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1500–1900**

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**THE FAMILY AND FAMILY
RELATIONSHIPS, 1500–1900**

**England, France
and the United States of America**

Rosemary O'Day

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MACMILLAN

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First published 1994 by
THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 2XS
and London
Companies and representatives
throughout the world

ISBN 978-0-333-37294-4 ISBN 978-1-349-23654-1 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-23654-1

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

**I dedicate this book to my far from simple co-resident
nuclear family – David, Daniel and Matthew Englander –
and to my wider family**

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General Editor's Preface

Since the Second World War there has been a massive expansion in the study of economic and social history generating, and fuelled by, new journals, new academic series and societies. The expansion of research has given rise to new debates and ferocious controversies. This series proposes to take up some of the current issues in historical debate and explore them in a comparative framework.

Historians, of course, are principally concerned with unique events, and they can be inclined to wrap themselves in the isolating greatcoats of their 'country' and their 'period'. It is at least arguable, however, that a comparison of events, or a comparison of the way in which different societies coped with a similar problem – war, industrialisation, population growth and so forth – can reveal new perspectives and new questions. The authors of the volumes in this series have each taken an issue to explore in such a comparative framework. The books are not designed to be path-breaking monographs, though most will contain a degree of new research. The intention is, by exploring problems across national boundaries, to encourage students in tertiary education, in sixth-forms, and hopefully also the more general reader, to think critically about aspects of past developments. No author can maintain strict objectivity; nor can he or she provide definitive answers to all the questions which they explore. If the authors generate discussion and increase perception, then their task is well done.

CLIVE EMSLEY

Preface

I owe an enormous debt to a great many people for their help with this book. I have space to mention but a few. I thank the Arts Faculty Research Committee of the Open University for their generous support, financial and otherwise. Secondly, I thank the extremely helpful staff of the Open University Library, especially all those who processed numerous inter-library loans. Thirdly, I am grateful to the archivists of the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D. C., the Bodleian Library, Oxford, the Guildhall Library, London, and the British Library. I was assisted considerably in my archival work by Dr Angela Raspin and Ms Sue Donnelly of the British Library of Political and Economic Science (LSE). I owe a debt which I shall never be able to repay to Jane Isaac of the Lichfield Joint Record Office. I learned this summer of her tragic accident. She and David Robinson, her predecessor, always made working at Lichfield a delight.

The writing of this book has been made pleasurable by my colleagues. My students Sally Gosling and Margaret Smith gave me the benefit of their stimulating conversation. The 'Women in the Humanities Research Group' at the Open University has always proved a source of psychological support. Professor Ruth Finnegan and Professor Michael Drake gave me the opportunity to develop my ideas about the families of the poor in the nineteenth century. Dr David Englander has lent me the benefit of his brilliant mind, and, even more important, his sympathetic ear!

PREFACE

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I thank Mrs Wendy Clarke for assisting in the production of the typescript. Finally, thanks to Beverley Tarquini of Macmillan Press for seeing this book through the press.

ROSEMARY O'DAY

The Open University

Introduction

In the dim, dark distant past, when this book was first conceived, it seemed that it would be both desirable and possible to study the history of the Western family and place it in a comparative perspective. It seemed, if not a simple, then a reasonably straightforward enterprise. Of course, these proved naïve beliefs.

First, the more I read purported histories of the family, the more I realised that they often did not focus on the family as a unit or cell at all but rather upon the institutions which hedged it – marriage, divorce, inheritance – or the roles played by individuals within families: wives, husbands, mothers, fathers, children, siblings, or of attitudes to these same subjects. Some such histories were nigh on indistinguishable from histories of women. Having written this book, I am more than usually sympathetic with the authors of these studies but also more and more convinced that we now need to focus on the family rather than upon its constituent members.

I started by reflecting on what is meant by ‘family’ today and whether this can or should be seen as having any relevance for the world that we have lost. Today most of us live in families but we only occasionally attempt to define what the family is and what it means to us and in our society. The ‘family’ may seem an institution common to all in our society, with features which are, for example, class specific; yet I dare say that as much separates my family from all the rest in our immediate neighbourhood as unites us. If a family is often perceived as a microcosm of a ‘state’ then there are many more variants on family than there are on state.

'Family' is also one of those concepts which seems to unite our world with an earlier world but which, on closer inspection, proves not to do so in a straightforward fashion. Indeed, contemporaries find it almost impossible to agree on the nature of the family in today's world. The transferability of the modern concept to the past is fraught with dangers. Certainly the people of the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries used the term, but what they meant by it often seems very foreign to modern developed societies. The term 'family' was used to describe the household or domestic economy, the co-resident members of the biological family, and the wider group of non-resident kin. Also there is a separation, not always clear-cut, between theories of the family and attempts to shape the family, on the one hand, and the form and behaviour of actual families. I comforted myself with the knowledge that today, also, we use the same word to cover a variety of meanings and shades of meaning. Constraints of space permitting, I resolved to try to make it clear in which sense I am using the word 'family' at any particular time and, where possible, to use the word 'household' when I am referring, in an economic context, to co-resident members of a domestic group which included non-kin members.

Why a comparative perspective? Historians use comparison and contrast in the course of their work in a perfectly natural and unreflective way as a descriptive, explanatory and analytical tool. Such comparisons tend to be casual and unsystematic. Some assumptions, however, have an underlying comparative import and dimension which demands, but rarely receives, further attention. One of these of direct relevance here is the assumption that the 'family' is in some sense a reflection of or response to the 'economy' and/or the polity prevailing. If this is indeed true then it would seem to follow that similar economies and/or polities should display similar families. Is it true that, as the nations of the world pass through different phases of economic development, the form of the family and the nature of family life show very similar characteristics? That is, that all 'traditional' economies, 'market economies' or 'competitive capitalist' economies, whenever and wherever they occur, produce the same family forms. Conversely, can it be shown that families in the countries studied are never comparable on a purely chronological scale unless their economies or polities are comparable? For example, can it be

demonstrated that the families of England, France and North America were not comparable in, say, 1820? Then again, does the family merely replicate the state? And, if so, are all the families in one state extremely similar? Historians have argued that the family in England, France and early America was, like the state, a monarchy. It was characterised, to a greater or lesser extent, by patriarchal relations. If this was indeed the case, then is it not strange that this period saw civil war and revolution in all three societies? The call to obedience was not uniformly answered.¹

The emphasis of this book is upon the English family. It is possible, of course, to use a comparative approach within such a national framework. To some extent, this strategy is followed here. I compare the family of the seventeenth century with that of the nineteenth; that of the town with that of the country; that of the middling sort with that of the poor, that of the widow with that of the married couple. Such comparisons and contrasts come naturally and they help to show what is distinctive about the family experience for each type. Typology is important. International comparisons are similarly helpful. Whereas one might be tempted, if we concentrate exclusively on England, to see features of the family as wholly English, comparison can often prove the lie. Who knows England, who only England knows?

One of the criticisms of comparative history, systematically pursued, must be that it tends to underline those aspects which are comparable at the expense of those which are not. These other features might be equally important as tools of analysis. It may well be that the family, while responsive to economic, political, religious or social forces, is yet never a simple reflection, replication or response to any of them. The historian should attempt to generalise about the development of the family within the scheme of historical change. Where appropriate, bold comparison and contrast both between societies and between economies over time and space must be used. But the historian should also strive to show what makes the development of the family in each society and at each time distinctive.

Above all, reducing everything to the level of absurdity should be avoided. We all know, if we think about it, that the experiences of families in early modern Britain, France, and North America were very different one from another and, equally, that living in a family in industrialised America was different from living in a

family in early industrial Britain – these differences can be simply ignored if we make statements such as ‘all early modern families displayed similar membership and structures’ or ‘the family was a reflection of the factory system’. The history of the family must be, to some extent, a history of the economy in which the family exists. The family is a unit which is demonstrably responsive to economic forms and to economic change. But it must be something more than this.

Why Britain, France and America? It early became clear that to broaden the basis of the comparison would obscure rather than clarify the issues which I wished to tackle. The countries chosen allow for both comparison and contrast in all aspects of their history – they are neither so similar nor so different as to make the exercise futile. All began as largely agrarian economies. All have trodden the path towards becoming competitive capitalist economies with a large industrial base. All have had chequered political histories. There was some real interaction between the three at political, socio-economic, religious and cultural levels. Yet all three had distinctive cultural, political and socio-economic histories and traditions. It is true that more comparisons could have been drawn by including Spain, Portugal, Scandinavia, Russia, Germany, Austria and other parts of central Europe. This would have been at the price, I think, of ‘hopping around’ and removing a firm basis for coherent comparison. It is left for others to expand upon what I have said here in these other geographical, economic and political contexts.

Until quite recently scholars have been afraid to study the history of personal relationships. To chart the changing structure and composition of households was one thing, to attempt a history of family relationships another. The major contribution of women’s history should be acknowledged here. Historians of women have made the history of personal relations not only respectable but essential for any understanding of the past. Those scholars, like Lawrence Stone, Edward Shorter and Philippe Aries, who have picked up the gauntlet in a more general context, have been attacked by others for producing overly schematised chronologies of change in human relationships. Yet our understanding of the world that we have lost has been much enriched by their endeavours. We should not be deterred by the difficulty of the enterprise from attempting to understand the interplay between

the desire for harmonious and satisfying human relationships in the past and the accepted mechanisms and structures of everyday life. We do not diminish the importance of ideology by recognising that agencies and institutions such as church, state and local community did not have uninterrupted access to the domestic circle. And this was not merely because people were not necessarily exposed to this teaching through reading or oral communication. It is as important that we understand how the family protected itself and defined itself within the state or church as well as how it acted for the state or church.

Personal relations in this book, however, is not shorthand for power relations. It is unfortunate that the dirigist approach has been so largely employed. If we examine the family experience in the early modern period we see how important harmonious relations were to the individuals who made up the family and indeed to the family itself. There was undoubtedly a tension between the way in which external agencies wished to use the household, and especially the head of the household, and the manner in which members of the family wished to use their family. We need to recognise this tension for what it was and determine to what extent it was a productive tension for the family as an institution and for its members. After all, the family was not simply a passive recipient of society's ideas, and it was within the family that individuals defined themselves. If we rest content with a discussion of the 'oppression' of women and girls within marriage and the family we will not progress very far. Families developed their own distinctive ethos which surrounded and influenced the development of individual identity. The sources reveal that wives and female children were seen as component parts of a body. While the head was important, it could scarcely function as a body without its members. And each member had important roles to play – valued roles, which often had repercussions in the wider world. The 'caring' nature and roles of the adult woman, for example, or the religious and moral sensibilities of women, nurtured in the family experience, were developed by women themselves in their lives outside the family. We may regard this definition as restrictive, but perhaps the family definition of the capacities and roles of an adult male was also, in its own way, limiting.² How these family roles were played in particular families varied enormously even within one society at one time. The family was a powerful agent in society and as such

should be viewed as an independent variable, alongside class, education, religion, and gender. It did not act alone and the historian must identify the areas of interaction.

The book which follows has an unashamedly unorthodox plan. The book is divided into five long chapters, each of which treats extremely important issues involved in arriving at a coherent history of the family, and provides provocative material for both seminar discussion and future research. Two of these are avowedly methodological. Is historical demography an adequate substitute for a history of the family? Can we discover what societies wished the family to be? Two others seek to describe and analyse the family forms of the period 1500–1800 in England, France and North America and to ascertain in what senses these forms were either distinctive or comparable. These chapters also attempt to illuminate the importance of ‘family’ for individuals, communities and groups within these societies, and implicitly to identify the conflict which existed variously between theory and practice and between the external and internal functions of the family. There is some consideration of the implications of this argument for the history of the ‘middle-class’ family in the modern period. The final chapter seeks to pinpoint the poor working-class family, both as a target for state and social reformers and as a feature which acted to bind together the working class. The brief conclusion draws together some of the main statements of the book and suggests where discussion and research should go from here.

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