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978-0-521-35763-0 - Interest and Emotion: Essays on the Study of Family and Kinship

Edited by Hans Medick and David Warren Sabean

Excerpt

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Introduction

HANS MEDICK and DAVID WARREN SABEAN

In recent years, social historians have been calling into question many aspects of their practice. They are no longer sure in what way the story which they relate is part of a larger story of political change, the struggle for power, and the analysis of the forces of domination.¹ There is a tendency on the part of some of the profession to regard structures, especially those amenable to statistical abstraction, as the proper object of investigation, whilst others centre their interest on an analysis of agency.² In the debate many assumptions of an earlier tacit synthesis are being put into question, and one of the insights which is most rapidly spreading waves through the discipline is that the 'progress' and institutional growth in Western industrial lands did not happen without enormous cost to those parts of the world which did not 'share' in that progress.³ Faith in the need and indeed the possibility for others to tread the same path has been shaken. This changed orientation, furthermore, made it possible to see that the *internal* costs might also have been other than one thought. An interest arose in historical 'losers' or in non-establishment views of the processes of change – history from the 'bottom up'.⁴ One began to confront the 'other' not just in the primitive but inside our own history. Besides the problem of how this new 'object' was to fit into a social history which was not depoliticized, the debates over structure and agency revealed the problem of whether and how the object of investigation might be reconstituted as a historical subject.⁵ Central problems of the old hermeneutical discussion of how to deal with subjective experience and find meaning in texts flooded back, but under a radically altered awareness on the part of historians. The cultural unity and continuity of experience which were assumed in the older hermeneutic tradition as a precondition for understanding could no longer be taken for granted.

The eye of the ethnographer, trained in the participant observation of societies other than his own, often proved to be more helpful for the historian in search of his new subject than the standard procedures of a discipline whose principal goal was believed to be the appropriation (however critical it might be) of an existent tradition, shared by the historian and his object alike. Historians, as a result,

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have begun to talk to anthropologists with an intensity not found since the turn of the century, when hermeneutic questions were likewise at the centre of the discipline. In more than one way the historian's object has thus become like the anthropologist's subject, and historians have begun to change as well.⁶

Just when historians are turning to anthropology for help, quite ironically the latter are undergoing an internal turmoil of their own, and, if not exactly getting from historians what they need to refashion their craft, they are at many points concerned with developing their own historical practice.⁷ To a large extent, attention to new problems has been occasioned by transformations in so-called 'primitive' societies under the impact of world capitalism, state formation, and the new international division of labour. Transformations of this magnitude broke into the atemporal syntheses of structural-functionalism with force. On the one hand, the notion of the 'timeless primitive' itself disappeared as it was discovered that even his society was constituted in the processes which transformed the world over the last several centuries. The traditional 'cult units' of anthropology in the form of cultural and social isolates were radically put into question.⁸ Such societies arose and differentiated in the course of the expansion of commerce and capitalism. On the other hand, structure itself has been called into question and within the image of a never-ceasing reconstitution of society, much discussion has come to focus around the categories of 'practice' and 'strategy' as more satisfactory analytical ones for describing action than such notions as 'moral community' or institutionalized value systems embedded in kinship.⁹ There is, however, the danger in this approach of dissolving 'strategy' into 'manipulation' and seeing action as grounded in generalized needs which escape being constituted by society. It is here that the hermeneutic problem creeps back in as the acknowledgement of 'otherness' disappears in a model of action based on ideologized assumptions of Western individualism. The problem of the connection between subjective experience and strategy on the one hand and objective structures on the other, between practice and the social constitution of values, perceptions and meanings, between individual and institution, has been caught up in issues of class formation, the dialectic of historical change, processes of transformation, and forces of social reproduction. The 'crisis' of anthropology throws its practitioner into historical practice willy-nilly.

In this conjuncture of the new social history and social anthropology, the possibility for a fruitful dialogue between the two disciplines has arisen. For both of them it is time to go beyond a sharp dichotomy opposing objective, material, structural, or institutional factors to subjective, cultural, symbolic, or emotional ones. One can no longer proceed from the hermeneutical concept of the individual as the main agent in the production and attribution of meaning. If 'meaning' takes on new interest, it is meaning publicly assigned – meaning in the interplay of social relations. But that does not imply that the social constitution of the individual is to be seen as prescriptive or static. To argue that the individual is socially constituted is to suggest that this happens inside the contradictions,

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disjunctions, and conflicts of society. Public understanding is only possible inside class constituted, contradiction-ridden, jarring processes. If the subject comes back to the centre of the stage, he does so within this context of the production of meaning – the complex process of selecting from the shared pool of connotations, values, and symbols available in a culture. This process, however, does not take place on neutral ground nor with equal ability or chances. It is composed of the constant exchange of and struggle for meaning within contexts of reciprocity, dependence, and resistance.¹⁰

The conference at which the essays in this volume were discussed explored some of the issues arising from this convergence of social history and anthropology by dealing with a limited subject, which it took from the central terrain of both disciplines. The family has long been under discussion by anthropologists, although pushed a bit to the side in the last several years by interest in the new problems, but only brought into discussion by social historians in the process of the renovation of their discipline. Our entry into the issues used as a vehicle a consideration of the way ‘emotions’ and ‘material interests’ are treated, and we offered a discussion paper, which appears in this volume in revised form.

Our argument began with the historian’s hermeneutic problem. It was suggested that the subjective emotional life of others is not open to the observer for inspection. ‘Meaning’ is not what we search for but the ‘meaning of meaning’, or, otherwise put, the expression of emotion as a ‘grammar’ or symbolic system of social relationships. Emotions are socially constituted and are not only the expression of experience but also the determinants of experience and practice.¹¹ It often seems as if historians carry around a field bag of emotions – the archeological artifacts of their investigations – from which they can pull out items to tag with stickers, such as ‘mother, 1720, Languedoc’ or ‘male child, handloom weaving family, 1816, Swabian Alp’. To reexamine the issues, it was suggested first that language, itself socially constituted, often misleads the researcher into exchanging the subject’s own label for the ‘real thing’, and second that strategies for analysing family dynamics were necessary to embed the analysis of emotional expression into a set of social practices. Therefore we introduced the historians to anthropological notions of rights and duties, claim and obligation.

One of the most intractable problems in this regard is the tendency to think in terms of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ alternatives, of action and motivation determined by interest on the one hand and emotion or moral value on the other. Historians sometimes string psychological motivations together as a continuum between these two poles. Classes and epochs can be suitably identified along the string, and, what is more, Western history, as far as the family is concerned, has been seen to move along the string from hard to soft. We argued that both emotions and material interests are socially constituted and that they arise from the same matrix. The problem is to embed them in property relations, working processes,

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and the structures of domination. Property too should not be reified but understood as a relationship structured by and structuring emotions and needs. As a strategy for analysing the social matrix, we offered the notion of ‘mediation’ and discussed one form of family rituals of mediation – perhaps the central one – namely, food preparation and meals.

As for anthropologists, their problem – assessing meaning and action within ongoing process – sometimes resolves itself into alternatives of ‘social reproduction’ or ‘transformation’. Either the individual is bound by processes of social control, domination, or socialization such that social structures are maintained or are only slowly subject to change, or breaks occur because of exogenous influences, setting the individual free from inherited values, institutions, and structures. However, this way of breaking process up creates serious problems. Anthropologists are discovering that history is not just something imposed on native populations from the outside, solely by their integration into the ‘modern world system’, but is also an essential feature of native peoples’ own creative efforts within the contexts, contradictions, and conflicts of their own cultures and societies. We engaged the anthropologists on issues that arise from dealing with structures and institutions in change and illustrated the problem with a number of strategies for analysing the family as a matrix of class relationships. The problem from one view is to see how, within moving contexts, emotions are constantly mapped onto new terrains, and with the changes of position, reorder and restructure experience and meaning.

Bernard Vernier takes up several of these issues in a case study of inheritance and social reproduction on the Greek island of Karpathos. He shows how the dynamics of property are closely linked to the web of social relations, how family mediates class relations, and how calculation and sentiment grow from the same matrix. He introduces and expands Bourdieu’s concept of ‘symbolic capital’ in an effort to solve the problem of the dichotomy of property and emotion.

The ideology of Western social science has often made a rough division between male and female along the lines of interest and emotion. The bond between mother and child is taken as quintessentially emotional and non-interested, something belonging rather to nature than to culture. (How this integrative, spontaneous tie is symbolized, used, and exploited in family relations and beyond, and – being marketed as a commodity – serves material interests well outside the bonds which it means to affirm, is shown in the essay by Karin Hausen.) Regina Schulte discusses the mother/child nexus in an extreme situation. She shows in her analysis of infanticide among propertyless rural servants in late nineteenth-century Bavaria how sexual relations, birth, and attachment to the new born child were all dependent upon and embedded in work processes and class relationships. Vanessa Maher argues that rural women in Morocco take radically different attitudes towards male and female children and that this in turn is part of a process of alienation rooted in the contradiction opening up between their own access to property and the way in which their

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bodies and reproductive and productive capacities are subsumed under the property rights of their husbands.

Jack Goody has pointed out that property transmission is not only one way by which the reproduction of the social system takes place, but it is also a way in which interpersonal relations are structured.¹² This is the theme of three of the essays in this volume. Martine Segalen discusses the transmission of property between generations in a partible inheritance system in Brittany. She shows how relations between generations and among adult siblings were structured by transmission as a process over a long time, producing constant and lasting competition among siblings. By contrast Alain Collomp deals with a stem family system, regulated by contract, in early modern Haute-Provence. Interweaving property and personal relations, he discusses the authority structure of older men and takes up the sometimes bitter conflicts between brothers and between mothers and sons-in-law. David Sabean analyses the relations between brothers-in-law among South German peasants in a period of capitalization and intensification of agriculture. With severe shortages of capital, brothers-in-law were forced into mutual cooperation for production, but at the same time into conflict over land and inheritance.

The political activities of family members or their particular position in the polity may also be viewed as part of the 'estate' which stamps the relations of members within a family. Andrew Strathern considers the political strategy of a Papua New Guinea 'big-man' to show how the relations of other family members are structured by the construction and maintenance of his political network. At a time when the nature of the social and economic system is undergoing rapid transformation, political power based on forms of public display and exchange is becoming uncertain. Much of family life centres around the desire on the part of some to reproduce the political network, whilst others are finding new ways to structure relations in the changed situation. Transformation and political structure are also themes handled by Roger Sablonier's analysis of inner-familial relationships in the Aragonese royal family at the turn of the fourteenth century. He examines trends towards centralization of state administration and parallel attempts to centralize the regulation of royal family affairs. Relations among siblings were under the strong impact of the father/king, whose central concern was passing his estate to a single heir.

Just as family sentiment and interpersonal relations can be patterned around an 'estate', whether composed of land or political connection or office, so the wider problems of mere survival or the desire to maximize the chances of offspring can be important for the emotional structuring of relations. Herbert Gutman takes up the problem of the way propertyless American slaves and their descendants created their own culture and class values under severe conditions within an idiom of family and kinship. He shows how enlarged kin networks transmitted ways of structuring interpersonal relations and created a basis for reciprocity and obligation. Esther Goody explores the issue of fostering young

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children in other homes, a common practice among West Africans, and deals with the patterning of sentimental relationships consonant with this practice. She describes a confrontation in an English court between a West African family and an English foster family, who alleged that the emotional tie with the parents of origin had been severed by giving the child out to be fostered. This situation is only seemingly analogous to the one which Brecht described in his 'Caucasian Chalk Circle'. The drama reaches beyond family and class, since it is not the lack of parental affection versus the proofs of true affection which is put on trial here but fundamentally different ways two societies and cultures have of relating familial affection with the social organization of survival.

Family as a mediator of class and class practice is a theme further examined by Karen Sacks. She deals with the working routines of Black female hospital workers – ward secretaries – to show how the values invoked in confronting authority and status were derived from everyday family experiences. Conflict resolution in family situations provided the experience necessary for political work and the maintenance of social and political networks. Louise Tilly also looks closely at the interrelationships of class and family. By examining family relations of nineteenth-century weavers in Cambrésis in the context of work, she is able to analyse how inner-familial relations at once mediate class values and play a part in the reproduction of the work force.

Not only can family be a matrix for the production of class and class values, but it can also furnish the idiom for relations external to itself and for the symbolic structuring of social reality. In this way family mediations of self-interest and emotion can serve as points for measuring or giving meaning to extra-familial situations. Hans Medick takes up the *Spinnstube* or village 'spinning bee' in early modern Germany, a focal point for winter evening conviviality and work. This institution provided a ritual moment of separation from the family and socialization into adult sexual culture, and at the same time provided a means for the transmission of village culture and the reproduction of the village property system, since it functioned as a marriage market. The ambivalence of custom is also the subject of Gerald Sider's essay on Newfoundland 'scoffs', parties at which stolen food was shared. The elements of the custom mirrored familial and inter-familial relations under the prevalent form of merchant capitalism. He shows that within and among families there was at once mutual aid and intense mistrust, both unity and warmth, exclusion and tension. Karin Hausen analyses the way a modern custom – the German Mother's Day – became established by a conjunction of business interests, modern advertising, welfare concern, and the peculiar situation of post World War I families. The symbol of 'mother' was embedded in a fanciful image of a completely self-sacrificing woman who provided the natural emotional centre of male fantasies.

Discussion at the Round Table revealed certain differences in the way social historians and anthropologists dealt with problems of the family. In general a

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central concern of anthropologists was with social transformation and discontinuities in historical development. Situations undergoing radical alteration by modern market forces, capital development, and cash-cropping or wage labour pose serious problems of analysis for anyone dealing with the contemporary third world. Rather than relying on older notions of 'custom' and 'tradition' or centring on enduring structures, anthropologists tended to assume that values were continually being created anew. Such an approach puts a stress on action, practice, and change and radically throws into question the notion of a persistent 'moral community' as a starting place for analysis. But anthropologists were not just interested in problems of recent change. Sharp discontinuities in the West European past also came in for discussion and raised a series of issues about dominating social groups and the range of material forces which brought about historical breaks. In considering the trend towards 'nuclear' family relations in the early Middle Ages, the intrusion of the Church and its interest in land control was crucial. While several contributors pointed to the way forces of production and processes of work were central for family relations, it was also pointed out that other material forces such as the technology of communication and the organization of violence were central to analysing social transformation.

Social historians were also interested in change, but most of their attention was focussed on the interplay between the family and the formation of class. How the emotional nexus centred in the family mediated class values or was the locus for the development of class consciousness was the main issue. Whilst change was not ignored by the historians, they showed a strong interest in questions of structure and the logic of social systems and were apt to organize their thinking around the category of 'reproduction' in contradistinction to that of transformation.

Discussion between the two disciplines came to focus on the problem of 'culture' and the associated concept of 'custom'. It was argued that custom and tradition are often opposed to the category of 'strategy' and that one way this is done is to assign tradition to the generation of grandparents and strategy to the active family heads facing everyday crises. Such an approach in turn rests on a viewpoint which sees emotion as derivative from material interests rather than seeing them both as embedded in the social relations and the cultural practice governing the access to property. By making emotion derivative, one is left with 'strategy' as the connecting link, and this tends to be historically flat. In addition this creates difficulties for understanding the capacity of dominated people to act, for what gives them this capacity is their sense of history. One of the central issues on the agenda of both disciplines is to bring this understanding to the problem of action in the context of historical change. Custom – or in Bourdieu's term, 'habitus', and the meaningful action connected with it – is not just a reflex of inherited relationships but also a source of historical innovation and in certain ways the matrix of multivalent social practice.

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- 1 The problem has been announced with a series of trumpet blasts. Some of the works that might be consulted are: Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, 'The Political Crisis of Social History: A Marxian Perspective', *Journal of Social History*, 10 (1976–7), 205–19; Tony Judt, 'A Clown in Royal Purple: Social History and the Historians', *History Workshop*, 7 (1979), 66–94; Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, 'Why Does Social History Ignore Politics?', *Social History*, 5 (1980), 249–271. There is also the question of narrative in its relation to these issues: cf. Lawrence Stone's article 'The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History', in Lawrence Stone, *The Past and the Present* (London, 1980), originally published in, *Past and Present*, 85 (1979), and the debate which followed it: Eric Hobsbawm, 'The Revival of Narrative: Some Comments', *Past and Present*, 86 (1980), 3–8, and Philip Abrams, 'History, Sociology, Historical Sociology', *Past and Present*, 87 (1980), 3–16.
- 2 An interesting discussion of the issues is found in E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London, 1978).
- 3 See Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, 1982), and the debates surrounding the work of Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System*, vols. 1, 2 (New York, London, 1974, 1980).
- 4 See the remarks by G. Allardyce, 'The Rise and Fall of the Western Civilization Course', *American Historical Review*, 87 (1982), 704–14.
- 5 Carlo Ginzburg and Carlo Poni, 'La Micro-historie', *Le Debat*, 17 (1981), 133–6; a similar problem in Malinowski's work is discussed by Marshall Sahlins, *Culture and Practical Reason* (Chicago, 1976), 74–5, 86.
- 6 See B. Cohen 'History and Anthropology: The State of Play', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 22 (1980), 198–221; R. Isaac, 'Ethnographic Method in History: An Action Approach', *Historical Methods*, 13 (1980), 43–61; Natalie Z. Davis, 'Anthropology and the Possibilities of the "Past"', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 12 (1981/2).
- 7 Renato Rosaldo, *Ilongot Headhunting 1883–1974: A Study in Society and History* (Stanford, 1980); Jack Goody, *Cooking, Cuisine and Class: A Study in Comparative Sociology* (Cambridge, 1982); Jack Goody, *Production and Reproduction* (Cambridge, 1976); Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge, 1977).
- 8 See on this the fine article by Eric Wolf, 'Culture and Ideology: An Essay in Honour of Angel Palerm', *Festschrift for Angel Palerm* (forthcoming). Wolf quotes Raoul Narrol on the concept of 'cult-units'.
- 9 Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge, 1977).
- 10 For the preceding remarks we are indebted to our conversation with Rhys Isaac.
- 11 See the illuminating discussion in Michelle Rosaldo, *Knowledge and Passion: Ilongot Notions of Self and Social Life* (Cambridge, 1980).
- 12 Jack Goody, 'Introduction', in Jack Goody, *et al.* (eds.), *Family and Inheritance: Rural Society in Europe 1200–1800* (Cambridge, 1976), 3.

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Part I. Family and the economy of emotion

I. Interest and emotion in family and kinship studies: a critique of social history and anthropology

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The history of the family as a branch of social history has begun in the past few years to pose a new range of questions. At the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, largely under the influence of Peter Laslett,¹ interest was centred around the structure of inner-familial relationships specific to class, group, and culture. Since the end of the 1970s, there has been a development in two broad directions. First there is a new emphasis on the problem of continuity and change in the social function of the family. Above all research has been centred on the role of the family in processes of social reproduction, socialization, and work, especially since the beginning of industrialization. The social history of the family is no longer caught so firmly in the grip of over-arching sociological theories of modernization and industrialization but undertakes research in concrete, local, and regional situations and seeks to derive theory in tandem with empirical investigation.²

A second direction involves the analysis of the reciprocal action of fundamental economic and social processes on inner-familial structure and distribution of roles and an assessment of how these roles were allocated to some extent by the defining power of bureaucrats and professionals. Some of the new themes are the effect of the organization of work on the household and family, the differential profiles of family life among property-holding and non-property-holding groups, the 'domestication' of family life through the policing of the family by the modern state. In this second direction, a new aspect to the family has been brought forward – no longer so much the structural and statistical moments, which might be called 'objective' – but rather the peculiarities of family experience and norms and modes of behaviour at different periods and in different classes and cultures. In this way of viewing the matter, family and household are no longer taken for granted as fixed magnitudes. One looks through and beyond the family to consider changes in sexual relationships, questions of inner and extra-familial sexuality, childhood, youth, old age, and death.³

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The strong point of these new 'subjective' perspectives in the history of the family – their reference to the immediate context of experience and problems of the researcher and reader – does not always outweigh the disadvantages. The structural and material conditions of family life are not intentionally screened out but are usually introduced only as 'objective' aspects in the context of global change. Consequently, they are considered indirectly and rather superficially to the development of family relationships.

The difficulties in handling the interplay of subjective and objective moments of family life can be seen clearly in the way the relationship between emotional needs and material interest is handled in both the disciplines of social history and anthropology. In analysing the family, anthropologists and social historians have often found difficulties in handling this relationship, and rather than carefully sorting out the nature of rights and duties, claims and counter-claims within families in different social and cultural contexts and delineating the corresponding specific territories in which emotion, trust, and sentiment are structured, emotions and interest are often treated as opposites which cancel each other out. In addition there is an attempt to legitimate such a view by means of evolutionary or 'ideological' perspectives, which contrast much too easily a 'modern' emotional-laden nuclear family to 'traditional' family relations based on a different structure of motives altogether. In a way similar to but more emphasized than Flandrin and Foucault, Edward Shorter describes the pre-history and history of the modern middle class family in Europe of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a progressive 'sentimentalization', for which the analysis of matters such as property relations seems irrelevant. Succinctly, Shorter puts it this way: 'when we encounter young men passing up fat dowries to wed their heart's desire, we shall know we're standing before romance'.⁴ As a pendant to this, 'peasant' family relationships are regarded as mediated solely through such interests: marriages are formed without regard to sentiment, and the ruling forces of parent/child relations are direct, tangible items of property. The more play a *sachliches Element* has in shaping family relationships, it is assumed, the less room there is for emotion.⁵ Working class family relationships in this view appear to be 'liberated' from accumulated wealth, which allows free play to emotion, but caught in the squalor of direct production and disoriented by disintegrative forces in industrial cities, the family becomes an arena of highly transient relationships, waiting for 'embourgeoisement', the penetration of sentimentalized values first produced in another social milieu, in order to attain stability.⁶

It is important in the first instance not to accept the self-articulation of family experience in different classes and at different times at face value, for in one context family experience can be mediated through a highly articulated form of language, whilst in another it might not be subject to expression in linguistic form at all.⁷ For example, it has been noted for 'middle class' school children in London in the 1960s that the discourse which they had learned at home involved