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Edited by Peter Laslett and Richard Wall

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*A Publication of the Cambridge Group
for the History of Population and Social Structure*

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Household and family in past time

Comparative studies in the size and structure of the domestic group over the last three centuries in England, France, Serbia, Japan and colonial North America, with further materials from Western Europe

edited, with an analytic introduction on the history of the family, by

PETER LASLETT

with the assistance of

RICHARD WALL

both of the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure

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This volume is dedicated to the memory of JAMES THORNTON who died in 1969, Director of the London Branch of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation of Lisbon. The studies at Cambridge which gave rise to these published results for England were first supported by the Foundation when Mr Thornton was its Director. The international interchange at which many of the papers were read in September 1969 also took place under the Foundation's patronage. Mr Thornton showed a remarkable understanding of a new branch of learning in the process of coming into being.

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Contributors

- | | |
|----------------------|---|
| Anderson, Michael | Lecturer in Sociology, University of Edinburgh |
| Armstrong, W. A. | Senior Lecturer in History, University of Kent, Canterbury |
| Biraben, Jean-Noël | Chargé de Missions, Institut National D'Études Démographiques, Paris |
| Blayo, Yves | Chargé de Recherches, Institut National D'Études Démographiques, Paris |
| Burch, Thomas K. | Associate Director, Demographic Division, the Population Council, New York |
| Clarke, Marilyn | Research Assistant, Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure |
| Demos, John | Associate Professor of History, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts, U.S.A. |
| Dupâquier, Jacques | Directeur D'Études, École Pratique des Hautes Études, VI ^e Section, Paris |
| Goody, Jack | Professor-elect to the William Wyse Chair in Social Anthropology and Fellow of St John's College, University of Cambridge |
| Greven, Philip J. Jr | Professor of History, Rutgers College, New Brunswick, New Jersey, U.S.A. |
| Halpern, Joel, M. | Professor of Anthropology, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, U.S.A. |
| Hammel, E. A. | Professor of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley, U.S.A. |
| Hayami, Akira | Professor of Economic History, Keio University, Tokyo, Japan |
| Hélin, Étienne | Professor of History, University of Liège, Belgium |
| Jadin, Louis | Research Assistant, École Pratique des Hautes Études, VI ^e Section, Paris |
| Klapisch, Christiane | Maitre Assistant, École Pratique des Hautes Études, VI ^e Section, Paris |
| Laslett, Peter | Reader in Politics and the History of Social Structure and Fellow of Trinity College, University of Cambridge |
| Nakane, Chie | Professor of Anthropology, Institute of Oriental Culture, University of Tokyo, Japan |

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- Pryor, Edward T. Jr Chairman and Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada
- Smith, Robert J. Professor of Anthropology and Asian Studies, Vice-Chairman, Department of Anthropology, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York
- Uchida, Nobuko Research Assistant, Faculty of Economics, Keio University, Tokyo, Japan
- Wall, Richard Research Officer, Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure
- van der Woude, A. M. Senior Lecturer, Department of Rural History, Agricultural University, Wageningen, The Netherlands

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Preface to the first impression

The appearance of a large, expensive, collective book on the history of household and family needs neither apology nor defence. This is a new, or a newly defined, area of study and its importance to human behaviour in the present as well as the past is manifest. The burgeoning subject stands in evident need of a body of comparative data and of an assemblage of techniques for their analysis. All twenty-two of the following chapters are intended to meet these requirements, whilst the first of them, the Introduction, also proposes a model of classifying and comparing forms of household and family over time and between countries. Deliberate aim has been taken at the object of opening out a new field of enquiry. But there has been no attempt at codification.

It is doubtless both inevitable and desirable that a work of this kind published at this time should be controversial. The issues which will arise may go very deep. A question might even be raised as to whether the form of the family has in fact played as important a role in human development as the social sciences have assigned to it. It is possible to wonder whether our ancestors did always care about the form of the families in which they lived, whether they were large or small, and even whether they contained kin or servants or strangers.

To go as far as this is not necessarily to deny that the form of the family has a determining influence on the outlook of individuals and the structure of society. Yet this determining influence may have been in fact of restricted significance. This would be because so little real variation in familial organization can actually be found in human history that examples of societies changing their character in accordance with changes in the family are very unlikely ever to be met with.*

Though a theoretical possibility, this is not the position expounded in the Introduction, which directs critical attention rather towards the assumption that in the past the household was universally large and complicated, and that historical progress has always been from big and complex to small and simple. Further, the usefulness of mean household size as a significant feature is called into question, since it is finally elusive in definition and unreliable as an indicator of household composition. What is here named the stem-family hypothesis is also run over with some scepticism, together with the supposition that the nuclear family is inevitably associated with the rise of individualism and with industrialization. These arguments will presumably themselves be disputed, and there are in fact already signs that the traditional positions associated with

* It is perhaps necessary to warn the reader here that the resident familial group alone is in question, not the kinship network, nor any 'familial' relationships between distinct households. The position described above is presumably that implied by Levy (1965).

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Le Play and established family sociology will be defended with spirit. It is possible indeed that this whole volume will be regarded as a polemic against the notion that the family group was ever large or complicated in the five cultural areas whose recent history is touched on here, or perhaps anywhere at any time.

It is my belief, however, that no open-minded reader of the Introduction or of any of the articles in this book could come away with such a stereotype in his head. There are repeated references to the existence of large households and of complex ones, with their possible significance for historical development. There is even (in the final section of the Introduction) a suggested criterion for deciding when complex family structure could be said to have dominated a particular culture. It is true that only Japan of the cultures examined is there admitted to have had the possibility of being dominated by a complex family tradition, with the nuclear family in a minority position even there, clearly predominant elsewhere, and virtually unchallenged in the Anglo-Saxon countries. But to make these claims is still not to declare at large against big and complex households, and it is fervently to be hoped that the determined controversialist will not pass this fact over.

There are two reasons why the point is of peculiar importance to me as author and editor, and I should like to set them out briefly here. The first is concerned with the industrialization of the West, and particularly with that of England, the first country to be industrialized. Assuming that nuclear family organization predisposes a society towards industrialization, the demonstration that in England such a form of the family was already predominant for centuries before industrialization constitutes a powerful argument as to why that country modernized herself earlier than any other. This argument creates a strong temptation to assume that England and the European West was uniquely disposed towards small and nuclear households, and it is therefore essential that this temptation should be guarded against. Such may be the reason why a certain *animus* against 'the myth of the extended family' manifested itself at the international conference on the comparative history of household and family held in September 1969 by the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure.

The reader is left to make his own judgment on how far that conference did establish the temporal priority of the nuclear family in England, and how far England's early industrialization can be connected with these facts. The present volume originates with the papers presented on that occasion. What I have called the null hypothesis* (see below p. 73) in the history of the family, which is that the present state of evidence forces us to assume that its organization was always and invariably nuclear unless the contrary can be proven, was certainly an outcome of these interchanges.

The second point which I should like here to underline concerns the domestic

* In the Introduction the null hypothesis is propounded in respect of England and the history of the English family. But it must be taken to apply to all societies at all periods. In some cases, no doubt, the null hypothesis will be easily rejected. But it is always worth setting up.

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cycle. Repeated insistence is rightly laid in this volume on the fact that only a few households in a community need to be complex at any one time for it to be true that a large number of others may have been complex at an earlier time, or may be due to become complex at a later one. Now this must not be allowed to obscure the fact that from the point of view of the experience of the persons in that community at the date in question, the nuclear family household constituted the ordinary, expected, normal framework of domestic existence.

Nevertheless since this book first appeared in 1972 the work of Dr Rudolf Andorka of Budapest and of Dr Lutz Berkner of the University of California and his associates has come to show that the extremes of familial organization, from the simplest to the most complex, may once have existed within the confines of the European Continent itself. More than this, Eastern and Western Europeans may have differed from each other in several further complementary but crucial ways; in the age gap between man and wife, in the period of childbearing in women, in respect of numbers of persons circulating from household to household as servants and so bringing about exogamy.

Notwithstanding, nothing is yet known to me which would finally sanction the assumption that the size and character of the family necessarily represents a value, a norm of belief and of attitude fundamental to human society. Even in Eastern Europe the form of household group does not appear to be a cultural value in itself alone. It seems rather to be a circumstance incidental to the practice of agriculture, to the customs of land distribution and redistribution, to the laws and traditions of land inheritance, and of succession in the patriline. My conviction remains, that the form of the domestic group cannot yet be demonstrated to be capable of doing all the work which social scientists have seemed to expect it to do.

Little room is left here for acknowledgments. Since so many obligations have been incurred in the course of producing this book, even beginning to list them would be out of the question. Our greatest debt is owed to the Cambridge University Press, and to Patricia Skinner in particular, and we must cite the name of the Social Science Research Council in London, which maintains the work of the Cambridge Group: the Gulbenkian Foundation is acknowledged on a previous page. Our debt to the co-operativeness and to the patience of our contributors must be evident to the reader, and we hope that these contributors will forgive us if we single out one name amongst them to cite, that of Gene Hammel who has been helpful in every direction and at every stage. To Marilyn Clarke we owe a great deal besides the index to the book.

A final word as to the division of editorial responsibility between us. The selection, compression and translation (where necessary) of individual pieces was undertaken by Peter Laslett assisted by Janet Laslett, but there his editorial duties came to an end. All the detailed and fatiguing tasks have been undertaken by Richard Wall, who has also inserted the cross-references in the footnotes.

July 1972

PETER LASLETT

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Preface to the second impression

Since 1972 scholars have been scouring eastern and western Europe for signs of the complex household of the past, a reaction in part to the challenge posed by our null hypothesis that the nuclear family should be considered dominant unless the contrary could be proven. The result is that we now know a good deal more about the role of the household in countries which were unrepresented at the 1969 conference which gave rise to the papers contained in this volume. The debate continues too on the importance to be attached to the complex household when 'snapshot', once-only listings of inhabitants reveal that of all households only two or three per cent were 'multiple': two distinct nuclei sharing the same living space. To us it seems difficult to see why a short period in an extended family in one's youth must necessarily be treasured for life, or indeed why the peasant-landowner, the complexities of his household still under examination as far as England is concerned, has to provide the ideal for society. But these are difficult propositions to refute with the only witnesses centuries dead and their experience whether of three days', three weeks' or three years' duration buried with them, though microsimulation of household structures following a sixteenth-century English model scarcely suggests that the inhabitants were keen to live in such units. Beyond recall too are the living-in servants who could say whether they saw themselves or were seen by others as such intimate members of the household as their master's children. The possibility is that there will be greater variation in familial attitudes towards such household 'extras' as widowed relative, servant and lodger, whether co-existing in one room, two, or in completely distinct apartments, than in the 'physical' structure of the household, the number with and without certain types of member, which is all that listings can ordinarily reveal. The quantitative approach seems to fail us here but not entirely; for the merging of census and reconstitution-type studies will enable us to identify, for instance, who among the widowed and the orphaned continued to live alone when there were kin present in the village with whom they might have sought shelter.

Finally, it must be stressed that the present impression differs from the first only in the correction of typographical errors and the modification of references to the 'current' research of 1972.

RICHARD WALL

Cambridge Group for the History of
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