

*Historical anthropology
of the family*

MARTINE SEGALEN

Translated by J.C. WHITEHOUSE *and* SARAH MATTHEWS



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1986

First published 1986
Reprinted 1988, 1993, 1994, 1996

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 0-521-25704-2 hardback
ISBN 0-521-27670-5 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2002

Contents

.....

<i>Foreword</i>	<i>page ix</i>
INTRODUCTION	1
Talking about the family: paradoxes and contradictions	1
The sociology of the family: where history and anthropology meet	3
The aim and scope of this work	6
Suggested reading	8
<i>Part One: The area of kinship</i>	11
1 THE DOMESTIC GROUP	13
The large peasant family	14
The domestic group in the past: size and structure	20
The instability of the old domestic group	31
Recent developments	37
Domestic groups and kin relationships	39
Suggested reading	40
2 KINSHIP AND KINSHIP GROUPS	43
The terminology of kinship	45
Filiation	46
Marriage	56
Lines and kindred groups in peasant societies	61
Suggested reading	71
3 KIN RELATIONSHIPS IN URBAN SOCIETY	73
Social and kinship change	73
Lines and kindred groups in contemporary society	80
Kinship group versus nuclear family: an ideological position	103
Suggested reading	103

Contents

<i>Part Two: The making of the domestic group</i>	105
4 THE HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY OF MARRIAGE	107
From alliance to marriage	108
Towards contemporary marriage	132
Suggested reading	137
5 MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY	139
Marriages	139
Choosing a partner: who marries whom?	143
Love, a social force of reproduction	147
Cohabitation and the younger generation	148
Divorce	151
Suggested reading	158
6 THE CHILD AND THE FAMILY	159
Towards a norm of two children	160
The diverse and changing nature of parental relationships	173
The family life cycle	181
New kinds of parents and children?	183
Suggested reading	196
<i>Part Three: Domestic roles and activities</i>	199
7 ROLES WITHIN THE COUPLE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY	201
A complex problem	201
Peasant households	204
Artisans' and shopkeepers' households	210
Working-class households	212
Bourgeois households	218
Suggested reading	221
8 ROLES WITHIN THE PRESENT-DAY COUPLE	223
Sociological role theories	223
Factors leading to changes in roles	227
The contemporary couple	244
Suggested reading	255
9 THE DOMESTIC GROUP AND ECONOMIC ROLES	257
The domestic group as an income unit and a consumption unit	258
The domestic group and inheritance	273
Suggested reading	285

Contents

10	FAMILY AND SOCIETY	286
	The family and social control	287
	The family and social power	293
	Women in the family and in society	298
	The family and social destiny	304
	Suggested reading	306
	<i>Notes</i>	309
	<i>Index</i>	323

Introduction

Can there be such a thing as a sociology of the family? Unlike other areas in which we may admit that we have no special competence, this particular field is, naturally enough, one we all feel we know well—we were all born into a family and, perhaps, have started one. This empirical, felt knowledge of the family makes it one of the most ideologically loaded of topics.

The family also holds some of the keys to our future as a nation. Should families cease to produce enough children as some demographers, historians and politicians have already claimed with alarm, should couples break up and teenagers harass people in the streets, then the state will look for ways and means of setting the family on a path with a less disastrous significance for the future, and at a lower social cost.

TALKING ABOUT THE FAMILY: PARADOXES AND CONTRADICTIONS

The assumptions on which we base our judgements concern the contemporary family, as compared to some mythical one that is 'felt' rather than analysed or known. The press and television echo the same clichés and talk of the 'disintegrating family', 'the weakening of the family', 'state aid for the family', 'the family at risk' and so on, stressing the link between the idea of family and the notion of crisis.

It would be useful at this point to suggest briefly the major ways in which this theme is formulated before going on to analyse them in the subsequent chapters. In our time, the family has contracted. It consists now of the couple. It is a unit of consumption rather than of production. It no longer provides the help it used to accept as its responsibility in the past, such as caring for the elderly, the sick or

Introduction

the mentally ill, and such functions of the kind that it still carries out (the socialisation of children, for example) are now shared with other institutions. Moreover, this 'insular' family now has very few relationships with other family cells. These relationships are seen as being 'impoverished', and in making such statements we are implicitly referring to some period in the past when they were 'rich'. According to this way of seeing things, the family cell manipulated by social institutions appears weak.

But there is another way of looking at the family that sees it as formidably powerful, a refuge and the special focus for our feelings. The couple first and foremost, and the children secondarily, are seen as investing in the family all those emotions that cannot be expressed in a dehumanised society. According to this view, all the warmth of those social relations that once embraced a wide range of kinfolk, neighbours and friends is now seen as being focussed more narrowly and more intensely on the nuclear family and on close relatives.

It is clear that these two ways of seeing the family are contradictory. On the one hand, it is said to be undergoing a crisis, on the other to wield inordinate power, since it has a virtual monopoly of emotional power in an emotionally starved society. As one sociologist investigating the family in Paris was told, '*The family is in a bad way, but my family is fine.*'

Is the family truly in crisis? Perhaps to talk about the question in such terms misses the point and may, perhaps, gloss over the real problem, namely that *society* is in crisis.

This theme was recurrent throughout the nineteenth century. Industrialisation drew to the towns enormous numbers of workers who had lost their old cultures and been assimilated into the proletariat, and the number of abandoned children and illegitimate births and the rate of juvenile delinquency all increased. The instability of proletarian families was a source of concern to the dominant classes, who wished to restore the power of the family and that of patriarchal and monarchical authority and to use the former as an instrument to foster morality amongst the working classes.

As an institution, the family can both resist and adapt. It has lived through all the changes, both economic and social, that have brought Western societies from the stage of a peasant to that of an industrial economy. It is more than the 'basic cell' of society or a 'last bulwark' against destructive forces and, seen in historical perspective, has powers of flexibility and resistance. Instead of analysing it in terms of a 'crisis', we should try to discover how the family has lived through the economic, social and cultural upheavals of the last

The sociology of the family

hundred and fifty years, how it has resisted them and how it has contributed to them.

THE SOCIOLOGY OF THE FAMILY: WHERE HISTORY AND ANTHROPOLOGY MEET

In France, although in the 1950s and 1960s the sociology of the family was not quite as formless and empty as the American historian Edward Shorter saw it, it was nevertheless a rather underdeveloped field, very much under the influence of a consciously empirical American sociology. It was unable to provide relevant conceptual frameworks or, until quite recently, exact data, and very probably this explains why there has been so much talk of 'crisis'. American sociology, because it has remained faithful to the concept of long-range social development, presents the family as a defined structure without precise references to its social and cultural environment and not as a domestic group undergoing change within a specific historical framework. The abstract nature of this position can be explained by the dominant ideology of the post-war years, that of individualism and freedom. This has meant that each family cell tended to be seen as unique and independent of cultural influences or economic and historical contingencies.

William Goode, however, in his work published in the 1960s, proposed quite a different approach. Whereas classical sociology produced more and more empirical research, Goode's innovation was to compare the American family with that in other cultures. He observed the frequently dynamic role of family systems, which sociology had often seen as passive objects, and drew a distinction between norms and practices, stressing that the ideology of the conjugal family did not necessarily imply a conjugal structure.

Goode's works, with their pioneering ideas, produced no great response in the sociological field for some time. It was left to historians interested in family structures to rediscover them in the 1970s. Sociology and history come together when exponents of both disciplines leave their traditional confines and go beyond the classic contrast of their respectively diachronic and synchronic approaches, that is, when historians refuse to concern themselves exclusively with changes and sociologists with structures. And sociology, as its knowledge of the family in bygone times increases, is gradually becoming more aware of its own limits. This increasing knowledge seems decisive, since every change is implicitly or explicitly referred to the family in the past.

Sociology is formulating this need and history is discovering or

Introduction

rediscovering the family. The latter has been influenced in its new orientation by the current ideology of 'the crisis in the family'. Also, although it has long been exclusively concerned with the state, it has rediscovered the family under the influence of those branches of itself that are directed towards the economic, social and cultural history of the mass of the population. Similarly, demographers interested in large-scale population movements find that the family is a central factor in their investigations. In France, as a result of their anxiety about the downward trend in fertility in the years before the Second World War, demographers both looked back into the past to attempt to produce a demographic history as well as made a close study of the family cell, that mysterious place in which fertility, once a natural phenomenon, had become a controlled and limited one. The *Institut national d'études démographiques*, as a result of the impetus given by Louis Henry, introduced a *fiche de famille* that made it possible to measure the degree of fertility and variations in it. This new technique, which attracted a great deal of interest both in France and elsewhere, made available a great deal of data. However, although historical demography enables us to discern trends and developments, it proposes no answers. Through the questions it raises, though, it does provide a new perspective on the historical problems connected with the family by moving towards a psychological history that could explain why such developments might occur.

The work of Philippe Ariès on the child's place in the awareness of the family has had a considerable influence on sociologists by offering support for those ideas concerned with the contraction of the family round the conjugal couple. Although that position is much more complex nowadays, it is, after twenty years of research, widely accepted. At the same time, his hypotheses have become an integral part of the cluster of questions that demographers have raised for themselves and for others and have contributed to the new deployment of forces in historical research on the family and the history of ways of thinking. This is based on sources well known to historians (notarial, judicial and ecclesiastical archives, account books, surveys and economic and social documents) but hitherto not fully exploited in studies concerning the family.

This 'new history' of a social, economic and cultural kind has, even if it sometimes goes beyond these areas, been a fertile source of information and ideas with regard to the study of the family.

History has been illuminating in two ways with regard to the general movement of sociology. In the first place, it has shown us how naïve many of our old simplistic concepts were. Some of our

The sociology of the family

theories were based on an erroneous view of life in the past, and some of our suppositions about the constancy of behaviour patterns were without foundation. A historical perspective has meant that we are now able to see the relative nature of a particular attitude towards the family or a particular aspect of the family as a characteristic of contemporary society. One example of this is our cliché of the 'shrinking' of the present-day family.

In this book we will see that kinship relations that had supposedly been overstretched by the effects of incipient industrialisation were in fact maintained and that certain forms were even strengthened. Here, the task of history is to demystify and demythologise our contemporary analyses of and statements about the family. These are still based on an implicit image of the 'good old days', of the family as the repository of every virtue and of all the harmony we have since lost. Increased knowledge of the family of former times means that we can form a fresh judgement of the family of our own day and its supposed crises and deviant behaviour.

Second, history teaches modesty. Relationships between changes taking place within the family and those taking place within society and technical, economic and social changes can never be explained in terms of simple and single models. Every study of the family in a particular social and economic context shows the wide range of different situations involved. It is not simply a question of no longer being able to claim that industrialisation alone changed the family in a fundamental way. We also have to make a more sophisticated study of the various complex relationships between the two processes.

During the earliest, artisanal stage of industrialisation, family structures remained relatively unchanged. They had, in fact, experienced some modification before industrialisation got under way, that may perhaps have facilitated the latter. Developments at the level of the domestic unit and the unit of production must therefore be examined simultaneously rather than consecutively, since both are produced by the same cultural and social changes. It follows that in other societies with different family traditions and patterns, different models of family and industrial development can be expected.

Reflecting on the family against the background of history therefore shows that there is not one single type of family and family organisation over the spectrum of time and space, but rather several. In thus perceiving the relative nature of the object of study, the historian encounters the variety of patterns that social anthropology observes.

This encounter with social anthropology is teaching historians and

Introduction

sociologists to take a new look at the body of knowledge and the set of theories we have built up concerning the family, and shows us that although it is a universal phenomenon the various forms it takes differ greatly in specific societies. There is a difference in degree, if not in kind, between those societies traditionally studied by anthropologists and contemporary ones. In the former, the basic matter of social categories, the framework of relationships of production, of consumption, power and so on, is provided by kinship, whereas in the latter, kinship is in competition with other social institutions, and with the state in particular. The way in which the family is currently organised in Western societies is merely one of the possible ways provided by the whole range of cultures. History enables us to re-create the family in the flow of time, and social anthropology shows us how relative it is with regard to other types of culture.

Social anthropology also proceeds in a way that greatly enriches the sociology of the family, by making considerable use of monograph studies. It stresses the need to examine the nature of the family within a carefully determined culture and in terms of its relationship with that culture. In conjunction with psychological and psychoanalytical approaches it also seeks the meaning of the symbols revealed by an analysis of behaviour patterns and rituals. This means that the family need no longer be seen simply as a passive and externally determined object, but can be envisaged as an institution capable of resistance and action.

THE AIM AND SCOPE OF THIS WORK

There are three parts to this book. The first sets out to elucidate the structural relationships between family, domestic group and kinship. It is based on anthropological concepts and attempts to show which of these are the most relevant to a better understanding of the contemporary family. The second is centred on the make-up of the family, marriage and the birth of children. The third deals with the roles and activities of the spouses. In the final chapter, the relationships between the family and society are discussed.

Each theme is introduced from both the historical and anthropological point of view. It is in this that both the originality of the approach and its difficulty lie, for when one is dealing with the family everything is interrelated and the intersections in the range of problems related to the family are indicated by the multiplicity of cross-references.

Comparisons of this kind, involving cultures from different times

The aim and scope of this work

and places, raise a further major difficulty. If we compare a family from another time or place with a contemporary family, we are really contrasting a rural and an urban society. Although there is a generally accepted definition of the former with regard to social relationships, the latter is highly differentiated and still inadequately conceptualised.

The family, whether considered from the point of view of kinship, affective relationships or its structural links with society, is, wherever possible and useful, allocated a place in terms of social categories seen not as classes but as cultural milieux. Thus, women and children, for example, are discussed in terms of working-class, peasant, bourgeois families and so on. The book does not pretend to present definitive theories about the family. Contemporary sociology is obliged to exercise a certain prudence, for it has no conceptual framework capable of accounting for the wide range of family phenomena. Now is not the time for a general theory, but rather for a 'medium-range' one, relating certain structural trends and certain types of families whose behaviour patterns are studied within well-defined temporal and spatial frameworks. Nor can we hope to provide a complete and exhaustive analysis of the subject itself, though perhaps the suggested reading may fill some of these gaps.

The word 'family' is a polyseme indicating both individuals and relationships. It refers both to the conjugal cell and offspring in today's society and to the household of former times. Here it is called the domestic group. Depending on the context, it can designate a very restricted group (parents or grandparents) or a wider one (uncles, aunts or cousins) of relatives. In other contexts it can be used of relationships between individuals or family units. Its meaning can be widened (as in, for example, 'the Smith family') to cover a dynasty of relatives who do not cohabit but share a joint patrimony. These are but a few of the meanings of the word.

The family not only presents lexical difficulties. The feelings centred in it are also full of snares. 'Love', 'family closeness' and 'the sense of childhood' are all vague expressions, used and judged in terms of the awareness of them that our own experience has given us. Consequently, we all too often tend to judge situations in the past (when relationships were different) by the yardstick of our present-day experience. I will try to say what is meant by such expressions, or at least to point out the difficulty inherent in the problem. Can one measure the intensity of love?

In terms of a precise vocabulary, instead of always speaking of the 'family', I will instead use whichever term seems to define most clearly that institution in the particular aspect of it under discussion,

Introduction

using such expressions as 'nuclear family', 'domestic group' and 'kinship relations'.

SUGGESTED READING

Works of a sociological nature

- Anderson, Michael, ed. *Sociology of the Family*. London: Penguin, 1982.
(Contains very useful comparative quantitative indicators of family change.)
'The Family'. *Daedalus* 106(1977): 2.
- Mendras, Henri. *Éléments de Sociologie*. Paris: Colin, 1975. See in particular chapter VIII on the family.
- Michel, Andrée. *La Sociologie de la famille*. Paris: Mouton, 1970.
Sociologie de la famille et du mariage. Paris: PUF, 1972; new ed., 1978.
Sociologie comparée de la famille contemporaine. International conferences of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique. Paris: CNRS, 1955.
- Stoetzl, Jean. 'Révolution industrielle et changements dans la famille'. In *Renouveau des idées sur la famille*. Cahiers de l'INED, no. 18. Paris: PUF, 1954.
- Williams, Robin M., Jr. *American Society*. 3d ed. Chapter IV, 'Kinship and the Family in the United States'. New York: Knopf, 1970.

A contemporary critique of American sociology

- Elder, Glen. 'Approaches to Social Change and the Family'. In *Turning Points. Historical and Sociological Essays on the Family*, supplement to *American Journal of Sociology* 84 (1978): 1-38. Ed. John Demos and Sarane Spence Boocock.

On the contribution of history

- Anderson, Michael. 'The Relevance of Family History'. In *The Sociology of the Family: New Directions for Britain*. Ed. Chris Harris. Monograph no. 28. Keele: University of Keele Press, 1979.
- Burguière, André. 'Famille et société', in a special edition of *Annales Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 4-5 (1972): 799-801, devoted to the family.

On the contribution of social anthropology

- Héritier, Françoise. 'Famille'. *Encyclopedie Einaudi*, vol. 6. Einaudi, 1978.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *La Famille*. Papers by and on Claude Lévi-Strauss. Collected by R. Bellour and C. Clément. Paris: Gallimard, 1979.
- A pioneer sociology listening to history and social anthropology:
Goode, William. *World Revolution and Family Patterns*. Glencoe, Ill.: Free

Suggested reading

Press, 1963. Also published, with a simplified sociological presentation, as *The Family*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964.

Historical approaches

- Anderson, Michael. *Approaches to the History of the Western Family 1500–1914*. London: Macmillan, 1980.
- Ariès, Philippe. *Histoire des populations françaises et leurs attitudes devant la vie depuis le XVIII^e siècle*. Paris: Seuil, 1948. Published in the Points collection.
- Flandrin, Jean-Louis. *Families in Former Times*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979. (An essential work with up-to-date historical material relating to the subject.)
- Hareven, Tamara K., ed. *The Family and the Life Course in Historical Perspective*. New York: Academic Press, 1978.
- Journal of Family History: Studies in Family, Kinship and Demography*, published by the National Council on Family Relations, Minneapolis.
- Lebrun, François. *La Vie conjugale sous l'Ancien Régime*. Paris: Colin, 1975. A useful pedagogical work dealing with all aspects of the family in the *ancien régime*.
- Mitterauer, Michael, and Reinhard Sieder. *The European Family*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982.
- Shorter, Edward. *The Making of the Modern Family*. New York: Basic Books, 1975. (To be read critically in that it contains some attractive but unproved assertions and adopts an ethnocentric approach.)
- Stone, Lawrence. *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500–1800*. New York: Harper & Row, 1977.
- Wheaton, Robert, and Tamara K. Hareven, eds. *Family, Sexuality in French History*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980.