EDITED BY JAN HANSEN, JOCHEN HUNG, JAROSLAV IRA,
JUDIT KLEMENT, SYLVAIN LESAGE, JUAN LUIS SIMAL, AND
ANDREW TOMPKINS

THE EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE

A Multi-Perspective History of Modern Europe, 1500-2000

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2.3.1 Household and Family in Early Modern History (ca. 1500–1800)

Sarah Carmichael and Xenia von Tippelskirch

Introduction

Since Aristotle, there has been a thread of thought which maintains that the way parents and children, as well as husbands and wives, relate to each other forms a subconscious model for political systems, serving as the template for how the individual relates to authority. Whether one subscribes to this view or not, everyday life and the organisation of society at the family and household levels are clearly fundamental to how European societies have functioned over time. Yet such topics were for a long time neglected by historians, who focused narrowly on economic and political developments or who relegated them to the field of women's history, which they treated as separate and non-essential. When it comes to our historical understanding of family and household, a lot of what people presume is true of the past is based either on the behaviour of elites, on portrayals in literature, or on ideologically framed, older research. For instance, the idea persists that historically, girls across Europe married universally and usually in their teens, or that large family groups were the norm for all societies. Many of these assumptions, however, do not stand up to scrutiny.

Examining the setup of care duties often associated with female roles in society (childbearing and -rearing, housekeeping etc.) can help us understand developments in a given period, not just for women themselves but for societies as a whole. In this sub-chapter we sketch the most important characteristics of family and household in early modern Europe, drawing out temporal and geographical distinctions where necessary. The origin of these regional differences is debated, with some historians arguing that differences in legal systems, inheritance regimes, or agrarian practices (such as the presence or absence of certain types of plough technology) are at the bottom of these

differences. It is in any case important to differentiate between rural and urban settings and between the conditions of high nobility and peasants. Furthermore, the distinction between family and household also differs between contexts. Sometimes all individuals living together in domestic groups will be related by blood but in other situations there may be many additions to the basic domestic unit in the form of lodgers, servants, apprentices, and so on. Historians have tended to find it easier to research domestic residential groups (i.e., households) than kinship networks.

The structure of this chapter follows that of the life course, running from birth (including infanticide), children and childhood, marriage, households and servants, to old age and death (including inheritance regimes). Finally, we will focus on how early modern houses were furnished and on the role of property during one's lifetime and after one's death.

Childbirth and Childhood

Childbirth and childhood were highly risky periods for those born in the early modern period. But during this period important changes also took place in how both were dealt with and both topics have stimulated wide-ranging research on various subjects associated with infancy. The focus on birth has allowed social historians (especially since the 1970s) to reconstruct the particular position that women occupied in early modern families, to question the role of legitimacy and how transmission of heritage was managed. Investigations of the history of childbirth have also given us insight into the anatomical and medical knowledge of the period. In this context, religious dimensions proved to be very important: the questions of when a foetus was actually alive and the fate of children who died unbaptised occupied contemporaries intensely. Early modern mortality rates for mothers and newborns were extremely high, with roughly twenty-seven precent of infants not living to see their first birthday (and about half didn't make it to adulthood), and four to five births out of every thousand leading to the death of the mother. (Taking into account that mothers in this period were likely to have multiple children, the risk for any given mother was therefore much higher.) Thus, births were accompanied by religious and magical rituals by which contemporaries hoped to achieve a fortuitous birth. Once the child was born, efforts were made to baptise it as quickly as possible in order to integrate it into the community of believers.

Throughout the early modern period children were born at home with the help of midwives, who mostly passed on their knowledge orally. We know of the practices that characterised midwifery thanks to the regulations of territorial authorities, but also through some medical literature—Eucharius Rösslin's *Der Rosengarten* (*The Rose Garden*), an illustrated text from 1513 that

circulated widely throughout the sixteenth century in Latin, English, French, and Italian translations. From the seventeenth century onwards, we also have treatises written by midwives. The French royal midwife Louise Bourgeois (1563–1636) was the first woman to publish about her art; the handbook of the court midwife Justine Siegemund (1636–1705) from Lower Silesia enjoyed particular success. In her richly illustrated book, which she compiled on the basis of her readings and her own practical experience, she primarily addressed other midwives she wanted to teach. Siegemund shows how assistance could be given during birth. Another famous treatise by the Parisian midwife Angélique Marguerite Le Boursier du Coudray (first published in 1759) even had coloured plates in its second edition (1777). The rarity of such colour illustrations proves that it was a very popular text, for which such expensive additions were seen as worthwhile. These works reveal how midwives dealt with difficult births, but also which instruments and manual techniques they used, how they performed emergency baptisms and, more generally, the ways in which the unborn were imagined.

At the end of the eighteenth century, responsibilities shifted: midwives were no longer chosen by childbearing women as before, but instead had to pass examinations organised by (male) physicians. The first lying-in hospitals were established during the eighteenth century. If one compares the situation in Europe, then clear differences become visible. For example, the university-affiliated lying-in hospital (Accouchierhaus) established in Göttingen in 1751 served primarily to train male obstetricians. Lying-in hospitals in Catholic countries existed in part to offer unmarried women the possibility to preserve their honour. In Milan (since 1780) and Paris (Office des Accouchées of the Hôtel-Dieu, founded in 1378 but with vastly greater influence in the latter half of the eighteenth century), they were directly connected to foundling homes. In England, however, hospitals such as the Lying-in Hospital for Married Women (established in London in 1749) accepted only poor married women and existed thanks to philanthropic organisations. Throughout Europe, at the beginning of this process of medicalisation, the risk of infection (childbed fever) in these clinics was extremely high, so that better-off women preferred to give birth at home until the nineteenth century. In some regions, newborns were systematically given to wet nurses. In Tuscany, sometimes fathers-to-be were involved in discussions about the choice of wet nurse, demonstrating that the task of caring for newborns was not an exclusively female one.

With the increasing regulation and institutionalisation of marriages in the course of the Reformation and Catholic reform, pregnancy outside marriage became a real problem. Until well into the sixteenth century, a marriage vow and consummation of the marriage had been sufficient to declare a marriage legally valid. However, in subsequent decades ecclesiastical authorities

increasingly required marriages to take place before a priest and in the presence of witnesses. At the same time, they stigmatised extramarital sexual intercourse. Unmarried women who were pregnant affirmed their good faith and honourable status in church courts, hoping to obtain marriage and recognition for their children. They were not always successful. Sometimes the social pressure was so great that they saw no other way out than to get rid of the unwanted newborn.

Unlike in many other parts of the world, not much evidence has been found for sex-selective infanticide or child abandonment in early modern Europe. The Constitutio Criminalis Carolina (1532) defined infanticide as a crime, ordered torture for questioning suspects, and threatened the death penalty. Those who had deprived still unbaptised children of the possibility of salvation were to be punished severely. Thus, in the area of the Holy Roman Empire, the rules for dealing with child murderers were clearly defined. Research has found different patterns in dealing with suspected child murderers. Proceedings were not always initiated at all, as the evidence was often difficult to produce. There also seem to have been marked differences between urban and rural and Catholic and Protestant areas. At the end of the eighteenth century, there was an increasing number of voices arguing for awareness of the impact of social pressures on single women from the lower classes and thus for a reduction of the penalty.

Childhood was a concept of growing importance in early modern Europe, though historians differ in how they assess it. Some have argued that modern childhood emerged in the transition from the Middle Ages to the early modern period or that the sentiment of motherly love was 'invented' in the seventeenth century, while others point to later changes during the Victorian era. No matter what position one takes, it is clear that something indeed changed in the understanding of childhood over the course of the early modern period. Children started to gain a status of their own, no longer seen merely as tiny adults but increasingly as innocents in need of protection from the adult world (particularly from the world of work). Education thus took on increasing importance. Early childhood education was a family affair in this period, especially for girls from the lower classes, who were educated within the framework of their families. But this period also saw a steady increase in schooling, often provided by the church. Many middle-class boys and even some girls were sent to school around age six, certainly in Britain but also in other parts of Europe. Apprentices and periods of servitude long remained a normal part of childhood, with the guild system creating opportunities for parents to outsource the housing and education of their children to a skilled master. Communal institutions also emphasised the importance of charity and education for abandoned children, trying to keep boys out of gangs and girls

out of prostitution. Orphanages were introduced in various regions partly in order to reduce infanticide—the baby hatches or foundling wheels found in many churches during the medieval and early modern periods bear testimony to that.

The Adult World and the Household

In early modern Europe, key stages of adult life were defined by marriage, work, old age, and death, each of which had an impact on the organisation of the household as an institution. Much of the historical work on marriage in early modern Europe revolves around proving or disproving the claims of John Hajnal. Hajnal was a mathematician who, in 1965, identified a geographic line running through Europe from Trieste to St Petersburg which seemed to separate Europe into two marriage systems: one in the east, where marriage was universal, where women married young to partners substantially older than themselves, and another system in the west, in which at least ten precent of people remained unmarried, while women married around the age of twenty-three to men who were, on average, two and a half years older. This contrast between the two halves of Europe has been much critiqued, but a picture has emerged which confirms that, at least for England and the Netherlands, marriage ages were (and remain) high for both men and women. However, the debate around this topic has demonstrated that rather than a strict line of division across the continent, it might be more accurate to talk of a gradient, with Central Europe representing an intermediate case where marriage ages were lower than in the west but higher than in the east. We therefore see, roughly speaking, marriage ages of twenty-four and above (often substantially so) for both men and women in north-western Europe, between twenty and twenty-four for women in Central and Southern Europe, and under twenty for women in many parts of Eastern Europe, though the male age at marriage is often substantially higher in these regions.

In a period where contraception methods were unreliable and sex outside of marriage was frowned upon (though pre-marital sex did occur, and frequently), marriage ages had a direct effect on the number of children women bear. Relatively close ages of spouses have been linked to a more consensual, equitable type of relationship. Studies of present-day couples show that in regions where the age gap between husband and wife is large, with husbands much older than their brides, this leads to more exposure to domestic violence, less investment in children's (particularly girls') schooling and less say in important decisions such as the distribution of expenditure on health care.

One factor which may explain higher marriage ages in north-western Europe is the fact that couples, upon getting married, were expected to establish their

own households. This meant that time was needed to train, work and save enough to do so. While households in Eastern Europe consisted largely of family members related by blood, west of the so-called 'Hajnal line', live-in servants and lodgers frequently extended the otherwise 'nuclear family' (i.e. a married couple and their children). These servants were often (although not always) young employees working for wages. This system led to a life-cycle in which a period of service was the norm in north-west Europe, as opposed to the situation in Eastern Europe. At almost all levels of society, families in north-west Europe sent their adolescent children out of their households to work as servants or apprentices, to board near a teacher or school, or to perform service for royalty. This mobility was notable to visitors from further afield. Life-cycle service died out with the shift from pre-industrial to industrialised production techniques, which was detrimental to the position of women, as they no longer had access to labour markets in which to gain skills and earn wages.

In addition to pointing out the significance of marriage patterns, research has been conducted on the legal and confessional dimensions of marriage. Very often, religious conversion was a precondition to marriage. The existence of denominationally mixed marriages demonstrates how fluid confessional identities could be in the early modern context. Dowries had to be negotiated in each case, but economic considerations were not the only connection between spouses. In cases of domestic violence or other marital conflict, divorce was only possible in Protestant countries. In Catholic areas, it was sometimes possible to obtain a dispensation on proof of an unconsummated marriage or to demand separation from table and bed before a church court. The petitions and testimonies required in the context of investigations and court trials provide insights into what early modern people had to say about their everyday married life. What often emerges is that those living in the early modern period had a lot more "agency" than we might sometimes assume, and that particularly women petitioned courts to uphold promises of marriage where they had not been fulfilled and they were left literally holding the baby.

An important feature of how the life-cycles of households were arranged is what happened after death. Although life expectancy at birth for the early modern period sat at around thirty to thirty-five years of age, most individuals who survived infancy could expect to live much longer—perhaps to around the age of sixty. This also meant that some degree of old age care provision was often necessary. In the Netherlands, early forms of retirement homes emerged where elderly couples could pay in advance for care. In many other parts of Europe, care by family members remained the norm. These patterns of what different generations do for each other and how they live together have long historical roots, with ramifications right through to the present day. In Spain and Italy, for example, even the state provision of old age care today is heavily

influenced by the idea that it is your children who care for you once you are no longer able to do so. Households in north-western Europe were frequently extended by live-in servants, or lodgers who provided commercialised care or the money with which to buy care.

Households of course exist not only as a set of relationships but also as tangible, material spaces. Historians like Raffaella Sarti have demonstrated the significance of objects in the context of early modern households. Young couples needed to procure the material conditions of living together, with basic necessities including a bed and a fireplace. The early modern period also witnessed a growing demand for luxury goods such as the wave of goods that became available through colonial trading networks, with spices and textiles from Asia arriving in the European market. This contributed to the so-called "industrious revolution", a shift in which households devoted more time to employment and less to leisure in order to afford luxuries. Tied in with this, the putting-out system—subcontracting manufacturing tasks to remote workers—meant that manufacturers across Western Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries could tap into a large labour supply available in rural households. The ability to produce goods for manufacturers at home while combining this with agrarian work meant that rural households could increase monetary incomes. As a result, early modern urban households became further embedded in a monetary system and the market, both in terms of production and consumption.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that household and family arrangements across Europe differed greatly across the continent, including distinct east/west variants associated with marriage patterns. These differences are debated but also had a significant impact on how societies operated. It is often argued that those from regions where networks were based on extended family ties put trust in the extended family over market-based relationships, whereas in a nuclear family setting individuals perhaps engaged more actively with the marketplace and put more trust in anonymous transactions, thereby fostering the rise of individualism and capitalism. Households and families are therefore key to our understanding of many other important historical processes. They also help to explain the emergence or persistence of disparities across the continent. Smaller nuclear households in north-west Europe provided less of a safety net to fall back on when times were hard. These 'weaker' family ties can also be linked to the development of forms of collective action (i.e. where people work together to improve their lot and to achieve a common goal)

such as guilds, commons, and other collaborative forms that were based on common interests rather than family ties.

Discussion questions

1. In which ways was childhood in early modern Europe different and how was it similar to today?

2. How did family and marriage differ across Europe?

3. In which ways did religion shape family relations in early modern Europe?

4. What was the role of sexual relations in early modern families, and in which ways is this different to today?

Suggested reading

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