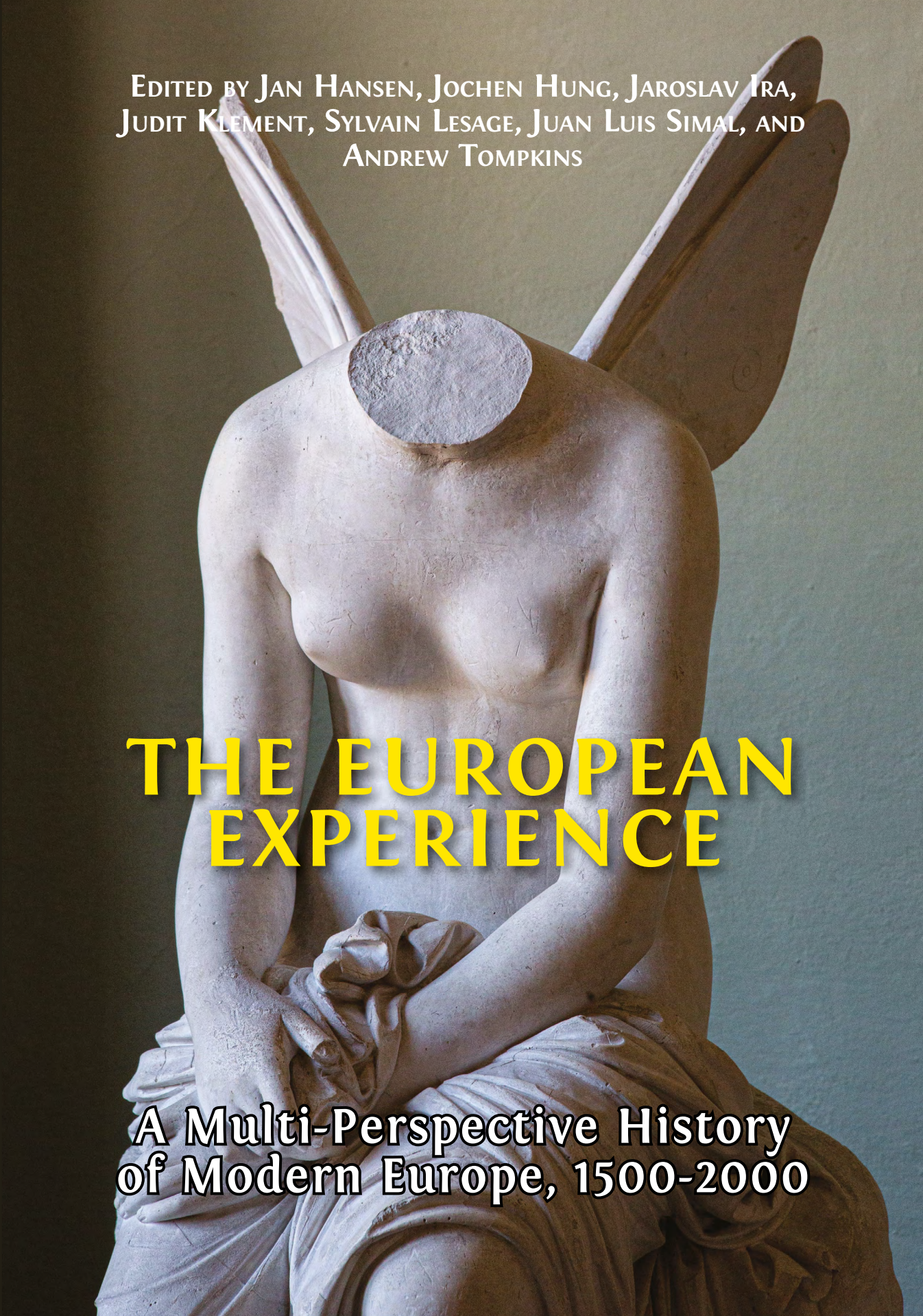
Edited by Jan Hansen, Jochen Hung, Jaroslav Ira, Judit Klement, Sylvain Lesage, Juan Luis Simal, and Andrew Tompkins



The European Experience

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

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2.3.2 Household and Family in Modern History (ca. 1800–1900)

Sarah Carmichael, Darina Martykánová, Mónika Mátay, and Julia Moses

Introduction

Improvements in agriculture and the industrial revolution had a profound effect on European societies, not just economically but also in the way that households and families were organised, largely through its impact on the way that people earned their incomes. The timing of the increase in agricultural productivity and the industrial revolution differed across the continent. Its impact was shaped by the pre-existing forms of household and family organisation and by the political context. However, the establishment of a system whereby income for a large part of the population was earned by working in mining, industrial establishments and services had a number of significant consequences for the family and household. First, it meant that household work in cottage industries began to decline, as work was increasingly undertaken outside the home. Second, and relatedly, larger family and kinship networks were no longer regarded as necessary for contributing to household industries, and individuals began to seek work elsewhere, including far from home. Finally, the shift to industrial work meant that labour increasingly came to be seen as something performed by male family 'breadwinners', even if the important contributions of women and child workers continued.

These developments, of course, varied dramatically across Europe and even within individual countries. For this reason, among others, historians and social scientists have debated whether there has been a single model of the 'European family'. Some have debated over divisions between north-western Europe and the rest of the continent. Others have pointed out specifically Eastern European or Southern European family models in which agriculture and intergenerational families played a greater role into the early twentieth

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century—though even in these regions, nuclear families (based on a mother, father and their children) were the most common pattern in cities. The idea of a European family model has also been questioned by scholars who have argued that households based on the nuclear family were not necessarily the norm in the past, despite popular memory. Indeed, a number of scholars have highlighted the role of single mothers and patchwork families during this period, not least because of spousal abandonment and widowhood in an era of high mortality and difficult divorce laws.

Nonetheless, despite these variations within the history of the family and household, there were several common trends during this period, including the predominance of patriarchy—the rule of the father, which determined the legal status of women and children as well as how households were generally governed. Moreover, in this era of mass migration and imperial expansion, frequent encounters with 'others' of various kinds helped to solidify certain ideas about what families and households should look like in particular countries or societies.

This chapter draws attention to several facets of these issues, including the vast socioeconomic and legal changes affecting marriage and the family, as well as cultural redefinitions of the family and the often moralising discourses surrounding sexuality, which likewise shaped the household and the family in modern Europe.

Fig. 1: A Swedish family with their five children in 1898, Public Domain, Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Swedish_family_1898.jpg.

Changing Economic and Legal Frameworks

The industrial revolution, which took hold at different times in different countries, had profound effects on how households functioned. Both the guild system and the 'putting-out' system were replaced almost wholesale by factory production. The rise of factory production and wage labour meant that, where previously households had operated as units of production, goods were now increasingly manufactured outside the home. This meant that remuneration for paid labour became increasingly important as households became ever less self-sufficient. At the same time, an ideal model of family organisation emerged among upper-middle-class families whereby men should earn the sole income to support the household, with women focused on creating a domestic sphere. This so-called male breadwinner model persists to the present day, but its origins are to be found in the time of industrialisation, when wages that had previously been paid to a household were increasingly paid to individuals. However, this was only ever an ideal. In reality, particularly in poorer households, women and children did a lot of work both in and outside the home. And of course, a male breadwinner household could only exist if the male of the household was alive and present. For many households, death and disappearance, travel for work or conscription to fight in wars led to men's absence, leaving women and children to make do as best they could. In many European countries, such as Spain, Portugal or France, the concept of the man as an exclusive breadwinner did not become hegemonic in the nineteenth century, and men welcomed their wives and single daughters bringing complementary income home—so long as men remained by law the supreme authority (*chef de famille*, *cabeza de familia*) in the household.

Parallel to the advance of industrialisation across much of Western Europe, there emerged another significant development: the rise of the modern state. In the late eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century, states around Europe began to develop modern bureaucracies, new tax systems and comprehensive legal codes which enabled them to know more about the families that lived within them. These developments also enabled states to shape families in new ways, largely as a result of the shift in power over daily affairs from religious institutions to governmental ones.

This transformation could be seen, first of all, in the domain of family law, which became a distinct area of jurisprudence from the eighteenth century and began to outline how to deal with areas such as marriage, inheritance, adoption, and divorce. The emergence of new civil codes in the wake of the French Revolution and various subsequent revolutions over the nineteenth century also brought about clear rules on matters pertaining to the household and family. For example, the Prussian Civil Code of 1794 declared the purpose

of marriage as mutual support, both financial and procreative. Just a few years later, in 1804, the French Civil Code, which had been introduced in the Napoleonic backlash against the French Revolution, marked a return to more conservative rules on marriage and the family after various revolutionary-era experiments that had included rights to civil marriage and divorce, as well as women's rights within marriage.

These legal developments were a watershed in the relationship of the family (and household more generally) with the states in which they resided. To be sure, the family had previously been subject to some governmental regulations and was certainly subjected to church rules on a wide variety of matters, from incest to marriage and its collapse. Throughout much of European history, marriage had been seen as a sacrament, a sacred ritual within Christianity that bestowed divine grace. As such, various church edicts in the medieval and early modern period allowed people to marry as long as they chose to do so freely, and as long as they married in front of witnesses who could testify to the new union. The marriage contract was effectively between the couple and God, not between the families of the marrying couple or as an act before the state. The advent of new Protestant traditions in the early modern period meant that, at least for Protestants, marriage was no longer seen as a sacrament, but it was still upheld as something special and worthy of protection.

New legislation that took off with the French Revolution was therefore a radical change, as were the reforms instituted by various civil codes afterwards. One of the most significant changes was the introduction of compulsory civil marriage, which meant that individuals needed to marry through the state—at state registry offices or with judges—rather than through the church, even if they chose to marry in the church afterwards. In countries that adopted laws on civil marriage, the only marriages that were valid were those registered with the state. The civil marriage movement took off across much of Europe over the course of the long nineteenth century, for example, in France (1792), Prussia (1794) and as an option in England in 1836, and its roots could also be seen in earlier attempts to separate matters of church and state, such as Austria's 1783 Marriage Patent.

Alongside marriage, divorce and marital separation shifted to the centre of debates about changing policies on the family in nineteenth-century Europe. Under Catholicism, separation 'from bed and board' was allowed in cases of marital breakdown, but not divorce. Protestants allowed divorce, but rules varied widely, with some more restrictive than others. Against this backdrop, different states gradually introduced laws on divorce and these varied, for example, with allowances only in case of spousal abuse, abandonment or adultery. Rules on divorce also varied within countries, depending on how unified their legal systems were. For example, in Germany, divorce was easier to obtain within predominantly Protestant Prussia than within predominantly

Catholic Bavaria. In Austria and in the Ottoman Empire, the laws on divorce and separation were determined by one's religion. In any case, even where divorce laws existed, as in Britain after a key reform in 1857 (the Matrimonial Causes Act), it remained expensive and legally difficult to end a marriage, meaning that marriages that did break down often did so under the radar.

Although marriage and divorce, as well as other aspects of family law, came increasingly within the remit of the state over the course of the nineteenth century, the impact of the law within the household was limited. Ideas about the rule of the husband and father, and of parents more generally, meant that the law often turned a blind eye to abuse, whether physical, emotional or financial. For example, the English social reformer Caroline Norton's husband took custody of her three children and barred her from seeing them after she left him in 1836. It was his legal right to retain custody, though she campaigned and eventually succeeded in the enactment of the Infant Custody Bill in 1839, which allowed mothers to keep their children. Divorces like Norton's moreover reveal the double standard applied to husbands and wives: whereas the laws of many European countries allowed husbands to divorce on grounds of adultery alone, women were usually required to prove not only adultery but some other forms of abuse as well such as living bigamously or committing incest.

Fig. 2: Emma Fergusson, Watercolour sketch of Caroline Norton (1860), CC 4.0, Public Domain, Wikimedia, Stephencdickson, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Watercolour_sketch_of_Caroline_Norton_by_Emma_Fergusson_1860,_National_Portrait_Gallery_of_Scotland.jpg.

Uneven power relations in the household also meant that financial decisions, the holding of marital property, and decisions about children were usually in the hands of husbands and fathers. The concerted efforts of various individuals like Norton, the Swedish reformer Ellen Key and the German reformer Helene Stocker, as well as women's rights groups like the Belgian League for the Rights of Women (1893) and the German League for the Protection of Mothers (1904), meant that many of these practices of patriarchy came into question or were reformed. In the name of 'maternalism'—defined by historian Ann Taylor Allen as "the exaltation of motherhood as the woman citizen's most important right and duty"—married women rallied together to call for rights to manage their own finances, to choose whether or not to work, and to have a say, for example, in the education of their children.

Emotional, Cultural and Moral Dynamics

Changing patterns of family relations affected the expectations that people had of different family members. While the presence of servants continued to be the norm in well-off European families throughout the nineteenth century (with demand in the cities met by massive female migration from rural areas), the definition of family began to narrow in scope, to the ties of blood and affection; service, meanwhile, was redefined with an increasing stress on economic, contractual aspects, particularly in the case of male servants. European societies came to perceive a manifest emotional preference for one of the children (mostly, but not always, the oldest son) as unjust and undesirable, while the stress on gender differences among children did not diminish, but rather grew due to a growing emphasis on formal education for boys. More intense care became expected from mothers, who were now supposed to oversee their children's care, upbringing and education. Previously, these tasks had often been performed by nannies, older siblings, or elderly female relatives, while the poorer mothers worked and the wealthier ones socialised. Indeed in many countries, from Spain and Austria-Hungary to the Ottoman Empire, supporters of women's education stressed the requirements of motherhood to defend their stance. Childrearing, however, was not their only argument: the ideal of companionship in marriage was another key point.

Even in the countries where polygamy existed, the ideal of marriage came to revolve around the notion of a couple that married for love and a woman who submitted—of her own free will and not because of the law—to her husband's authority and guidance. Novels, poems, operas and plays helped spread this idea and render it desirable to people in Europe and far beyond. Young men became critics of sexual segregation and forced or arranged marriages, and defended the education of women not only from a political,

philosophical, or patriotic stance, but also because they learnt to expect and long for a companion in their wife. While this new ideal of marriage insisted on emotional and intellectual intimacy and joint activities, it continued to be a hierarchical one, with the husband in charge of supervising and guiding the wife. The gendered division of tasks between the couple often increased, as productive and political activities moved from households to public spaces.

Political discourses heavily shaped attitudes to the family as well: particularly in the regions where stateless nationalist movements, like the Basque or the Czech ones, emerged, the home was not to be an apolitical haven, but a place of patriotic education and sociability. Moreover, pro-natalist discourses and policies strove to actively shape family size and lifestyles as well as opinions and legislation on the suitable age for marriage, the upbringing of the children and parenting. Not only public institutions intervened in this debate, but also legal and medical professionals, charities, social movements (such as feminism), and political movements and parties.

Historical research, especially the critical views of twentieth-century theorists like Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, has challenged previous assumptions about nineteenth-century sexual behaviour, such as the notion that the Victorians were extremely prudish and repressed their sexual desires. Foucault refused the so-called 'repressive hypothesis' that the nineteenth-century was asexual and that sex was not even mentioned in public. In fact, he suggested that just the opposite was the case: sexual behaviour was widely discussed in legal, medical, and religious texts.

Behind the proliferation of discourse on issues related to sex and sexual attitudes, one can identify new social developments all over Europe. One of the most important factors in social change was the immense growth of the urban population. The resulting social mixing meant not only a statistical increase in population size, but also the emergence of new relations, novel urban social figures, and identities. As cultural historian Judith Walkowitz explored in her treatise on the narratives of sexual danger in Victorian London, the big city—the metropolis—was constructed in contemporary literary texts as a "seductive labyrinth", a powerful and dark monster. Contemporaries referred to the metropolis as a modern Babylon, where many lives were broken and where young men and women were trapped.

Although we have no idea of the exact numbers, prostitution—or, as it was labelled by contemporaries, the 'Great Social Evil'—grew radically within European urban environments. In the nineteenth century prostitution in its various forms was considered one of the major social problems. Politicians, doctors, journalists, and other intellectuals were preoccupied with the figure of the prostitute, her role in the spread of the dangerous venereal disease syphilis, and the moral threat that prostitutes supposedly embodied for

European societies. The prostitute, the 'fallen woman', undermined the moral well-being of the middle class and the 'nation'. She thus represented the opposite of the contemporary female ideal of the 'innocent virgin' and of values such as chastity and grace.

In the nineteenth century, the word 'prostitution' referred not only to women who sold their bodies for sexual services (as the term is used today) but was also used to describe women who lived with men outside of marriage, or who gave birth to 'illegitimate' children. Moreover, only men were considered to experience sexual pleasure, while women who maintained a relationship for their own delight and happiness earned a bad reputation for themselves. Various forms of prostitution existed, including serving in brothels, streetwalking, or being a 'kept woman'. Authorities constantly monitored prostitutes and prosecuted illegal forms of prostitution. As the case of prostitution shows, differences between urban and rural areas as well as between social classes were decisive for how differences of gender played out in the sexual culture of the nineteenth century.

Conclusion

The nineteenth century stands out as a period of major transformations in family dynamics. First and foremost, households ceased to be the main centres of production. A symbolic separation between public and private spaces took place, situating household and family firmly in the latter, while political and productive activities shifted to outside of the household. At the same time, family became a truly public issue, as revolutionaries, social reformers, and moralists from across the political spectrum argued that the state of the family was intrinsically linked to the state of the nation. Furthermore, the rise of the individual as a cornerstone of modern subjectivity led to a redefinition of the ideal family. According to most nineteenth-century Europeans, the authority of the father and the husband was to be preserved and exercised—but it should be based on love and persuasion, not on violence or the threat of it. In any case, adult sons were to be respected as fully autonomous individuals who could decide freely on their marriage and profession. The notion of marriage, in particular, shifted towards a union of feelings, in which the wife submitted to the husband's leadership and loving guidance—though the law took care to reaffirm male authority within the couple. Nonetheless, the nineteenth century also witnessed more dramatic ruptures within the hierarchical family and the development of ideas about equalitarian marriage, free love, and alternative spaces for child-rearing. At the same time, public authorities and civil society intervened ever more frequently into family life, with justifications ranging

from the well-being of helpless children to the social responsibility of fathers and mothers.

Discussion questions

1. In which ways did family life differ between rural and urban communities in nineteenth-century Europe?
2. "People nowadays are much more liberated regarding sexual relations than people in the past." Based on this text, do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
3. How has the status of mothers changed since the nineteenth century?

Suggested reading

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