shape of the household, despite a close link between owning property and age at marriage or incidence of marriage. In the west, it would appear, the shape of the household was much more a matter of personal attributes in that it was the occupation and sex of the household head that played the role that land took in the east.

An inherent drawback to the presentation of detailed case studies is that it is impossible in the available space to provide evidence of their typicality. This is as true of the West Flanders study as of the others. It remains an open question whether we would have found a different pattern in another group of Flemish villages, or, alternatively, the same pattern in a Walloon community where different inheritance customs would lead us to expect other relationships between land ownership and the family and the household.

The constraint of space has also led us deliberately to focus on the major differences between the household patterns of eastern and western Europe. Consequently, a number of interesting areas within 'historic Europe' have had to be omitted or referred to only in passing: Ireland, Prussia, and the Rhineland for example, and Mediterranean Europe. In time it is hoped that other studies will be forthcoming, using the methodology pioneered here, to fill these gaps and check upon the typicality of the results presented in this volume.

Another drawback inherent in the case-study approach is that it is very easy to lose oneself in a morass of detail and small numbers when comparing one study with another. This is never more so than when trying to treat the household as a dynamic and not a static unit. Nor have the critics of the static view yet been able to devise a satisfactory

methodology,³ usually being content to analyse household structure in relation to the age of the household head in the hope that the experience of any one age group at one point in time will represent the experience of all other age groups either earlier or later. In other words, it is assumed that each cohort will experience similar household patterns. Two contributors to the present volume side-step this problem by monitoring the same household from census to census but come up with two distinct methodologies. In chapter 10, Reinhard Sieder and Michael Mitterauer take the individual farm or property as the base unit and trace the comings and goings and succession strategies over periods as long, sometimes, as fifty years. Then in a more modest study, Luc Danhieux, using four censuses, follows households, the sequence breaking when a new owner or tenant arrives who is unrelated to the previous possessor (see chapter 13).

This difference in methodology hides a more fundamental disagreement as to whether the household is the right unit of analysis for understanding how society works, or whether the focus should be on property, considered as fixed family capital, and how people use it and pass it on to their descendants. The latter is an approach that has worked well with Austrian data before the mid-nineteenth century, but it is not easy to adapt it to circumstances in which property is sold to strangers, divided, converted into moveables, and dissipated. On the other hand, the alternative 'household focus' soon runs into trouble, for a household, like a property, has a certain 'life', and a rather short one at that. When is the life of a household to be said to begin and to end? If one begins with the marriage of a young couple and ends with the death or remarriage of the surviving partner, one immediately creates the conjugal family as the linchpin of the entire group. This may be satisfactory for north-west Europe alone, and perhaps not universally even there. Clearly, the methodology of analysing change over time deserves some of the attention that has been lavished on the household as a static unit.

In addition to the chapters of case studies, we have included in the present volume some more thematic essays. Peter Laslett, for example, examines the notion of the household as a work group and finds it wanting (chapter 17). David Gaunt looks at attitudes towards the elderly enshrined in law and custom (chapter 8). This takes us well beyond the household as a unit of study, and it is important that we should make this move. The household is not the whole family system.⁴ The

³ One notable exception is the study by van de Walle of the Belgian community of La Hulpe: 'Household dynamics in a Belgian village' (1976).

⁴ Yet we have sometimes been accused of believing they are equivalents despite protestations to the contrary in P. Laslett and Wall (eds.) (1972): 1.

Introduction

5

next two sections of this introduction will therefore be devoted to this theme. First, we will take a basic building block of society, the household, and assess its function as a consumption unit and how this relates to other entities such as 'family', 'work', and peer groups with which it may have competing and differing loyalties; and housing, which provides a framework and perhaps an identity for its actions. By the term 'consumption unit' is meant the provisioning of a fund on which all members of the household may draw. It is recognized, nevertheless, that freedom of individuals to do this may in practice be limited, either by custom which gives greater power to the household head or to the husband;⁵ or by contract, servants, for example, being paid a stipulated amount for their work. Second, we will examine the various support channels that link family to family, particularly those which connect parents to their married children. We aim to see to what extent families supported themselves from their own resources and how far the nuclear-family household (or for that matter the extended-family or multiple-family household) succeeded in being truly independent. For this purpose we have chosen to use the family budgets collected by the great nineteenth-century theorist of the family, Frederick Le Play. Le Play's ideas are often cited, and more often misunderstood, but his detailed investigations into the family histories and living conditions of European workers seem rarely to be read. Nor, to the best of our knowledge, has any such series of histories been subject to systematic analysis as opposed to the selection of the chance quotation to support a particular and often predetermined point of view. The simple scheme of analysis that we propose for showing ties between an individual family and its relatives, its employers, and others will, we hope, be picked up and used with other biographies.

In the third section of the introduction we return to the question of household structure and the problem of its measurement. One of the great successes of *Household and family in past time* could be said to be the table on households by kin composition. It is the table most often replicated even by those who maintain a formal antipathy to household studies *per se*. Unfortunately, all too often it is left as the only comment on the household and therefore, quite rightly, has run into criticism for

⁵ Although de Maroussem, following in the footsteps of Le Play, cites an instance where in practice the power to direct the affairs of a complex household community lay with one of the women. See his account of sharecroppers in Charente, *Ouvriers des deux mondes*, 2nd ser., 3 (1892). In other cases power was divided, a master directing the work of the men and a mistress the work of the women, as in the study of the Nivernais farmers by de Cheverry in *Ouvriers des deux mondes*, 1st ser., 5 (1885).

providing an undue emphasis on the kin component in the household.⁶ Accordingly we have proposed below (see p. 41) to count the number of adults per household. This, we argue, will be a more satisfactory summary measure of household composition in that it provides a more accurate reflection on the function of the household as an economic unit.

Nevertheless, we reserve our position on two counts. First, no summary measure on its own can provide an adequate picture of the household: in other words, the household needs to be looked at in all its various aspects.⁷ Second, the kin component of the household is interesting in its own right, even when it forms as small a proportion of the household as it did in pre-industrial England. Given the financial and moral support channelled through kin,⁸ it is important to see precisely who amongst a group of relatives was received into the individual's household, and under what circumstances. The final section of the introduction will therefore be devoted to kin, beginning with an assessment of the extent to which east–west differences in the frequency of taking kin into the household reported on elsewhere in this volume are still reflected in the latest round of census statistics (broadly c. 1970). We then move on to consider whether, when the kin component of the household is small, as in north-west Europe both present and past, this necessarily implies other common features and, finally, to reflect more generally on the nature of the differences in the household systems of eastern and western Europe and their underlying causes.

I. Family, household, and society

Whereas the word 'family' can take on a number of different meanings (either limited to the people to whom one is related and with whom one lives, or expanded to cover parents, offspring, even all acknowledged

⁶ Persuasively argued by Mitterauer, 'Familiengröße – Familientypen – Familienzyklus' (1975a). The original title of our table 'Structures of households' (P. Laslett and Wall (eds.) (1972): 31) is perhaps at fault, and we have amended it to read 'Households by kin composition' in the revised and extended series of household analysis tables to which further reference is made below (see p. 36).

⁷ For example, the single summary measure of the number of adults per household, proposed above, will be affected by the social context: in England, lodgers and inmates would be excluded, while in Hungary all who contributed to or drew from a common budget would be considered household members, whether lodgers or not.

⁸ There are many studies of such support, some at the individual level, e.g. Macfarlane, *The family life of Ralph Josselin* (1970); others at the community level, e.g. R. M. Smith, 'Kin and neighbours' (1979b) and Levine and Wrightson, *Poverty and piety in an English village* (1979): ch. 4, and cf. below, sect. II. 'Kin' is used loosely in this introduction as a synonym for relatives of the household head other than spouse or offspring.

kin and affines), the household represents something very specific: the co-resident domestic group. It marks out the living space of a group of people that is private to them in that other people may not enter it without their permission. Much more tangible than the family, it was inevitable that the household should become the focus of attention in the reconstruction of family systems of past times, because the intangibles, the bonds between people who did not live with each other and who were not tied to the rest of the community or to some superior power, went largely unrecorded.

In narrowing the focus to fall on the household, it might appear that the door has been arbitrarily closed on the network of relationships that exist beyond it linking it to its neighbours. This is not the case, however, for the decision to study the household involves assumptions about its value as a unit of analysis. In attributing a variety of functions to the household we are in effect saying that they are not being carried out elsewhere. It follows that the household cannot be understood in isolation from the rest of the society of which it formed a part.

Assumptions about the household may either be explicit or implicit. In *Household and family in past time* the household was defined in terms of residence (sleeping together) and in terms of consumption (at least one main meal together). It was implicitly assumed that in order to eat together, all working members of the household would pool their income, except for the servants who shared the household in the residential sense but had no 'right' to its communal income. On the base of common participation, further ties are likely to arise: loyalties of household members to each other and to a recognized head, the feeling for the privacy of the household, and the process of socialization under which those reared in a household will reproduce a similar household in their own adulthood when circumstances permit. In a specific context, temporal or spatial, the household may also function as a unit of production and afford shelter to those members of the community unable to subsist on their own resources. In so far as there is a conventional picture of the development of the household over time, personal relationships among household members are deemed to be strengthened by the very process which has brought the household to shed its broader functions of shelter and production.⁹ In practice, though, it is impossible, except in very rare instances, to say that a particular house-

⁹ By way of example see B. Laslett, 'Family membership past and present' (1978): 486. Barbara Laslett agrees that the modern household provides shelter but argues that it differs from the form of shelter under discussion here. The former is shelter in the form of a retreat by each individual into his own home rather than the extension of the household to take care of the elderly and the orphaned.

hold had any, let alone all, of these characteristics detailed above. Admittedly, in the censuses, and before that in the unofficial listings of inhabitants, there appear blocks of names that look like households. The better listings and censuses refer to the sorts of people we would expect to find in households: parents, children, relatives, a few non-relatives (not identified as inmates), and servants. But in exactly what sense were these groups of people households?

Even in the present day it is possible to produce examples of living arrangements where it is difficult to sustain the concept of the household. The current practice of the takers of the British census is to rely on the consumption of one main meal in common, which leads to any group of people who share a living room but eat serially rather than communally, or take their meals outside of the house, being classed as so many separate households rather than as one. In this particular case, the idea of the household as a consumption unit and as a living unit, representing an arena for interpersonal contact, are pulling in different directions. Nor would such a group of persons necessarily recognize one of their number as constituting a distinct household head.

For the most part, such problems can be considered minor in the late twentieth century, relevant to such a small section of society that it scarcely disturbs the number of households by size and type whatever decision is adopted. It is quite a different matter in nineteenth-century England, when, particularly in towns, a multiplicity of subletting created a world of boarders and lodgers, some virtually independent, some not so independent, of the principal household. Using a definition of household close to that of the present day, the census authorities of the time were clearly desirous of classifying all lodgers as separate households, but would appear to have met considerable resistance from the enumerators and perhaps from householders (responsible from 1841 for filling in their own schedules), who tended to incorporate lodgers into their own households. While their interest in the family lasted, the census authorities attempted various adjustments to the published figures to allow for these 'mistakes'.¹⁰

If we take as a working definition of a household one that would have been acceptable to the residents of those households, then we are led inexorably away from a definition of the household on the basis of common consumption towards a definition that is based on the occupa-

¹⁰ *Census of Great Britain 1851*, Appendix to Report, table 13: c–ci; *Census of Great Britain 1861*, Appendix to Report, tables 34–7; 94–5. I have written in greater detail about definitions of the household in British censuses in Wall, 'Regional and temporal variation in the structure of the British household since 1851' (1982a).

Introduction

9

tion of distinct living space over which the household had independent, day-to-day control. Lodgers in England, whether or not they were catered for separately, did not hold the same control over their living space as did households. Therefore they were not households, and our usual approach is to treat lodgers as attached to, though not full members of, their 'landlord's' household.

But this does not mean that a change on these lines would be universally applicable. Hajnal, for example, in chapter 2 argues for a consistent definition of a household as a consumption unit. A similar approach is taken by Andorka and Faragó in chapter 9, who claim that in Hungary both the census officials and the villagers agreed that those who shared their meals in common constituted a single '*familia*', even if they lived separately. The common budget therefore becomes their preferred definition for a household. Cotters would be excluded from, and servants included in, the households, in conformity with how the feudal system is believed to have operated. But when evidence is lacking they have to make the working assumption that any non-relative (including any non-related servant) of the household head who had a family of his own (spouse or children) constituted a separate 'household', but that a non-relative without a family did not. In either case it is likely that both sorts of non-relative contributed to some of the production and shared some of the resources of the principal household.

The definition of a household, therefore, varies from place to place just as its structure does (see p. 21). As the definition adopted affects the structure we observe, this makes the analysis of the structure of the household a very difficult matter indeed. The comparative analysis of the household gives rise to greater problems than comparative demography, because there is more room for argument than over what constitutes a birth, a death, or even a marriage.

In certain contexts, units which seem unambiguously households might suffer from some of the limitations on their independence that one would associate with the lodging groups discussed above. The classic case is where several households occupied a tenement building in which there was a resident concierge.¹¹ The concierge represented the interests of the landlord, collected the rents, and let the rooms and, through the exercise of this power, came to control not only the public section of the building, such as the stairs, but some of the activities of the individual household members. Particularly when the tenants were working class, the concierge might be found refusing entry or depar-

¹¹ The following account relies heavily on the description of the Paris carpenter by Le Play and Focillon in *Ouvriers des deux mondes*, 1st ser., 1 (1857): 67.

tures after a certain hour, turning visitors out before midnight, and suppressing the noise of the children. However, there was no doubt in the mind of contemporary observers that these groups constituted households.

In yet other instances, the concept of the household as we have outlined it might seem altogether inappropriate. The study by Fél and Hofer of the village of Átány on the Hungarian Great Plain has become well known and is worth looking at again.¹² In this one village the family took on a variety of forms in which a house, housekeeping, or work might alternatively be communal or divided between father and son or brother and brother, giving rise to the following combinations as set out in table 1.1.

The impression of variety, however, is in an important sense illusory. The peasants, asked for their opinion on the type of living arrangements, distinguished only between those cases where the sons had scattered, moving out of the paternal farm altogether, and those where they had remained. Information on precise living arrangements and the degree of division could be, and was, obtained by Fél and Hofer but did not impinge on the consciousness of the inhabitants. In this case, the concept of the household was irrelevant not because the household could take on a variety of forms, but because the peasants defined their families in a way that played down the importance of co-residence.

The division of work and property between father and son is only one of the lines of demarcation running through Átány society. The farm buildings were usually situated at some little distance from the houses, and the men often slept on the farm. As the details on the individual families show, neither the nature of the work nor the distance involved necessarily prevented the men from living at home. Therefore, one has to consider the work patterns as a result of a preference by the community, or at least the male section of it, for this type of arrangement. The segregation of the domestic group paralleled that which the community displayed in public through the seating arrangements in church. But it would be an error to try and see the group of males around the *kert* (farmyard) as a rival to the 'house'. It is true that the *kert* was the living place of the men and the centre of economic activity, but the house alone was the place for family celebrations and social gatherings. The mistake is to try and interpret loyalty in purely economic terms. If we do this, then the groups fragment, showing a variety of loyalties to farm and house, differing according to the age and sex of the individual,

¹² Fél and Hofer, *Proper peasants* (1969): 80, 92, 103. See also Andorka and Faragó, ch. 9 below, for further references to this study.