

Family and social change

*The household as a process
in an industrializing community*

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I

Family and industrialization

Industrialization is widely seen as the most important social and economic change of the last 200 years; it is frequently credited with the power to modify or destroy any pre-existing social arrangement that stands in its way. In particular, there is often assumed to be an adversarial relationship between the traditional extended family and the process of industrialization. In this chapter I examine this long-held belief, focusing on the origins of this idea and the contributions to it by the great theorist of structural-functionalism, the American sociologist Talcott Parsons. I shall then try to trace the formulation of new hypotheses resulting from empirical historical research concerning the relation of family to industrial society. After that I proceed to the formulation of the questions that have guided the present research.

1.1 Traditional family theory

Until the later 1960s virtually all historians and sociologists subscribed to the popular tradition of the large preindustrial extended family.¹ Before industrialization and urbanization, it was believed, people lived together in large households with great numbers of relatives and servants. The world we lost as a result of industrialization con-

¹ Unless stated otherwise, the terms 'family' and 'household' are used alternately in this text to refer to the same phenomenon: a co-residential group sharing in a number of important activities (e.g. production and consumption) and consisting for the most or the entire part of people related by blood. By 'nuclear family' or 'nuclear family household' is meant a household consisting of one or two parents with or without their unmarried offspring. 'Extended family' or 'extended family household' refers to those households that in addition to nuclear family members contain any other kin. Both types of household may be augmented by live-in servants or other unrelated individuals.

sisted of households engaged in a wide range of functions of which the economic function was most important. The household was the locus of many productive activities in which all household members participated. Individual aspirations in the traditional household were made subject to the stability and the material interests of the family group. Industrialization, it was asserted, resulted in the disintegration of the family group into smaller units of nuclear families consisting of parents and their unmarried children. The family was robbed of all of its productive economic functions to become a unit of consumption. Romantic love replaced economic calculation between husband and wife. The ideology of individualism replaced patriarchy; thus greatly affecting the relationship between generations.

All serious discussion of the demise of the preindustrial extended family in Europe ultimately is shaped by the ideas put forward by Frédéric Le Play, one of the founding fathers of modern empirical social science.² Writing in the second half of the nineteenth century he described three ideal family types showing differing degrees of stability. The patriarchal family type, which was found according to Le Play among nomadic communities in the East, encompassed all male descendants of the family head and their associated dependents. They all lived and worked together as a unit under the absolute authority of the father who represented the interests of the family as a whole. The patriarchal family, laying great emphasis on authority and lineage, was dominated by a spirit of tradition which stifled change. The second family type elaborated by Le Play was the stem family, which he considered typical of *some* European peasant communities. It consisted of the parents, the unmarried children and the family of one married son, the heir, chosen by the father to continue the family property after his death. The heir's siblings had the right to stay on in the household of their brother as long as they remained unmarried. Alternatively, they could leave and strike out on their own. In this way a balance existed between paternal authority and the freedom of the children, between stability and mobility.

Le Play painted a nostalgic picture of the stem family in which harmony ruled and all members worked together in a shared sense of solidarity and self-sufficiency within the family. However, Le Play saw industrialization and commercialization as destroying the stem

² Le Play, *L'Organisation*, see pp. 3–28; for further information on Le Play, as well as translations of some of his work, see: Bodard Silver, *Frédéric Le Play*, pp. 76–80 and 259–80; Anderson, *Approaches*, pp. 22–3; Kloek, *Gezinshistorici*, pp. 21–2. Le Play was not the only writer on these subjects at the time. Similar notions were found in Riehl, *Die Naturgeschichte*, see vol. 3, pp. 145–65.

family because its economic basis, the family property, had been removed. Family life disintegrated because children were no longer prepared to stay on in the parental household and left at early ages leaving ageing parents to fend for themselves. This was further aggravated by the abolition of impartible inheritance, leading to the splintering of the family property which had to be parcelled out equally among all children. These developments created the unstable family type which was centered around the marital couple: it was created at their marriage and dissolved again upon their death. Children left the household when they married or possibly earlier. The bonds between generations were lost, thereby threatening the stability of the entire social order.

Although Le Play nowhere actually stated that the stem family was the predominant family form in preindustrial Europe, his writings gave rise to the idea that the history of the family in Europe involved a linear development from large extended family households towards a small nuclear family unit isolated from kin and community. Most social scientists cited urbanization and industrialization as principal factors to account for this development of 'progressive nuclearization'.³ This development created a sharp dichotomy between the preindustrial or agrarian family on the one hand and the industrial or modern family on the other.

In the 1950s influential structural-functionalist theories were formulated on the basis of these traditional convictions within family history and sociology.⁴ These theories tried to explain the historical development of the family in terms of a process of structural differentiation. A society undergoing modern economic change will necessarily differentiate its kinship-based social structure. Non-kinship structures like the state, the church, schools, factories and labour unions will take over functions that were traditionally maintained by the kinship system.⁵

The family system, itself part of the process of functional specializa-

³ Berkner, 'Recent research', see especially p. 401.

⁴ Morgan, *Social theory*, contains a chapter on the varieties of functionalism. Most of the following is based on the writings of Talcott Parsons: Parsons, *The social system*; Parsons and Bales, *The family*; Parsons, 'The kinship system'. A short summary on the nature of the modern family and its relation to the social structure can be found in Parsons, 'The social structure'. For a short discussion of Parsons' family theory see: Rodman, 'Talcott Parsons' view'.

⁵ Parsons and Bales, *The family*, p. 9. The process of change of the social system conforms to the principle of structural differentiation. Change in the social system initiates changes in social subsystems such as the family. All of those processes of change take the formal shape of a process of structural differentiation. For a historical application of this theory see: Smelser, *Social change*.

tion, develops towards a system of small nuclear family units. This modern type of family is considered to be structurally isolated from kin and neighbours, to have an intensive, 'hot-house' type of family life, and to observe a strict role segregation between husband and wife. Only two functions have been left to the modern family.⁶ First, the family is the main socializing agent of new members of society. The seclusion of the nuclear family guarantees a slow, step-by-step socialization process through which the child is prepared to cope with a complex, functional and fragmented type of society. The family's second function is to regulate the emotional stability of its adult members by offering a safe harbour from the hostile world outside. This has become necessary because of the breakdown of extended kinship relations and the tensions which result from functioning in a complex world.

For structural-functionalists like Talcott Parsons the family's main characteristic was to be found in its structurally isolated position in relation to more extended kin.⁷ All rules of modern industrial society provide for the formation of nuclear families only. People may actually want to form all sorts of extended family groups, but they get no help from the rules governing the social system. Moreover, Parsons states that the most stringent kinship obligations are restricted to the nuclear family, thus isolating it in a relative sense from wider kinship units.⁸ In other words, kinship obligations to the nuclear family take precedence over obligations to kin outside it.

Crucial to structural-functionalist thinking is the supposed 'structural fit' between the nuclear family and industrial society. By virtue of its particular characteristics the modern family is thought to be functionally adapted to the demands posed by the industrial system. Or to put it more succinctly, the modern economic system necessitates the isolated nuclear family.

Why is this so? One of the most important characteristics of modern industrial society is its need for relatively high rates of social and geographical mobility of individuals. The adult male worker must be free to move at the behest of the economic system. While on the one hand individual social and geographical mobility is hampered by extensive family solidarity, it is also believed that extensive family ties will be weakened or destroyed with the social and geographical mobility of individual family members.⁹

⁶ Parsons and Bales, *The family*, pp. 16–22.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11.

⁸ Parsons, *The social system*, p. 186.

⁹ Parsons, 'The social structure', pp. 192–3.

In traditional societies the family group coordinates a number of shared economic and productive activities which tie the individual to his family group through mutual occupational, property and status interests. Thus, in order to make possible the mobility of the individual it was necessary not only to limit kinship obligations to nuclear family members, but also to strip the family group of its economic functions. Only after production had been taken away from the household could the segregation of the modern family from the economic system be achieved. Parsons counted the farmers among one of the notable exceptions in post-war America to his ideal family type precisely because they had not yet fully realized the segregation between the family and the occupational sphere.¹⁰

This segregation of the modern family from the economy is related to the existence of opposing value systems in both. The successful growth of the industrial system was made possible by the adoption of values which Parsonian theory calls 'universalism' and 'achievement'.¹¹ Achievement refers to the belief that people should not be categorized on the basis of qualities inherent to them or on the basis of their relationship to a particular person. Rather, people should be differentiated between in terms of their achieved qualities. Universalism tells us to treat all members of a particular social, occupational or any other category in a similar way, irrespective of their relationship to us. For instance, taxi drivers should not distinguish between passengers who are kin and those who are not in the fares they charge.

It is evident that within the family system other values prevail. A father treats his own daughter differently from all other daughters, which means that the father acts upon 'particularistic' values instead of universalistic ones. Also his behaviour towards his daughter is solely dependent upon her inherent quality of being his daughter, and should not turn on achieved qualities such as her education or on the social position she has achieved. Which means that he is behaving on the basis of 'ascriptive' values.

The 'conflict of values' which would ensue between the family system and the occupational system is solved in the Parsonian system by means of the double segregation of the nuclear family.¹² First of all, the nuclear family is segregated from the wider extended kin group, and, second, within the family there is the role segregation between the husband-worker and the wife fulfilling the family oriented role. Interference between the two conflicting value systems is avoided by

¹⁰ Parsons, 'The kinship system', p. 185.

¹¹ Parsons, *The social system*, pp. 182-91.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 186.

limiting family solidarity to the nuclear family in which only one person, the husband, is supposed to assume roles in both the economic and the family system. In this way family values do not interfere with the world of work while economic values cannot intrude into family life. By differentiating sharply between the world of work and the world of family life Parsonian theory contributed strongly to what is now believed to be 'the myth of separate worlds'.¹³

All this renders the nuclear family functionally adapted to industrial society, or in other words there exists a 'structural fit' between the family and the economic system. Families organized on structural-functionalist terms are best fitted to meet the requirements of the industrial system. Consequently, these families will do better, career-wise, than extended family groups. Individuals and families most mobile and successful in social and economic respects will form the nuclear type of household. Moreover, those individuals living in nuclear family units will be best equipped to reach the higher placed positions in life. A functionally adapted family system will also permit individuals to be mobile in a geographical sense. Hence, geographical mobility and extended family groups are considered to be mutually exclusive. Geographically mobile individuals will not, and cannot, live in extended family households while those living in nuclear family households will be free to move to where the economic system needs them.¹⁴

Clearly, structural-functionalist theory considers the functional adaptation of the family system to industrial society as being a positive one. Functional family adaptation has made possible industrial development, which leads necessarily to the conclusion that residential extended family groups would slow down or perhaps even prevent modern economic change.¹⁵ Although today few adherents of the traditional point of view in family history remain, the influence of Parsonian ideas continues to be strong.¹⁶

¹³ Pleck, 'Two worlds'.

¹⁴ These ideas soon reached Dutch empirical sociology. In his article on 'The extended family in transition', P. Taietz examines the frequency of social visits to their parents of farmers' sons who were socially and/or geographically mobile as opposed to those who were not. Taietz's research was carried out in 1958 in the eastern part of the Netherlands, which at that time was still strongly characterized by kin co-residence among agrarian households. Results indicated that social mobility as a determining factor was only relevant for sons living in the village, while geographical mobility in all instances reduced the frequency of social contacts between parents and sons.

¹⁵ Parsons, 'The social structure', p. 192.

¹⁶ See e.g. Degler, *At odds*. See also T.K. Hareven's review of this book in *Journal of Social History*, 17 (1983-4), pp. 339-44; Kertzer, Schiaffino, 'Industrialization', pp. 371-2.

Structural-functionalist family theory has been heavily criticized from various angles.¹⁷ Of direct interest to the present research is the opposition concerning the structural isolation of the nuclear family in modern society. Post-war sociological research among American and British families discovered elaborate patterns of aid and assistance between the respective nuclear families of parents and their married offspring.¹⁸ Moreover, it was not possible to establish a clear negative influence of social or geographical mobility, although the latter did appear to lessen the frequency of social contacts between parents and children. Structurally speaking, the modern family conforms to the nuclear type, but when focusing on family relations the kinship system allows for elaborate or intensive extended family networks. Litwak coined the term 'modified extended family' to describe the family patterns he had found.¹⁹

However, this type of criticism only involved minor adjustments to Parsons' theory. The 'classical extended family', which refers to the traditional residential extended family, was still thought of as being irreconcilable with the industrial system. Parsons never saw any immediate cause in these criticisms to change his theoretical views. In his answer to his critics he stressed that the help patterns they found between parents and the families of their children were not contradictory to his proposition of the relative structural isolation of the nuclear family.²⁰ Most cases, Parsons indicated, concerned financial aid from parents to children which remained strictly limited to the private sphere. Hence, the segregation between the economic system and the family system remained.

It would seem to follow logically from Parsonian theory that those social classes or groups which are best adapted to the industrial system should reflect most closely the ideal of the nuclear family.²¹ Obviously, in the modern industrial system the middle and upper classes are by definition more successful; they dominate the system and direct its future. However, the structural-functionalist sociologist William J. Goode had already pointed out that in most societies family behaviour among the higher social classes is less close to the ideal

¹⁷ For a discussion of the various issues see: Harris, *The family*; and Morgan, *Social theory*, pp. 39–48.

¹⁸ Litwak, 'Occupational mobility'; Litwak, 'Geographic mobility'; Sussman, 'The isolated nuclear family'; Sussman and Burchinal, 'The kin family network'; Young and Willmott, *Family*.

¹⁹ Used by Litwak, 'Occupational mobility', p. 10.

²⁰ Parsons, 'Reply'.

²¹ On deviant cases in different social groups see: Parsons, 'The social structure', pp. 180–1.

than among the lower social classes.²² Higher social classes maintain the most elaborate extended kin network, they exercise most control over the career and marriage choices of their children and are most likely to give and to receive aid and assistance from relatives. The lower-class family pattern is that of the nuclear family. They are the least encumbered with extended family relations, enjoy least family stability and family-based economic and material security. Goode compares their freedom from kin to their 'freedom' to sell their labour in the market. They are not hampered by the weight of extended kin relations because there are no kin who will interest themselves sufficiently in their actions. The higher social classes, on the other hand, have the most to lose; they are backed by resourceful kin networks and will therefore resist the system's undermining pressures. It is precisely these networks that enable them to make the most of the opportunities offered by industrialization. Consequently, they will let go of their family ties more slowly, so that changes in upper-class family patterns will occur in a later phase of the industrialization process.

Parsons himself considered the modern nuclear family to be most conspicuously developed among the urban middle classes of post-war America. This particular social group in his view was the clearest representative of that modern and mobile industrial society with which the nuclear family was in such close structural harmony. Among the exceptions Parsons listed agricultural families in which, as we have seen, the segregation between the family and the occupational system was still incomplete. Some lower-class families, characterized by unstable marriages and a mother-centered family structure, constituted a second type of deviance from the main pattern. Finally, Parsons considered some elite groups to form the third exception to his rule. In these aristocratic-like families the importance of ancestry and lineage, and the ancestral home, were thought to promote continuity of intergenerational kinship solidarity.²³

The idea that the history of the family can be adequately described in terms of a unilinear development from large extended family households towards the small household of the nuclear family is also found among historians. One of the earliest and most prominent of them was Philippe Ariès in his famous and influential history of childhood.²⁴ In this work he also applied the idea of differentiation or specialization of the family, albeit implicitly. Ariès depicted an idyllic

²² See chapter 1 of Goode, *World revolution*; Goode, 'Industrialization'.

²³ Parsons, 'The kinship system', pp. 185–6.

²⁴ Ariès, *L'Enfant*; English edition: *Centuries*.

image of the traditional household in which no distinctions were made between family members or kin, visitors or servants. These traditional households were busy centres of a rich social life in which people of different social standing could meet and which formed an ideal place in which to socialize children.

Ariès saw the rise of the modern nuclear family concurrent with the emergence of a prolonged childhood and the institutionalization of education. The modern family was 'closed-off' from society so that an isolated and intensive family life could come into existence. However, from Ariès' point of view the modern family deprives the child of the possibility of taking part in grown-up life from an early start. The child is denied a wealth of life experience necessary to function optimally in the adult world. This makes the nuclear family less fit to function as a place of socialization. Through Ariès' eyes we witness a process of disintegration taking place rather than one of positive adaptation. Like most historians of the school Ariès belonged to, termed the 'sentiments approach' by Michael Anderson, he placed this development first among the higher social classes after which it slowly trickled down to the working classes.²⁵

It is clear that Ariès' position is diametrically opposed to the Parsonian when it comes to the functionality of the modern family. Its virtues to Parsons are vices to Ariès. The family's specialization and separation from the outside world, which for Parsons are a necessary condition to realize a step-by-step socialization of children, are seen by Ariès as imposing serious limitations on human possibilities.

Inspired by the conflicting opinions of Parsons and Ariès, the American sociologist Richard Sennett investigated a number of middle-class families in Chicago in the second half of the nineteenth century.²⁶ These families all lived in one particular neighbourhood of Chicago in a period of great industrial and urban expansion. Sennett examined their family life and the social and economic circumstances with which they had to cope. It is his contention that the rapid process of transformation the city was undergoing at the time promoted an intensive, 'hot-house' type of family life within the group of nuclear families. Family members fled into the safe harbour of their own family life from fear of the rapidly changing and competitive world outside. Sennett argues that the smaller nuclear family type offered a better breeding ground for this defensive reaction against the city than the larger extended families. The latter were charac-

²⁵ Anderson, *Approaches*, pp. 39–64. Major works in this area besides Ariès' *Centuries of childhood* are: Shorter, *The making*; Stone, *The Family*; Flandrin, *Families*.

²⁶ Sennett, *Families*.

terized by a more 'open', competitive character: most of them had more working adults present, which made it difficult to prevent outside values from penetrating the family. The nuclear family however made it possible for the husband-breadwinner, as the sole person with connections to the occupational world outside, to retreat from the competitive sphere of work and submerge himself in the warm bosom of the family, in which he could negate the necessity to compete and strive upwards.

Thus, the nuclear family became a defence mechanism against the city with severe consequences for those involved. The heads of nuclear families were not able to maintain or improve their social and economic position because they had virtually retreated from what they considered to be the frightening and hostile world outside. This made them unable to fulfil a role model for their children. The children in these closed, introverted families were raised in a climate whose values were antithetical to the rest of society. Non-competitive, ascriptive values were characteristic of the family while 'outside' competition and universal values were dominant. This situation made them ill-prepared for adult life. In their turn the children experienced difficulties in getting ahead in life. The non-competitive, 'hot-house' family life of the nuclear family was responsible for its inadequate operation in society. On these grounds Sennett dismissed the functional relation between the nuclear family and industrial society.²⁷

1.2 *Historical revisionism*

A few years before Sennett published his Chicago research another myth in family history had been exposed. In 1972 Peter Laslett and his colleagues from the Cambridge Group published their *Household and Family in Past Time*.²⁸ On the basis of English census-like listings from the period 1574 to 1821 these scholars asserted that the nuclear family had been the dominant family type long before any industrial development. Laslett and his colleagues reacted against generations of social scientists who, on the basis of the writings of Le Play, had presumed that the stem family was the predominant type of family form for centuries before the onset of industrialization.²⁹ The scholars

²⁷ In a review of this study (by R. Lubove in *Journal of Social History* 5 (1972), pp. 388–91) Sennett was criticized for not having substantiated in any way the objective basis for the fear against the city. In other words, Sennett was relying too heavily on unproven psychological assumptions in trying to make his case against the nuclear family.

²⁸ Laslett and Wall (eds.), *Household*.

²⁹ See P. Laslett's introduction in *Household*, specifically pp. 1–23.