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0521829720 - The Household and the Making of History: A Subversive View of the Western Past

Mary S. Hartman

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I

How Northwestern Europe Was Strange*Marriage, Households, and History*

In a sparkling little book with the engaging title *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons*, social historian Charles Tilly reminded colleagues in the mid-1980s of an awkward situation that is still with us.¹ He pointed out that despite many heroic efforts, scholars have still not sorted out what it was that made western Europe the site of changes that, from about 1500, ushered in the modern era – changes that are still making themselves felt around the globe. As one commentator lately inquired, “Why did a relatively small and backward periphery on the western fringes of the Eurasian continent burst out into the world in the sixteenth century and by the nineteenth century become a dominant force in almost all corners of the earth?”² While the role of western Europeans in giving birth to the first “models of modernity” has been variously portrayed, not to mention regularly decried, it is impossible to dismiss compelling evidence that it was events set in motion within that region that are continuing to transform the world – for good, arguably, as well as for ill. Yet there is still no consensus as to why that was so.

Fernand Braudel, distinguished interpreter of that change as well as an ardent proponent of the vanguard role of western Europe, puts the point boldly in his famous multivolume endeavor to explain just how the contemporary

¹ Charles Tilly, *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons* (New York, 1984).

² Gale Stokes, “The Fates of Human Societies: A Review of Recent Macrohistories.” *The American Historical Review* 106, No. 2 (2001): 508–9. Books discussed in the review include Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York, 1997); David Landes, *Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some Are So Rich and Some So Poor* (New York, 1998); Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: Europe, China and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, N.J., 2000); Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley, 1998); R. Bin Wong, *China Transformed* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1997); and J. M. Blaut, *The Colonizer’s Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History* (New York, 1993).

Cambridge University Press

0521829720 - The Household and the Making of History: A Subversive View of the Western Past

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

capitalist world took shape in the years from 1500 to 1800.³ Tilly cites Braudel's pronouncement that as late as the sixteenth century,

the thickly settled regions of the world, subject to the pressures of large populations, seem close to one another, more or less equal. No doubt a small difference can be enough to produce first advantages, then superiority and thus, on the other side, inferiority and then subordination. Is that what happened between Europe and the rest of the world? . . . One thing looks certain to me: The gap between the West and other continents appeared *late*; to attribute it to the "rationalization" of the market economy alone, as too many of our contemporaries still have a tendency to do, is obviously simplistic.

In any case, explaining that gap, which grew more decisive with the years, is the essential problem in the history of the modern world.⁴

Tilly argues persuasively, though, that even Braudel, despite his masterful grasp of the Mediterranean world in the early modern centuries, never managed to explain that familiar gap. He even contends that Braudel never made up his mind on the relationship or the contributions of the parties widely presumed most responsible for western Europe's peculiar role in global transformation: the new capitalists on the one hand and the new state-makers on the other.⁵ In an effort to help interpreters think more clearly about this puzzle of historical change and the nature of Europe's role, Tilly uses his essay to reflect upon and catalog "the strengths and weaknesses of the schemes we customarily use to analyze large social processes and to speculate on their origins."⁶

In addition to his critique of Braudel, Tilly provides lively commentary on the efforts of scholar upon scholar to explain finally what it was about western Europe after 1500 that set the world on a new course. He warns in the first instance, however, that we need to discard much unreliable interpretive baggage inherited from nineteenth-century European social commentators. Those gifted but often bedazzled or outraged eyewitnesses experienced firsthand the cumulative effects of centuries-long change in the turmoil of a novel reorganization of production dubbed the "Industrial Revolution." They also beheld the awesome and often violent consolidation of nation-states as the most powerful European organizations of the era. While Tilly concedes that their judgments can be compelling, he declares that these nineteenth-century commentators could also be simplistic and tendentious; and he is troubled that even now, their pronouncements continue to "encumber our thought."⁷ Among what he labels their "pernicious postulates" are the mistaken notions

³ Fernand Braudel, *Civilisation Matérielle, économie, et capitalisme, XVe-XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1979).

⁴ Tilly, *Big Structures*, 72 from Braudel, Vol. II, 110–11.

⁵ Tilly, *Big Structures*, 66–73.

⁶ *Ibid.*, ix.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

Cambridge University Press

0521829720 - The Household and the Making of History: A Subversive View of the Western Past

Mary S. Hartman

Excerpt

[More information](#)*How Northwestern Europe Was Strange*

3

that the world as a whole can be divided into distinct societies; that social change is a coherent general phenomenon; that large-scale change takes all societies through a more-or-less standard set of stages; and that times of rapid change necessarily entail a range of disorderly behaviors such as crime, suicide, and rebellion.⁸

Tilly recommends that if we are finally to succeed in the challenge of identifying and understanding the large-scale structures and processes of change that struck European commentators so forcefully by the nineteenth century, we must leave such notions behind and appeal instead to what he labels “huge (but not stupendous) comparisons.”⁹ Next, he provides a useful taxonomy of different sorts of comparisons, citing a variety of examples of historians and social scientists looking comparatively at wars and revolutions as well as political, economic, and cultural systems, juxtaposing developments in different nation-states, regions, continents, time periods, and more. Such approaches, he suggests, can enable interpreters to steer a sensible middle course between the futility of attempting “total history,” in the style of Braudel, and the limitations of confinement to the necessary but insufficient terrain of traditional microhistory, with its tight focus on individualized and compartmentalized experience. Such a historically grounded, comparative approach, he argues, offers the best hope for finding better answers to large questions about the origins and course of major social change in the modern world.

In the end, however, like most of the theorists he cites and admires while, often enough, deftly bringing them down, Tilly himself appears to accept the same presumptions they do about where we must all return to renew our search if we are to shed more light on western Europe’s role in initiating an ongoing, dynamic process of global transformation. As he declares in his conclusion:

For our own time, it is hard to imagine the construction of any valid analysis of long-term structural change that does not connect particular alterations, directly or indirectly, to the two interdependent master-processes of the era: the creation of a system of national states and the formation of a worldwide capitalist system.¹⁰

This book will hardly contest the importance of these two “interdependent master-processes,” let alone the need for their consideration in any serious study of long-term structural change. What it will argue, however, is that each master-process was itself dependent upon a prior and distinctive development within western Europe – or, more precisely, within northwestern Europe. This extraordinary development has long been known but remains hidden in plain sight. I refer to the discovery in the mid-1960s of

⁸ Ibid., 11.

⁹ Ibid., 74.

¹⁰ Ibid., 147.

Cambridge University Press

0521829720 - The Household and the Making of History: A Subversive View of the Western Past

Mary S. Hartman

Excerpt

[More information](#)

an idiosyncratic and still unexplained household-formation system featuring late marriage that, by 1500, dominated in northwestern Europe and singled that region out among all the major agricultural regions of the world.¹¹

That a solid connection has yet to be established between the detection of this huge anomaly in marriage and household arrangements and the distinctive ways Western history evolved after 1500 is in one sense not so surprising. Standard historical interpretation, after all, continues to take for granted that “the making of the modern world” was a performance generated almost exclusively from extra-domestic sites, and largely by elite men. It is true that from the 1960s a new social history, and an even newer women’s history, have contested the latter assumption, arguing that the activities of more ordinary men as well as women must always figure into accounts of what makes history run. Yet even these interpreters have rarely contested the ingrained view that all the historical action that truly matters takes place in arenas beyond the household. Their disputes have centered instead, as Tilly’s own sweeping account confirms, upon which one of those arenas deserves to be assigned priority – the most popular contenders being the political and the economic realms. Nor have these scholars tried to claim that women’s agency in any arena, domestic or otherwise, counted much for developments long singled out as most significant for European and, ultimately, global history.

This study will argue, to the contrary, that these and more extra-domestic arenas, along with the course of modern history itself, owe their most noteworthy features to a prior and still largely overlooked marriage and household system. I will maintain, too, that within the anomalous households of northwestern Europe, women’s behavior mattered at least as much as men’s – not only for generating some novel gender and power arrangements within those households but also for shaping major developments beyond them. It is true that in all arenas, men were and remained the dominant actors, and that for long anyway, they were acknowledged as legitimately such. Yet what is remarkable is that a peculiar household system, which will be shown here to have been unstable compared to its counterparts elsewhere, not only required women and men alike to be more actively engaged as partners in creating and maintaining their households, but regularly prompted women to resist men’s control.

Equally striking is evidence that the combined features of the strange household-formation pattern in northwestern Europe worked from the late medieval era to diminish the salience of biological sex as a marker of social identity. That finding will be argued to suggest a new hypothesis, grounded in historical experience, to account for pervasive cross-cultural beliefs in the high importance of gender differentiation, including in a sexual hierarchy favoring men, a condition that is too often explained through the universalist

¹¹ John Hajnal, “European Marriage Patterns in Perspective,” in D. V. Glass and D. E. C. Eversley, eds., *Population in History: Essays in Historical Demography* (London, 1965), 101–43.

Cambridge University Press

0521829720 - The Household and the Making of History: A Subversive View of the Western Past

Mary S. Hartman

Excerpt

[More information](#)*How Northwestern Europe Was Strange*

5

claims of psychology or sociobiology. The discussion will also provide a splendid opportunity to call upon one of Tilly's recommended huge – perhaps even stupendous – comparisons.

* * *

A claim to present a novel approach to understanding Western and ultimately global developments, including the sexual hierarchy that appears nearly everywhere to favor men, may seem foolhardy at best. Yet since I was hardly alone during the 1970s in imagining that historical demographers were the ones about to blaze just such a path, with newly minted family and women's historians following hard on their heels, I suspect others may also have pondered why we have achieved a new millennium without a fresh array of historical syntheses to draw upon. It is true that compensation has been amply provided in the form of an enormous growth in specialty fields including, especially in the United States, a marked new focus upon cultural history. The downside of this extraordinary proliferation of research fields, however, is that collective historical attention has been diverted before a number of critical issues in social history and connected fields – especially demographic, family, and women's history – were adequately addressed. What is more, risk-taking seems to have been invested more in claiming legitimacy for new specialties than in showing just how each expands historical understanding, resolves ongoing controversies, or upsets the existing consensus on various topics.

This book returns to some of the larger unresolved issues, and it sets out a new explanation of how and why modern Western societies developed in some peculiar and still puzzling ways. While the book is based upon existing research in different and often isolated fields, that research is reimagined here in an interpretive account that links disparate findings in a single line of argument. The object is not to offer a full-blown revisionist narrative of the Western past. It is instead to make a case, and propose some tools, for a radically altered approach to that past. Illustrations and comparative examples from the medieval to the contemporary era will serve to delineate the rough outlines of what such a history might look like, but my wider aim is to provoke reassessments of what we think we already know about the making of the modern world.

The focal point, as noted, will be the still unexplored ramifications for Western historical development of the eccentric northwestern European system of late marriage. The system was first described and analyzed in the 1960s by economic historian John Hajnal, who later noted that it “presumably arose only once in human history.”¹² Although late marriage and several other features of household formation are now familiar to

¹² John Hajnal, “Two Kinds of Preindustrial Household Formation System.” *Population and Development Review* 8 (1982): 476. Hajnal refers to this article as a “sequel” to the one of 1965.

Cambridge University Press

0521829720 - The Household and the Making of History: A Subversive View of the Western Past

Mary S. Hartman

Excerpt

[More information](#)

demographic and family historians, they are less well known among historians of women and hardly familiar at all to mainstream practitioners. As for the wider community of history enthusiasts, even the most avid subscriber to the popular History Book Club is unlikely to be aware of the strange marriage and household arrangements that came to be dubbed “the Western family pattern.”

To appreciate what set northwestern Europeans apart, it is useful first to be reminded of how most marriages have been formed in the rest of the world’s agricultural societies, including many places to this day. While particular household structures have varied widely, couples in southern and eastern Europe, India, the Middle East, China, and parts of Africa typically married early, with brides being seven to ten years younger than grooms. Families ordinarily arranged their children’s marriages, and few persons remained single throughout their lifetimes. Newlyweds most often moved into the existing residence of the groom’s parents, carrying on multifamily or joint households of two or more married couples.

Young persons in northwestern Europe, however, followed a different path, and for a long time. In England, the Low Countries, much of Scandinavia, northern France, and the German-speaking lands, most women as well as men from the medieval era on married comparatively late and were much closer in age than their counterparts in early-marriage societies. A significant number, 10 to 20 percent – and more women than men – never married at all. While it is true that the sons and daughters of titled and well-to-do families long married younger, had family-arranged marriages, and might even move in with the groom’s parents, the vast majority of youth behaved otherwise. From medieval times until the late eighteenth century or so, young persons in their late teens and twenties played the major role in selecting their own partners; and they usually did so as agricultural servants or apprentices residing in their employers’ households. At marriage, these couples typically pooled their resources and created simple or nuclear households of their own, which meant that most residences in northwestern Europe housed just one married couple.

John Hajnal’s exploration of this late-marriage system, presented in a collection of specialized scholarly papers on population history in 1965, was overshadowed by the publication the same year of the distinguished Cambridge scholar Peter Laslett’s ground-breaking book *The World We Have Lost: England Before the Industrial Age*.¹³ This popular study of small-scale

¹³ Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost: England Before the Industrial Age* (New York, 1965). Laslett, who died in 2002, is in many ways the key figure inspiring this study, even though it was John Hajnal who, as I will argue, identified in late marriage for women the single most critical feature of northwestern European household-formation arrangements and who also proposed that late marriage might be the key factor in western Europe’s pioneering role in industrial transformation. Peter Laslett’s career was initially devoted to examining early modern English political theory, especially that of Filmer and Locke, before he turned his

Cambridge University Press

0521829720 - The Household and the Making of History: A Subversive View of the Western Past

Mary S. Hartman

Excerpt

[More information](#)*How Northwestern Europe Was Strange*

7

familial society drew upon some of the same demographic evidence that Hajnal's did, but focused far more on the nuclear composition of households, rather than late marriage, as the distinguishing feature of English family arrangements. Laslett did remark that English people were bound to be surprised to learn that their ancestors had not married young, a mistaken belief that he suggests is likely owing to their awareness of the teenage brides in Shakespeare. But he insists in this widely admired study that the more serious mistake English people have made in contemplating how their ancestors lived has been to imagine that their households were extremely large.¹⁴

In England and northwestern Europe generally, Laslett reported, average household size was actually quite constant for centuries at just four to six persons. It was these findings on household composition and their possible implications, then, that first captured the attention of the younger generation of scholars attracted to the new social history in the late 1960s and 1970s. For a time, it even seemed likely that a genuine historical revolution was underway, based upon these startling demographic discoveries. Yet the revolution was not to be; and within a generation, the high excitement created by accounts of those discoveries, and what they might mean, had dissipated.¹⁵

attention to the family and gathered around him other talented demographers and historical sociologists who became the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure. In this sense, Laslett's own intellectual odyssey traversed and sought to link the still separated historical worlds of the household and wider politics. Much of his work and that of his followers explored the possibility for integrating those worlds that is being called for here.

¹⁴ Ibid., 93.

¹⁵ See Keith Wrightson, "The Family in Early Modern England," in Steven Taylor, Richard Connors, and Clyve Jones, eds., *Hanoverian Britain and Empire. Essays in Memory of Philip Lawson* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK, 1998): 1–22. In this useful paper delivered in 1996 to Laslett's Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, Wrightson comments in a survey of the past thirty years of family history in early modern England that controversies of many sorts on this topic have died down of late without actually being resolved. He argues that there has long remained an impasse in assessments of the early modern English family between the assertions of vast change in that period, represented by adherents of Lawrence Stone's schematic presentation of overlapping phases of development in *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800* (London, 1977), and the work of Laslett and others, especially Alan Macfarlane, which emphasizes continuity in family structure rather than change for the early modern period. While within such a characterization this study would emphasize the continuity side, it would argue that what Wrightson's analysis misses, along with most other assessments of Western family history at this time, is John Hajnal's early identification of the significance of late marriage, and especially late marriage for women. Wrightson does not even mention Hajnal's work in this paper, which heavily cites English as well as continental scholars, although he does note that in his view, while the history of the family in early modern England as of 1996 was still in an "interpretive quandary" between a model of immense cultural change (Stone's) and one of essential cultural homogeneity (Laslett's and Macfarlane's), the "single most important development of the last 15 years has been the emergence of an explicitly gendered account of family relationships,

Cambridge University Press

0521829720 - The Household and the Making of History: A Subversive View of the Western Past

Mary S. Hartman

Excerpt

[More information](#)

News, then, that for hundreds of years the most typical marriage and household arrangements in northwestern Europe constituted a global anomaly produced no sustained response from the historical community at large. It is true that demographers themselves paid much attention from the 1960s to the 1980s to comparing households, and especially household size, in many locales around the world; yet their findings have not been assimilated into standard historical narratives. Nor, more importantly, has there been a sustained interest in determining whether a distinctive domestic regime might have influenced familiar northwestern European developments, either within households or beyond them. What attention there has been was confined to the prevalence of nuclear households in the region, rather than to the feature that John Hajnal, at least, held far more important – namely, late marriage, and especially late marriage for women.

* * *

As noted earlier, most chroniclers of the Western past, along with nearly everyone else, have never viewed ordinary households, even collectively, as genuine historical players. Reading back from a contemporary world in which families appear to be ever more fragile entities, ceaselessly reacting to change generated outside their porous boundaries, such interpreters might be excused for thinking that whatever the motors of Western history may be, they must surely be located outside family households. Proponents of social history and its several offspring – especially family and women’s history – might nonetheless have been expected to embrace the discovery of the aberrant family-formation pattern. These practitioners, after all, have long maintained that ordinary men and women belong in the historical record. Yet even family and women’s historians, after intense but short-lived interest in the findings of historical demographers, turned their attention elsewhere.

Although she does not discuss the odd northwestern European marriage pattern as such, historian Louise Tilly’s comparison of family and women’s history helps explain why neither of those then-emerging subfields made a priority of tracking down the implications of the discovery of that pattern for behavior within or beyond households.¹⁶ First, historians of the family

rooted in a feminist critique of the earlier agenda of family history,” Wrightson, “The Family in Early Modern England,” 11.

In the remainder of this introductory chapter, I will second this view of the importance of the new women’s history while at the same time attempting to explain why neither that field nor historical demography – nor social history more broadly – managed to make good on an early promise to use new information about how northwestern European families were formed, and what women did within those families, to set out new accounts of how the Western world evolved.

¹⁶ For a full discussion, see Louise A. Tilly, “Women’s History and Family History: Fruitful Collaboration or Missed Connection?” *Journal of Family History* 12, Nos. 1–3 (1987): 303–15.

Cambridge University Press

0521829720 - The Household and the Making of History: A Subversive View of the Western Past

Mary S. Hartman

Excerpt

[More information](#)*How Northwestern Europe Was Strange*

9

did not really set out to challenge the prevailing low status of typical family households as historical players. Their intent was instead to make a case that families have had a history of their own, as well as to understand these entities through what she describes as “a taxonomy of ‘approaches’: demographic, household economics, and sentiments or attitudes.”¹⁷

While some of their work stresses connections between the family and other social institutions, and while all of it deals at least implicitly with women as well as men, family historians have downplayed sex-specific or individual experience in favor of aggregates of persons, households, or other collectivities. Historians of the family have cited the wider societal influence of middling and upper-class families, in particular, not only in the political realm but also in promoting certain supposed “Western” attitudes, including individualism and even egalitarianism.¹⁸ Yet they have rarely lodged similar claims, as will be done here, on behalf of the overwhelming majority of northwestern European households – that is, the households of peasants.

Women’s history, by contrast with family history, was born in the context of a wider rights movement; and its early practitioners, at least, raised many questions about the complicity of historians in ignoring women’s lives and contributions. Many early interpreters, too, explicitly named the family as “a central institution of women’s oppression.”¹⁹ The new historians of women, Tilly explains, did not really adopt “family” as a category in which history is appropriately conceptualized. Family turns up as a feature that may condition women’s entry into politics or shape their relationship to labor markets or to housework, but family is something that is, in her words, “distributed across other concerns rather than being an independent category.”²⁰

All this makes it easier to see why news from 1965 that northwestern European marriage arrangements had been deviant for centuries shook neither a historical establishment focused on traditional political and economic categories nor a gathering crowd of revisionist upstarts seeking to expand the universe of legitimate historical sites, topics, and actors. Family historians, for the most part, were not asking the sorts of questions about agency and causality that have long engaged the major fields of historical inquiry; and while new historians of women were in fact asking such questions, they

For a more recent discussion of these same issues in the English context, see Megan Doolittle, “Close Relations? Bringing Together Gender and Family in English History.” *Gender & History* 11, No. 3 (November 1999): 542–54.

¹⁷ Tilly, “Women’s History and Family History,” 305.

¹⁸ See, for example, Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800* (New York, 1977); and Randolph Trumbach, *The Rise of the Egalitarian Family: Aristocratic Kinship and Domestic Relations in Eighteenth-century England* (New York, 1979).

¹⁹ Tilly, “Women’s History and Family History,” 304, from Ellen Dubois, “The Radicalism of the Woman Suffrage Movement: Notes Toward the Reconstruction of Nineteenth-Century Feminism.” *Feminist Studies* 3, Nos. 1/2 (Fall 1975): 63–71.

²⁰ Tilly, “Women’s History and Family History,” 310.

Cambridge University Press

0521829720 - The Household and the Making of History: A Subversive View of the Western Past

Mary S. Hartman

Excerpt

[More information](#)

shared the view of most other historians that the family is not where the action is.

It is true that family historians have since researched the economic and social institutions that illuminate demographic and household structures – conducting, for example, extensive surveys of different landholding and inheritance practices.²¹ Yet a leading scholar in the field, Tamara Hareven, has commented in a comprehensive review of trends in the study of families that more extensive work is needed. Most relevant to the investigation here, she states that a future agenda must include determining more precisely how households have evolved. In particular, she says, scholars must identify which circumstances enabled the family to be more or less able “to control its destiny and to affect the larger social process,” as well as which factors evidently caused the family as an institution to succumb to external forces.²²

More clarity is required, Hareven adds, on the emergence of so-called modern family behavior, especially now that it is clear that industrialization did not produce the nuclear household, as was once generally thought. Suggestions that the commercial revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was somehow responsible still do not explain the continuing mystery of “the existence of nuclear household patterns in the Middle Ages.”²³ Nor, she might have added, do they explain the continuing mystery of why, from medieval times to the modern era, women in northwestern Europe

²¹ As E. Anthony Wrigley commented, “Since the flow of income from the land formed such a large part of the total flow of income generated in pre-industrial economies, and since the size and structure of familial systems were much influenced by their economic circumstances, tenurial and familial systems were necessarily closely related. The inheritance rules by which land passed from one generation to the next were likewise of significance to family constitution and strategy. For example, where land can be bought and sold freely and in units of any size, it is feasible for a family to adjust its holding of land to its labor power as this varies over the life cycle of the family – acquiring additional land as sons grow to adolescence and shedding it again after they leave home. Where, on the other hand, land is inalienable, any symmetry between land and labor on a holding can only be secured by ‘importing’ labor from outside the current co-resident family group whenever the number of able-bodied workers falls short of the number required to work the holding to advantage. Conversely if the family has a surplus of labor, it can only be fully productive if the surplus is ‘exported’ to another holding. There is no necessary connection between inalienable land-holding and particular family characteristics, of course, nor is surplus labor always ‘exported.’ Many peasant societies in Asia today, for example, appear to prefer to retain surplus labor on the family holding even when marginal productivity drops below marginal consumption. But the system by which a pre-industrial society attempts to match productive land and productive workers is so important to its general functioning that it is natural to consider the matter when examining family life,” in “Reflections on the History of the Family,” in Alice S. Rossi, Jerome Kagan, and Tamara Hareven, eds., *The Family* (New York, 1978), 79.

²² Tamara Hareven, “The History of the Family and the Complexity of Social Change.” *American Historical Review* 96, No. 1 (February 1991): 111.

²³ *Ibid.*, 119.