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Introduction

My aim in this pamphlet is to provide a guide for those who wish to explore the burgeoning literature on the history of the Western family since the sixteenth century. Over the past twenty years family history has been one of the main growth areas in the development of social history; indeed, little of the literature discussed in this pamphlet was written before 1960 and most was published after 1970. On the one hand the newness has made family history immensely exciting – so much has had to be discovered and many of the discoveries have been so unexpected. On the other hand there have been difficulties. As in any pioneering discipline some lines of inquiry have proved totally fruitless. The many hours of detailed work necessary to produce results for even a single community have meant that progress has been slow. The fact that most work has been based on single villages or small regions has made it extraordinarily difficult to build up a clear picture of the main changes in family life over the past 400 years. Indeed, as we shall see, there are still major disputes even over which questions should be asked.

Almost inevitably in all this activity, controversy and disagreement between scholars favouring different ways forward have been common; some of the attacks made on other people's research have by normal academic standards been quite abusive, with scholars implying that their opponents' work was either irrelevant or almost totally lacking in scholarly judgement and rigour. Superficially – and as occurs in any area of history – these disagreements have often seemed to be over the interpretation of particular sets of documents or the significance to be attached to particular events.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-55793-1 - Approaches to the History of the Western Family, 1500-1914

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And, in part, this has been so. But the disagreements can also be traced to two other sources.

Firstly, there is the problem of diversity – indeed, the one unambiguous fact which has emerged in the past twenty years is that there can be no simple history of *the* Western family since the sixteenth century because there is not, nor ever has there been, a single family system. The West has always been characterised by diversity of family forms, by diversity of family functions and by diversity in attitudes to family relationships not only over time but at any one point in time. There is, except at the most trivial level, no Western family type. Peasant families have typically differed markedly from merchant families and labouring families from aristocratic families. Peasants in eighteenth-century north-west France differed from peasants in central France, and in Germany or Sweden marked differences could be found even between neighbouring communities. England perhaps alone appears to have been much more homogenous yet even here illegitimacy in one area could occur twice as frequently as in another. Everywhere, certain groups – large like French Canadians or small like Hutterite communities – had behaviour which differed markedly from the rest of the society in which they lived and one group, North-American black families, have been the subject of so much controversy that I have been unable to include a discussion of the topic here. For the same reason I have excluded discussion of the very limited literature on the dramatic changes which have occurred since the inter-war period; indeed, the history of the Western family since the end of the First World War has been remarkably neglected, as is, of course, the case with so many other areas of social history.

Identifying and trying to understand the diversity has been a major problem, particularly in any attempt to generalise about long-run trends over the Western world as a whole. Many scholars, however, have set out to do just this, hence the necessity for this pamphlet to have a wide geographical focus and a long temporal span. But underlying these difficulties lies a second and much more fundamental set of issues, which in fact arise in any area of economic and social history – and indeed in any area of social science – but which are seldom as clear as they have been in family history. It has been becoming increasingly clear in recent years that

Cambridge University Press

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many of the disputes in family history arise because different groups of scholars, even when apparently working on the same topic, are, often unconsciously, trying to write very different kinds of history and are thus adopting different approaches to the selection of problems for research, to the kinds of sources they employ, to the way evidence is and can be used, and to the relevance of social and economic theory to their work.

I have here distinguished four different approaches to family history. One, which calls itself psychohistory and even has its own journal, the *Journal of Psychohistory*, seems already in its work on the family to have run into insoluble problems of evidence, and to have involved its practitioners in so much anachronistic judgement and blatant disregard for many of the basic principles of historical scholarship, that I have not thought it worth detailed consideration here; a summary of the main lines of approach of this school together with a useful collection of critiques can be found in the first number of the *History of Childhood Quarterly* (see also [54] and Wishy's review in *Journal of Family History*, 1978). The remaining three approaches – which I here call the demographic, the sentiments and the household economics approaches – continue to attract much attention and I have devoted a chapter to each. I shall argue, indeed, that each represents one major tradition of social science writing, that each has its own significant and individual contribution to make to our understanding of family life in the past and that the pursuit of all three is necessary if a properly rounded and sensitive picture is to be obtained; in fact, as we shall see few scholars stay totally within one tradition, and the distinctions between approaches, while they reflect clear differences in emphasis between different scholars, are to some extent oversimplifications.

Though the subject is of immense intrinsic interest, because problems of methodology are so important, students will not always find the study of this subject simple. The evidence, indeed, often appears fragmented and confusing, and the analysis ambiguous. However, because of the light that it throws on current approaches to social history in general, a careful examination of how modern historians are treating family history is particularly illuminating at the present time.

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The demographic approach

Before the mid-1950s family history as we know it today was almost nonexistent. Most work was limited to single families or small élite groups or was based mainly on impressionistic literary sources. Very little was known about the family life of the mass of the population.

Then, in the mid-1950s a group of demographers in France greatly refined (and extended to the populations of whole communities) the old technique of using the parish registers of baptisms, burials and marriages to link together the entries which related to the same individual and family (a useful introduction to this work by Goubert is in [11]). The findings derived from this ‘family reconstitution’ – and notably the demonstration of the use of some form of conscious family limitation among the Genevan bourgeoisie as early as the seventeenth century – caused other scholars to take up their methods and to extend this demographic approach to other sources of data. It is this body of work which is reviewed in this chapter.

The basic principles which inform this approach have their inspiration in the methods of natural science and of quantitative social science. The pioneering work of the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, for example, has been particularly concerned with the development of rigorous, standardised and quantitative research procedures aimed at generating data comparable both over long periods of time and across communities and societies. The literary sources which formed the basis of most earlier attempts at family history are largely rejected on the grounds that their evidence is difficult to interpret reliably,

Cambridge University Press

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often contradictory and above all uncertain in its relevance outside a small élite.

Instead, those who have worked in this tradition have turned their attention to sources – particularly parish registers on the one hand and census-type listings created for taxation and other purposes on the other – which cover the entire populations of at least some communities. While this has limited the range of topics that they can cover, on these topics they have built up huge data banks of internationally comparable data covering long periods of time. In doing so they have shown the falsity of many traditional views about the past, and have set up a solid base of data on which all family historians today rely as a framework for their analysis. Let us consider some examples.

(i) Marriage rates and ages

From 1600 until the late nineteenth century – and probably back into medieval times – Western Europe had a marriage pattern almost unique in world history [31]. For example, marriage was late. Typical mean ages of marriage in rural areas were 27 or 28 for men and 25 or 26 for women, and between 1600 and 1850 there is little evidence of any systematic or long-run patterns of change [29; 28] (though Wrigley has recently suggested a rise in England in the age for women until about 1700 followed by a fall to a low point in the mid-nineteenth century, but with no similar pattern for men [30]). After 1850 some rise is detectable in a number of countries and as late as the 1930s the mean age at first marriage for women in England and Wales was still 25 and that for men 27 (compared with 22 and 24 in the 1970s). Before 1850 only in North America were younger ages of marriage normal for whole populations and even these were significantly above present-day levels in most places. Moreover, significant proportions of the population never married. Before 1800 typical proportions were around 10 per cent though in some areas in the later nineteenth century figures nearer or even in excess of 20 per cent can be found; again, only in the past 30 years have these rates changed dramatically.

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But these are mean figures and can be misleading. Both between communities and even in the same place over time there were significant variations: for example, in Shepshed in the English midlands the mean age of marriage fell between the sixteenth and the early nineteenth centuries by over five years for both sexes [74]. However, it is one thing to find differences of this kind and quite another to explain them; and at least before the nineteenth century very little success has been achieved here, partly because much of the variation is probably the result of random variation brought about by the small size of the communities studied (a general problem of all demographic work on individual pre-industrial communities) and partly because demographic theory has not been greatly concerned with nuptiality. The main problem is, however, as we shall see, that the emphasis of research has been mainly on descriptions rather than analysis and that the research has been done in ways which make it unlikely that easily verifiable interpretations will emerge.

(ii) Patterns of childbearing

A detailed account of the literature on marital fertility is outside the scope of this pamphlet and a number of useful discussions appear elsewhere [21; 22; 23; Tilly in 18]. As with the literature on marriage, more effort has so far gone into description than into analysis and the diverse findings are poorly integrated. However, a number of points are fairly clear.

Before the late nineteenth century (except in France where changes came earlier), a combination of a late age of marriage and relatively long birth intervals gave mean completed family sizes (number of children born per woman) for most areas of between 5 and 6.5 (though with wide dispersal about the means). In some areas, and for certain groups of the population as early as the seventeenth century, some form of family limitation of a conscious and active kind seems to have been employed, keeping completed family size down below 5 for significant periods of time [25; 26]. Whether or not family size rose in the eighteenth century is an open question but recent evidence suggests a small rise (a full description for England will appear in [23]). What is certain is

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that, by the late eighteenth century in France and possibly, though the figures have to be inferred from poor data, in North America (summarised by Withey in *J. Fam. Hist.* 1978) and by the later nineteenth century elsewhere, a sustained decline was under way which was of crucial importance in making possible new attitudes and experiences within the Western family [7; 24]. In England and Wales, for example, completed family size fell from about 6 in the marriage cohort of 1860–70 to about 4 for the 1900 cohort and 3 by that of 1910.

For the family historian, however, it is not so much the reduced number of children as their changed distribution over the marital life cycle which is of most significance. In pre-twentieth-century populations births were spread fairly evenly over the whole fertile period with only a small fall as women aged. By contrast, since 1900 the main effect of fertility limitation has been to compress childbearing into the early years of married life so that, compared with a mean period from first marriage to last child for seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European populations of 14.4 years [28] and a median period of 11.5 years for American wives born 1880–9, the figure for those born in the 1950s will be less than 8.5 [33; note also Wells in 11]. Since, over the same period, the age of marriage has also fallen, the age at which women had their last child fell even more from a mean of 40.1 before 1800 [28] to 33 for wives born in the 1880s and 30 for those born in the 1920s. Together with falling adult mortality, the consequence has been that whereas a woman who marries in the late twentieth century at the mean age of marriage can expect to live for almost 50 years after the birth of her last child [32], women marrying before the late nineteenth century could expect to live only for about 20 years, a figure that showed little change over time. Looking in a different way, the mean duration of a marriage unbroken by divorce has risen from about 20 years (with a wide local dispersal) in pre-industrial Europe to about 35 by 1900 and to at least 45 years today. Only couples born in the last 100 years have been able to look forward as a matter of course to a period of old age together free from the cares of bringing up children. (The changed familial and economic position of women as a result of these changes is usefully summarised in [90: *ch.* 5].)

(iii) Extramarital conceptions

The history of extramarital conceptions since the early eighteenth century falls into three distinct phases which show a remarkable parallelism across the whole Western world. Firstly, almost everywhere, the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were periods of steady rise in both illegitimate births and prenuptial conceptions, though the scale and timing of the start of the rise varied from country to country and region to region. Secondly, at some point in the nineteenth century (though not until the 1930s in Sweden) this general rise in illegitimacy was halted and the trends, with some inter-country variation, went into reverse, a fall which continued slowly until the Second World War (usefully summarised in [41]). The data on premarital pregnancy are less complete; it certainly fell in England and Wales over this period but in North America, for example, an early-nineteenth-century fall seems to have been followed by a late-nineteenth-century rise [45]. The third phase in European non-marital conception belongs to the post-war period and took the form of a dramatic rise which in some places is still continuing.

These three major phases are well documented for a range of countries and form one of the most impressive and interesting bodies of data collected within the demographic approach (and there is now some evidence of even earlier internationally parallel trends, notably a fall in the first part of the seventeenth century [1; 7]). But around these parallel trends there were also significant variations. Even within the same country some areas had figures three or four times as high as others though the reasons are often debatable ([46] for Scotland; [1] for England; [41] for Europe generally; and Kälve-mark in [40] for Sweden). Significant variations also occurred by social class, a pattern which also changed over time. At least in France bastard-bearing seems to have been widely spread through the population in the sixteenth century [7; Depauw in 12]. In later periods a largely working-class pattern has been observed which also seems to have applied to prenuptial conception, though not necessarily in some peasant areas (there is good work here on North America – see [45]). More recently there has been a return to a more equal distribution through the population. And the distribution of illegitimate births across the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-55793-1 - Approaches to the History of the Western Family, 1500-1914

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population seems to have changed in a third way too. Several English and French studies, for the pre-nineteenth-century period in particular, suggest that part of the fluctuation in illegitimacy rates was the result of variation in the behaviour of what Laslett has called a 'subsociety of bastard bearers', women who bore more than one illegitimate child [1; 40]. (A tendency for the 'inheritance' of prenuptial pregnancy between generations has also been noted.) Just who these women were is not as yet clear, but if further research can substantiate and locate more precisely the existence of such a subsociety an important set of clues as to the sources of variation in extramarital sexual behaviour over time may be obtained.

One other observation is also apposite here. The correlation between the fluctuations in illegitimacy and those of prenuptial conceptions has already been noted (and this, of course, rules out any simple explanation that fluctuations in illegitimacy result from changes in the pressures on unmarried pregnant girls to get married). More interestingly, though more tentatively, a rough parallel has also been noted between illegitimate and legitimate fertility – both probably rose in the eighteenth century, fell at the end of the nineteenth and rose in the post-war era. Similarly there is an inverse correlation with the age of marriage, at least in England and Wales, and particularly in the eighteenth century. Certainly there is no evidence for any period to support the superficially attractive proposition that illegitimacy has been high when women have had to wait longer to get married and been lower when marriage was earlier.

(iv) Size and membership of the household

There can be little doubt that popular tradition in most Western societies has held that households in pre-industrial Europe were relatively large and complex in structure, frequently containing members of more than two successive generations and often including extra kin such as cousins, nieces and nephews, and uncles and aunts (compare, for example, the tradition of the *Ganze Hauz* in Germany, the *storfamilj* in Sweden and the large family community in France). A similar notion had long held credence in

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-55793-1 - Approaches to the History of the Western Family, 1500-1914

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academic circles where the most cited authority was one of the founders of modern empirical social science, Frédéric LePlay. LePlay, writing in the second half of the nineteenth century, described three ideal familial types:

- (i) the patriarchal (characteristic of nomadic and herding societies), which laid strong emphasis on stability, authority, lineage and tradition, leading to a large domestic group containing at least all the male descendants of the patriarch;
- (ii) the stem family, or *famille souche* (widespread, according to LePlay, in European peasant societies), which also had a stable patriarchal element but usually restricted co-residence and succession to one son of the patriarch and his descendants, though some other children might remain unmarried in the household, leading to household sizes of up to 18 persons;
- (iii) the unstable family, which characterised urban manufacturing populations and, by contrast with the other types, was founded by the marriage of two independent individuals, survived only as long as they did, and despatched its children into the world as soon as they could be independent, exercising little control over them.

From the mid-1960s Peter Laslett in particular began to accumulate evidence which suggested that, at least in England, large and complex households had never been common. In 1969 Laslett published his first analysis of listings for 100 English communities at dates between 1574 and 1821 and he called a meeting in Cambridge to discuss similar data for other periods and countries (the papers – including Laslett’s – are reproduced in [34]). In his paper Laslett demonstrated that the mean household size in England (including servants) had remained more or less constant at about 4.75 from the sixteenth century right through the industrialisation period until the end of the nineteenth century when a steady decline set in to a figure of about 3 in contemporary censuses. Equally remarkable, he suggested, was the small range of the means across the 100 communities. The largest figure was 7.22 (6.63 if London is excluded) while the smallest was 3.63. No obvious pattern of temporal or regional variation could be observed. Only 2 per cent of the households contained 12 or more people and only one-third contained 6 or more. However – and this is an important point which has often been overlooked in the subsequent controversy – Laslett was at pains to point out that a