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978-0-521-64541-6 - Individuals, Families, and Communities in Europe, 1200–1800:
The Urban Foundations of Western Society

Katherine A. Lynch

Excerpt

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Introduction

This study investigates European family and social life by examining families and their members against a background of other kinds of relationships and institutions that have long typified western Europe. It explores families as groups of individuals related by marriage, blood, or adoption. It considers groups of people who lived together in households, and moves beyond the household to study extended kinship bonds as well.

The book also puts family relations into larger perspective by viewing them as only one of multiple foundations of solidarity in western society. I am interested in how individuals and families used other associations and institutions – communities, broadly defined – to complement or even fulfill some of the fundamental missions that families have historically provided, such as a place to live, assistance in times of need, and a sense of identity.

I suggest that there has been a deep and enduring tendency among Europeans, especially urbanites, to form communities that often used the terminology of fictive or invented kinship to express moral solidarity. Examples of these relationships range from godparenthood to bonds of “brotherhood” and “sisterhood” among members of monastic communities, invented kinship ties created in religious confraternities of laymen and women, or ties of “brotherhood” that bound together civic communities.

The kinds of communities that men and women created varied across time, space, and social group. Confraternities, which were associations of laymen and women designed for purposes of religious association, mutual assistance, charitable outreach, or burial, depending upon time and place, are a good example. For poorer inhabitants of towns and cities – often lone individuals – these communities could serve as substitutes for family bonds that were weak or nonexistent. Husbands and wives of the middling ranks of urban society frequently joined confraternities together, treating them as extensions of their conjugal bonds. Certain urban patricians, on the other hand, often used social networks that their confraternities provided as a welcome refuge from lives dominated by dense kinship ties.

Whether studying the families and larger social lives of the poor or wealthy, this book tries to show how family forms and organizational or “community”

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forms developed together as interdependent parts of the same society. One of the book's goals is therefore to expose the symbiotic relationship between western household and family forms on the one hand, and the diverse sorts of communities that supported them and made them possible. I think of the interdependent development of family and community relationships as structural in the sense that Fernand Braudel defined it:

By *structure*, observers of social questions mean an organization, a coherent and fairly fixed series of relationships between realities and social masses. For us historians, a structure is of course a construct, an architecture, but over and above that it is a reality which time uses and abuses over long periods. Some structures, because of their long life, become stable elements for an infinite number of generations: they get in the way of history, hinder its flow, and in hindering it shape it. Others wear themselves out more quickly. But all of them provide both support and hindrance. As hindrances they stand as limits . . . beyond which man and his experiences cannot go. Just think of the difficulties of breaking out of certain geographical frameworks, certain biological realities, certain limits of productivity, even particular spiritual constraints: mental frameworks too can form prisons of the *longue durée*.¹

The persistent structural features of European family life's links to larger patterns of community building seem to have appeared most clearly in urban settings, for several reasons. First of all, some of the community forms I am studying seem to have required populations to be of a certain size and diversity before they could develop. Second, it may well be that what economists call the "demand" for various sorts of communities – particularly those designed for mutual assistance – was stronger in towns and large cities because of the demographic conditions prevailing there. As I discuss in Chapter 1, higher rates of mortality, and the greater presence of migrants in urban areas often reduced the size of households and weakened bonds of family and kinship, making extrafamilial networks of solidarity more vital to individual survival. However, I also believe that we may simply be more aware of the urban versions of these organizations and other forms of associations in urban settings because they were more likely to become formalized there, producing records and accounts that permit historians to study them.

Some kinds of voluntary communities could be found in rural areas, where the vast majority of the population lived, and were imported into the city by streams of migrants. Evidence suggests, however, that extrafamilial forms of solidarity were more often nurtured in the city and then exported to the surrounding countryside, brought there both by return migrants, or, in the case of some Christian organizations, by clergy eager to build community ties that extended beyond those of blood and descent.

¹ Fernand Braudel, "History and the Social Sciences: The Longue Durée," in *On History*, trans. Sarah Matthews (Chicago, 1980), 31.

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Temporal and spatial limits

My study draws on evidence for western Europe from the Middle Ages to the end of the eighteenth century. Such an ambitious task requires justification in an age of the specialized monograph. As copious references attest, this study would have been impossible without the specialized research of scholars in family history, urban history, demographic history, gender history, the history of charity and poor relief, and religious history. The availability of excellent recent studies of societies whose fundamental features I am trying to lay bare has inspired me to try to integrate these findings into an interpretation that makes sense of evidence from these different fields.

Why the choice of time period, and why extend the study back to the Middle Ages? The answer is quite simple. It seems to me that the factors that have combined to create western patterns of family and community structures were already beginning to animate and shape European culture and society in the thirteenth century. Although this book does not seek the exact origins of these patterned relationships, it does try to see some of them in their infancy. However, I try to avoid the criticism that Marc Bloch leveled against historians obsessed with the origins of things. He wrote: “To bring the seed to light is not the same thing as to show the causes for its germination.”² This study is more interested, therefore, in the processes of germination and flowering of key relationships between family forms and community building than in uncovering the exact origins of such relationships.

I draw most of my evidence from the history of France, England, Germany, Italy, the Low Countries, and Spain. I focus on these parts of western Europe, and have largely excluded eastern Europe, because of my greater familiarity with these areas; the greater impact of urbanization in this part of Europe; and a sense that certain key demographic and political factors were configured rather differently in eastern and western Europe.

But why focus on continuities in family history instead of concentrating on changes, given most historians’ belief that what we need to explain are transformations in families’ affective relations, gender relations, and the demographic, economic, and political systems of western Europe that have shaped them? The simplest answer is that evidence of important continuities is there in the historical record, but with few exceptions such as studies of continuities in the basic demography underlying European family life, or

² On the overemphasis on “origins,” see Marc Bloch’s “A Contribution towards a Comparative History of European Societies,” in C. Lane and Jelle C. Riemersma, eds., *Enterprise and Secular Change* (Homewood, IL, 1953), 504–5, and Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft*, trans. Peter Putnam (New York, 1971), 29–35 on the “Idol of Origins.”

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the size and structure of domestic groups, historians have explored them less fully than changes.³

This relative lack of attention to historical continuities over what *Annales*-school historians call the *longue durée* results mainly from historians' practice of specializing in the study of narrowly defined times and places. Although specialization at its best leads to mastery of particular times and places, it sometimes leaves the community of scholars relatively unfamiliar with the wide range of evidence and case studies needed to become more aware of continuities or recurring patterns in the past. Furthermore, historians seem to prefer observing and studying change rather than continuities, which sometimes drives us to devote more attention to what appear to be novelties in the historical record than to what is familiar. Finally, the very deeply rooted sense of linear time that pervades the consciousness of western historians makes stories of progressive change more compatible with our fundamental worldview.⁴ Change, we often think, calls for explanation, while continuity is just "there." While fully acknowledging the impact of such critical changes in European family and social life as secularization, the growth of what Lawrence Stone called "affective individualism," or, later, the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, I argue that the social history of the family in the West has also been marked by important elements of continuity that remain to this day.⁵

Weberian perspectives

The concepts of western culture or western society have so many historical and ideological associations that it is wise to specify what I mean by them beyond the simple temporal and spatial limits of the study indicated above. The work of Max Weber, who believed that there was something distinctive about European society, has shaped my view of some of the key structural continuities of European history. I am particularly interested in his discussions of urban life, his musings about the relative weakness of lineages or clans in Europe, and his belief in the importance of Christianity in shaping the society as a whole.

Weber's analysis of these topics appeared in his well-known *Economy and Society*.⁶ Here, he laid out the argument that occidental cities differed from

³ For continuities in the history of the domestic group, see Peter Laslett, "Introduction: The History of the Family," and "Mean Household Size in England since the Sixteenth Century," in Laslett and Richard Wall, eds., *Household and Family in Past Time* (Cambridge, 1972), 49, 139, 142, 156–8; Linda A. Pollock, *Forgotten Children: Parent–Child Relations from 1500 to 1900* (Cambridge, 1983), 33–67, 262–71.

⁴ On the appeal of models of linear time, see Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York, 1994), 55–64.

⁵ Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500–1800* (New York, 1977), 221–69.

⁶ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, 2 vols. (Berkeley, 1978).

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those in Asia by the development of several key features, which included a notion of “community,” a high level of “autocephaly,” and specific forms of law and economic policy.⁷ Although Weber realized that Asian urbanites often banded together and challenged officials of their central governments, he argued that they had developed no *de jure* right to do so. Higher political powers, he believed, were never forced to recognize the legitimacy of the kinds of community interests for which urban dwellers in many parts of medieval Europe struggled.⁸

Weber distinguished between cities of northern and southern Europe, distinctions that will also emerge occasionally in this study. He noted, for example, that the “occidental” type of city as he defined it was most developed north of the Alps, and argued that southern European cities were somehow transitional between Asiatic and North European forms. This stemmed, he believed, mainly from the continuing presence in southern European cities of a nobility of rural origins and mentality whose values differed from those of thoroughly urbanized patriciates found in northern Europe. Despite such differences between cities in north and south, however, Weber’s main distinction lay between Western cities on the one hand and Asian ones on the other. His view of the importance of this broader distinction also informed his discussion of the relative strength of clan, kin, and caste groups in Asia and Europe.⁹

Weber characterized the history of lineage and clan relations in the West by hypothesizing their progressive weakening. He argued that several factors distinguished Europe from Asia in this regard. Important among them were migration, the feudal system, and the development of state organizations, which combined to demystify and weaken kin groups in Europe as early as the Middle Ages.¹⁰

He believed that the power of kindreds also declined under the impact of Christianity, whose adherents’ notions of community challenged claims of solidarity based solely on biological descent.¹¹ Weber seemed to imply that Christianity’s emphasis on extra-kin solidarity would have been inadequate by itself to shatter strong clan structures, but that these structures were already weakened when Christian ideology and institutions dealt their own blows. Whether Christian models of community by conversion appealed to individuals who were part of societies already characterized by loosely bound kin networks,

⁷ *Ibid.*, vol. II, 1212–20. Citations refer to the Roth and Wittich edition. I prefer to translate *Gemeinde* as “community,” as in Max Weber, *The City*, trans. and ed. Don Martindale and Gertrud Neuwirth (Glencoe, IL, 1958).

⁸ Weber, *Economy*, 1228–30. ⁹ *Ibid.*, 1236–8. ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1244.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1244; Alan Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism: The Family, Property, and Social Transition* (New York and Cambridge, 1978), 45–50. On the demystification of biological descent in Christianity, see Michael Mitterauer, “Christianity and Endogamy,” *Continuity and Change* 6, 3 (1991): 314, 325, and Michael Sheehan, “The European Family and Canon Law,” *Continuity and Change* 6, 3 (1991): 356.

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or whether the Christianization of Europe further weakened such networks, is impossible to demonstrate. Probably, it was a bit of both.

Weber thus portrayed a society whose kin groups and clans gradually encountered a belief system and a church organization whose principles provided a potential challenge to models of solidarity based on ties of blood and descent. Importantly, Weber believed that this pattern marked the experience of Europe's upper as well as lower classes. He argued that neither the nobility nor the lower classes of western society displayed the high levels of patrilineal solidarity and ancestor worship found in many other civilizations. Weber observed that medieval nobilities ascribed increasing importance to patrilineal descent and hereditary claims to titles during their rise to power, but rejected the idea that their obsession with these ties compared in intensity to practices of ancestor worship found elsewhere in the world.¹²

Weber also emphasized how the fundamental relationship between free men in many parts of western Europe of the Middle Ages – that of lord and vassal – was based not on ties of blood, but rather on a public, contractual relationship sworn between two unrelated individuals face-to-face. It was a form of invented solidarity between men that joined those who did not share membership in the same clan or descent group.¹³ Thus, in his view, the evolution of a form of urban political community, a demystified kinship system, and the presence of other forms of solidarity such as contractual relationships between unrelated free men, constituted several of western society's distinctive features.

The problem of “essentialism”

In recent years, no scholar has done more than Jack Goody to challenge Weber and those who would use Weber's work to understand family and kinship within a comparative framework. In *The Oriental, the Ancient and the Primitive*, Goody sought to document the many similarities between the development of family groups in East and West, focusing on ways that Eurasians living in socially stratified societies passed property on to their children, dwelt in conjugal families, and granted women surprisingly liberal rights to property. He believes that it is best to see Eurasia as one region when it comes to understanding how families and lineages functioned across time, how they transmitted property through generations, and how they organized family and gender relations.

¹² On the nobility's growing sense of lineal solidarity in eleventh-century Europe, see Georges Duby, *La Société aux XIe et XIIe siècles dans la région mâconnaise* (Paris, 1953), 215–27.

¹³ On the kinship model informing the symbolism of rituals of lordship and vassalage, see Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*, trans. L. A. Manyon (Chicago, 1961), vol. I, 137–42; Jacques Le Goff, “The Symbolic Ritual of Vassalage,” in *Time, Work and Culture in the Middle Ages*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago, 1980), 260–1.

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Interestingly, in this work, Goody drew his European examples exclusively from Mediterranean Europe, allowing it, or more precisely, the eastern Mediterranean, to “stand” for Europe. The absence of northern Europe from this magisterial comparative study surely did not result from the author’s lack of familiarity with northern Europe, since his earlier writings, including *The Development of the Family and Marriage in Europe*, drew important contrasts between southern and northern Europe, emphasizing resemblances among societies within the Mediterranean basin.¹⁴ Perhaps Goody believes that similarities between Europe and Asia are most obvious in the Mediterranean area. In this respect, he would concur with many, including Weber himself, who identified what he saw as Europe’s peculiarities most of all with its northern areas.

Despite Goody’s desire to diminish what I believe are radical differences between the family histories of Europe and Asia, he has ironically done more than any other scholar to reemphasize the institution that was most responsible for shaping the peculiar way that Europe’s families – and especially its urban families – evolved over time. It was Goody who, in *The Development of the Family and Marriage in Europe*, reminded historians of the Church’s central role in shaping family life in Europe north and south. Here, Goody demonstrated the impact of the Church on patterns of property holding and devolution, noting its success in convincing lay property owners to will to it the wealth that in most other societies would have passed to kin or spouses. The Church thereby distorted normal (in world cultural terms) patterns of property devolution and ensured its own enrichment. Over the centuries, the accumulation of property helped the Church become ever more powerful in imposing many features of its worldview on European culture and society.¹⁵

My study bears the stamp of this important theme of Goody’s, though my own treatment of the Church’s impacts emphasizes its success in providing the laity with both a worldview promoting extrafamilial forms of association and practical models for their construction. Moreover, while this study is informed by certain Weberian views, and is focused on the West, I have tried to heed Goody’s admonition to avoid the “essentialism” that he deplors in the work of those who are convinced of some of the West’s peculiarities. Goody recommends that instead of simply positing the West’s essential “uniqueness,”¹⁶ social scientists need to work empirically to identify a carefully delimited number of factors or “variables” that, when taken together, shaped western family and society in peculiar ways.¹⁷

¹⁴ Jack Goody, *The Development of the Family and Marriage in Europe* (Cambridge, 1983).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 91–133.

¹⁶ Jack Goody, *The Oriental, the Ancient and the Primitive: Systems of Marriage and the Family in the Pre-Industrial Societies of Eurasia* (Cambridge and New York, 1990), xix, 1, 357, 465, 483–5.

¹⁷ Jack Goody, “Comparing Family Systems in Europe and Asia: Are there Different Sets of Rules?” *Population and Development Review* 22, 1 (March, 1996): 9, 13.

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In search of a western family form

The writing of the family history of Europe for the last thirty years has been built in large part upon the monographic study of particular times and places. The field has also benefited, however, from investigations that tried to generalize from results of case studies to find broader patterns or models. The most celebrated and widely studied of these models appears in John Hajnal's work, which used a variety of genealogies and census records to formulate a model of marriage that he called the "European Marriage Pattern." This pattern, which Hajnal and others believe emerged in the sixteenth century, had two main characteristics: a relatively high age at first marriage for women (over 23–24) and men (26 and over), and a relatively high proportion (10–15 percent) of "permanently celibate" people – that is, people who never married.¹⁸

A second major effort to build a model of western family history came from research identified with the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure. Members of this group focused largely upon family relations as they could be observed from listings of households. In a series of publications, they and other historians of the family and household in many parts of the world determined that for most of the documentable past, households in western Europe had been nuclear in form. Stem family households, those in which one heir usually remained in the household throughout his life, existed in some areas. The most statistically representative household form in western Europe, however, was one that was nuclear in structure and likely to contain servants or other employees rather than large numbers of kin.¹⁹ Over the years, additional research on both household and family led the leader of the Cambridge Group, Peter Laslett, to propose a model of the "western family" that included: a nuclear family household, a mother who was relatively old during her child-bearing years, a relatively small age gap between spouses, and the frequent presence in the household of persons who were not members of the immediate family and often not kin at all.²⁰

Although Hajnal's work referred to Europe north and south and emphasized east–west differences, his model of "European Marriage" has been found to be predominant mainly in the north. This fact led quite logically to more intensive

¹⁸ John Hajnal, "European Marriage Patterns in Perspective," in D. V. Glass and D. E. C. Eversley, eds., *Population in History: Essays in Historical Demography* (Chicago, 1965), 101–43, and Hajnal, "Two Kinds of Preindustrial Household Formation System," *Population and Development Review* 8, 3 (1982): 449–94.

¹⁹ For an aggressive rejection of the idea of the ubiquity of nuclear families in western Europe, see Pierre Goubert, "Family and Province: A Contribution to the Knowledge of Family Structures in Early Modern France," *Journal of Family History* 2, 3 (1977): 179–95.

²⁰ Peter Laslett, "Characteristics of the Western Family Considered over Time," in Laslett, *Family Life and Illicit Love in Earlier Generations: Essays in Historical Sociology* (Cambridge and New York, 1977), 13–14.

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efforts to find and elaborate a model of marriage and household formation that corresponded to southern or Mediterranean Europe. Research to date has failed to find such a model, however. Rather, it seems that southern Europe has been characterized by a variety of household formation systems in different subregions.²¹ The family formation system that seems to have predominated in parts of southern Spain and southern Italy partially resembled that in northern Europe. Like young people in northwestern Europe, newly married couples in southern Italy and southern Spain tended to set up new households rather than live with parents after marriage. However, women there tended to marry at significantly younger ages than women in the north, resulting in couples where the age difference between wives and husbands was usually greater than in northern Europe.

Households in other areas of southern Europe seem to have differed from northern Europe even more profoundly. Parts of central Italy, northern Spain, and some mountainous areas of southern France were home to more complex households, including stem family households.²² In this system, adult brothers and sisters of the heir usually had the right to co-reside with him, but were required to remain celibate if they did. In “joint” families typical of certain landowning groups in central and northern Italy, brothers brought their spouses and reared their children together in the same large households. Research on household formation systems in southern Europe has thus revealed that important elements of Laslett’s “western family” or Hajnal’s “European Marriage Pattern” did exist in many areas of southern Europe, but that there was more apparent regional variation than in the north. Features such as wider disparities between husbands’ and wives’ ages, and generally lower proportions of women who remain unmarried seem to be quite general, however.

Historians and anthropologists have also looked beyond systems of household formation to uncover the presence of different models of family relations. Of particular interest are relations between individuals and their kin who did not live in the same household. Inspired by the work of Max Weber as well as empirical studies of kin relations, some observers have proposed that kin networks in northern Europe were generally loosely knit. This view emerged

²¹ David I. Kertzer and Caroline Brettell, “Advances in Italian and Iberian Family History,” *Journal of Family History* 12, 1–3 (1987): 87–120; Francesco Benigno, “The Southern Italian Family in the Early Modern Period: A Discussion of Co-residential Patterns,” *Continuity and Change* 4, 1 (1989): 165–94; Rosella Rettaroli, “Age at Marriage in Nineteenth-Century Italy,” *Journal of Family History* 15, 4 (1990): 409–25; Pier Paolo Viazzo and Dionigi Albera, “The Peasant Family in Northern Italy, 1750–1930: A Reassessment,” *Journal of Family History* 15, 4 (1990): 461–82.

²² David Kertzer, *Family Life in Central Italy, 1880–1910: Sharecropping, Wage Labor, and Coresidence* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1984), 188–94. On variations in marriage systems in Spain and Portugal, see Robert Rowland, “Sistemas matrimoniales en la Península Ibérica (siglos XVI–XIX). Una perspectiva regional,” in Vicente Pérez Moreda and David-Sven Reher, eds., *Demografía histórica en España* (Madrid, 1988), 72–137.

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most strongly in discussions of English social history in the work of Alan Macfarlane, who argued that from late medieval times onward, English life and law were distinguished by the primacy of the individual over the family grouping, and by the absence of the sort of “familism” found among peasantries of the European continent.²³ Market forces, Macfarlane believed, regulated the ownership and transfer of land between individuals in England, whereas differing systems of law and “family strategies” that subordinated individuals to their families or kinship groups predominated elsewhere. His study of the life of one seventeenth-century English clergyman, Ralph Josselin, vividly showed how very little contact or apparent sense of identity Josselin shared with his extended kin.²⁴

Research on a later period of English history suggested a model of kin relations in which people who did have sustained interactions with their kin frequently displayed an “instrumental” attitude. In his study of urban working-class households in nineteenth-century industrial Lancashire, Michael Anderson developed a “rational actor” model of kin behavior. He argued that the sorts of services that extended kin provided for one another depended on calculations of individual interests, which could result in the refusal as well as the proffering of assistance in “critical life situations,” including the death of key wage earners, their unemployment, or the need for lodgings in the case of migrants who came to the city.²⁵ Members of the families that Anderson studied valued kin solidarity, and believed in a certain level of obligation to fairly close relatives whenever possible. Beyond these obligations to immediate family, however, assisting other relatives where obligations were not so clear meant a certain amount of negotiation. Anderson’s findings about the ways individuals tried to balance their own needs or those of their conjugal family with those of extended kin illustrated nicely Hans Medick and David Sabean’s model of kinship solidarity that had room for both “interest and emotion.”²⁶ Moreover, as Peter Laslett suggested, the likelihood of giving or receiving help in money, services, or housing to or from one’s kin depended on many factors having nothing to do with the desire to help. To be able to provide assistance, kin had to be alive, in physical proximity, and of an age and financial status to offer it.²⁷

²³ Macfarlane, *The Origins*, 51, 81, 83, 94.

²⁴ Alan Macfarlane, *The Family Life of Ralph Josselin: An Essay in Historical Anthropology* (New York and Cambridge, 1970), 126–43.

²⁵ Michael Anderson, *Family Structure in Nineteenth-Century Lancashire* (Cambridge, 1971), 136–61.

²⁶ Hans Medick and David Warren Sabean, “Interest and Emotion in Family and Kinship Studies: A Critique of Social History and Anthropology,” in Medick and Sabean, eds., *Interest and Emotion: Essays on the Study of Family and Kinship* (Cambridge, 1984), 9–23.

²⁷ Peter Laslett, “Family, Kinship, and Collectivity as Systems of Support in Pre-Industrial Europe: A Consideration of the ‘Nuclear-Hardship’ Hypothesis,” *Continuity and Change* 3, 2 (1988): 157.