The Household and the Making of History

A Subversive View of the Western Past

This book argues that a unique late-marriage pattern, discovered in the 1960s but originating in the Middle Ages, explains the continuing puzzle of why western Europe was the site of changes that, from about 1500, gave birth to the modern world. Contrary to views that credit political and economic upheavals from the late eighteenth century for ushering in the contemporary global era, it contends that the roots of these and other modern developments themselves are located in an event taking place more than a millennium earlier, when the peasants in northwestern Europe began to marry their daughters almost as late as their sons. The appearance of this late-marriage system, with its unstable nuclear household form, is also shown to have exposed for the first time the common ingredients whose presence has perpetuated apparently universal beliefs in the importance of gender difference and of a sexual hierarchy favoring men.

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For Edwin M. Hartman and

Samuel M. Hartman

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Preface and Acknowledgments

Many years ago when I first imagined this book, it presented itself as a perfectly straightforward undertaking. A modern European historian trained in political history but attracted to the new social history and the even newer women's history, I was intrigued by the then novel work of Peter Laslett and the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure. I was fascinated as well by John Hajnal's remarkable discovery of a unique pattern of late marriage – for women, in particular – that is believed to have emerged as early as the medieval era in northwestern Europe. I devised a project in the late 1970s that would show how the subfields of women's history and family history, and the recent demographic findings about this strange marriage and household formation pattern, were bound to transform the ways we understand the Western past.

After taking what I believed was a temporary administrative post in the early 1980s, I continued to find as much time as I could to explore the effects, as well as the still-mysterious origins, of the distinctive late-marriage arrangements in northwestern Europe. At that point, I was convinced that the project was such an obvious one that it was likely to be pursued by many scholars. I was wrong about that, as things turned out. I was wrong, too, about the administrative post being temporary. Worse still, I was wrong about the project itself being straightforward. I explain why in the book.

What I was not wrong about was an initial intuition that the story waiting to be pulled together was bound to be a good one. It is true that the early enthusiasm among the new breed of social historians for the discoveries of the historical demographers faded. Despite John Hajnal's and Peter Laslett's imaginative insights suggesting that the discovery of a peculiar family and household system might dramatically alter widespread views about how Western history – and even global history – unfolded, historical studies took other directions. The past few decades have nonetheless been a heady time of expansion, with many new fields and subfields being born. And if practitioners of the new women's history that I was sure had so much to bring

to the findings of the historical demographers chose to focus their attentions elsewhere, it was often to dazzling effect. A happy personal dividend, too, was that for long I enjoyed the luxury of countless unhurried conversations and written exchanges with many generous colleagues, friends, and, initially anyway, total strangers. Several of the ideas we discussed in those years have made their way into the book; others, thanks to their wise counsel, have been qualified, recast, or abandoned altogether.

My chief purpose here, however, is not to recount the long version of how this book came into being but to thank the many who offered their help along the way. In doing so, I wish to make it quite clear that not all these people endorse the book's arguments or are even aware of what finally emerged as those arguments. Yet, regardless of varying degrees of skepticism and enthusiasm, most were intrigued enough to engage in dialogues, some carried on for years, that have greatly informed and enriched the book. Early on, work-in-progress sessions gave me much appreciated feedback from Rutgers colleagues, including historians Sue Cobble, Dee Garrison, John Gillis, Martha Howell, Dorothy Ko, Suzanne Lebsock, Maurice Lee, Jr., Phyllis Mack, Jennifer Morgan, William O'Neill, David Oshinsky, Susan Shrepfer, Bonnie Smith, Peter Stearns, Judith Walkowitz, Marc Wasserman, Deborah Gray White, and Virginia Yans. Of these, Dee, John, Mo, and Bill not only commented on several early chapters but also provided much encouragement and support, and occasional good-natured goading. More recently, colleagues Rudy Bell, Philip Greven, Mary Hawkesworth, and Bonnie Smith read the entire manuscript and offered wise and beneficial guidance. In addition, Marlie Wasserman, director of the Rutgers University Press, gave invaluable advice at a time when it was badly needed. And near the end of production, sisters-in-law Charlie and Sue Hartman provided some impressive editorial wisdom.

In the interim, three Rutgers colleagues in anthropology – Robin Fox, Susan Gal, and Michael Moffatt – read several chapters and offered indispensable counsel. I also owe thanks for their comments to faculty and graduate student colleagues in the 1997–98 interdisciplinary seminar "Women in the Public Sphere," cosponsored by Rutgers's Institute for Research on Women and Institute for Women's Leadership. In addition, several women whom I encountered through the wonderful Berkshire Conference of Women Historians kindly offered their thoughts on the project. The late Margaret Judson, whom I met when she was a retired colleague from Douglass College at Rutgers, not only introduced me to the "Berks" but also shared with me her vast knowledge of English constitutional history. Well before her superb book on the French family household appeared, former student and now Berkshire stalwart Margaret Darrow offered cautionary advice that I hope she notices I took to heart. Natalie Davis graciously sent a copy of one of her articles on early modern French families, arguing a position on the importance of household decision making at all social levels that I linked to

the peculiar northwestern European marriage pattern and present here as a central theme.

Other Berkshire members who have liberally given me help and caveats include Barbara Hanawalt, Lynn Hollen Lees, Mary Beth Norton, Joanne McNamara, and Judith Zinsser. Still others, both scholars and editors who either read chapters or offered important advice at various points, include Susan Bielstein, Nora Chiang, Jean Bethke Elshtain, Sarah Hrdy, Joyce Seltzer, Catharine R. Stimpson, the late Lawrence Stone, and Susan Cott Watkins. The full and astute comments of two anonymous reviewers of the manuscript went far beyond what authors typically receive; and despite the resulting extra labor entailed, I am enormously grateful.

My editor at Cambridge, Lew Bateman, was everything an author could wish – responding positively in less than a week to my initial inquiry about potential interest of the Press and thereafter being supportive, widely informed, wise, and, quite often, very funny. The other people with whom I had the pleasure to work at Cambridge were similarly knowledgeable, thoughtful, and professional, especially Sarah Gentile, Helen Greenberg, and Helen Wheeler. I was blessed, too, in having a fine graduate student, Sandrine Sanos, aid in the preparation of the manuscript for publication. I also enjoyed the helpful and efficient support of Pat Dooley, who contributed in multiple ways to the project. Finally there are Ed and Sam Hartman. They are my favorite companions – at home, at the seashore, and in the mountains. This book is dedicated to them.