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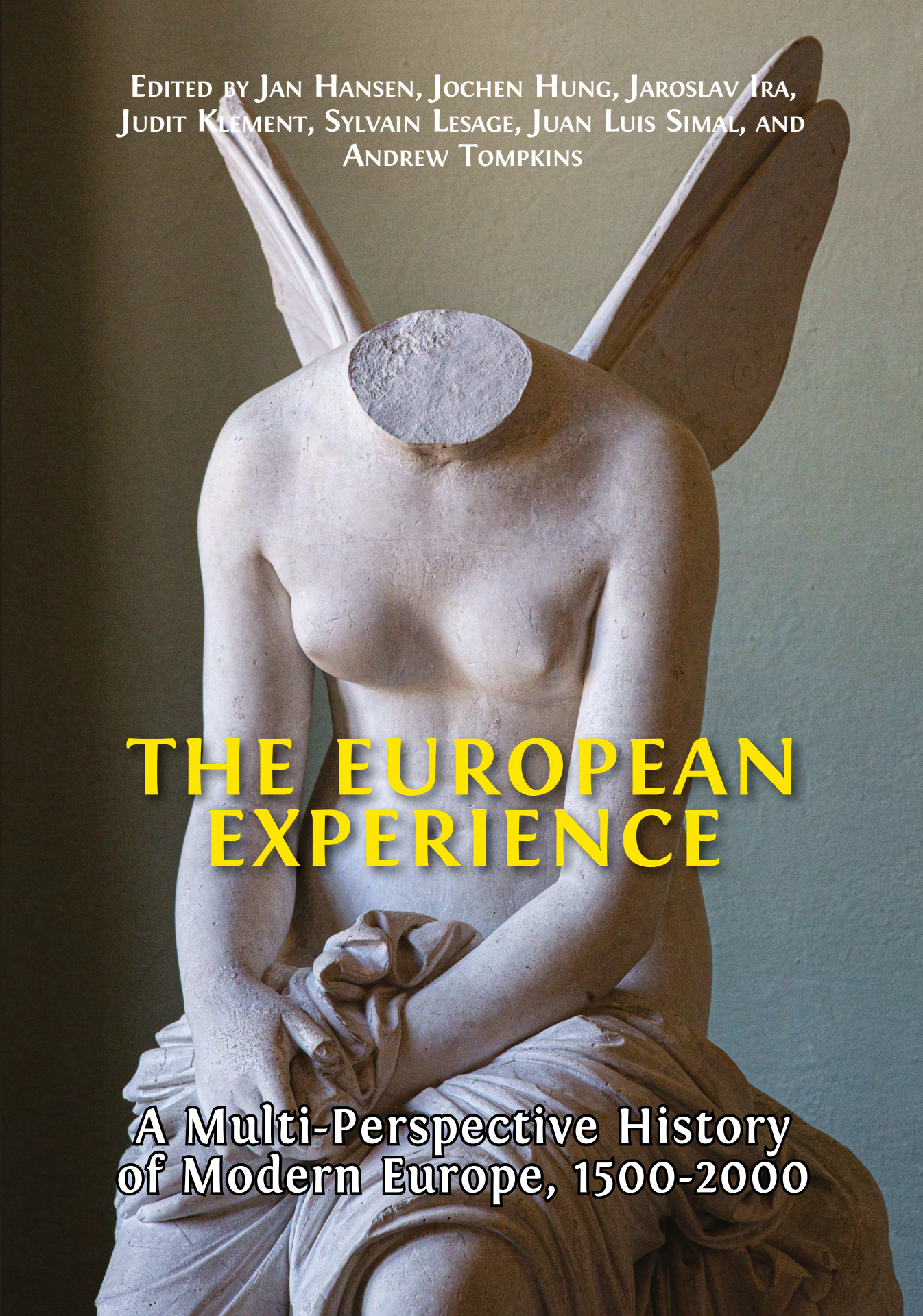

The European Experience

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

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Jan Hansen, Jochen Hung, Jaroslav Ira, Judit Klement, Sylvain Lesage, Juan Luis Simal and Andrew Tompkins (eds), *The European Experience: A Multi-Perspective History of Modern Europe*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2023, https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0323

Digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0323#resources

This book is one of the outcomes of the Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership "Teaching European History in the 21st Century", which ran from 2019-2022 and was funded by the European Commission under the Erasmus+ Key Action 2 (Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices).

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80064-870-8
ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80064-871-5
ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80064-872-2
ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 978-1-80064-873-9
ISBN Digital ebook (azw3): 978-1-80064-874-6
ISBN XML: 978-1-80064-875-3
ISBN HTML: 978-1-80064-876-0
DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0323

Cover image: Wilhelm Gunkel, *Fly Angel Fly* (2019). Cover design by Katy Saunders

6.4.2 Generations and Lifecycles in Modern History (ca. 1800–1900)

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Introduction

Lifecycles, intergenerational relations and forms of familial conviviality dramatically changed in nineteenth-century Europe. A wide array of societal changes played into this transformation. The Code Napoleon and the various national forms of civil law succeeding it codified and thus (re-)defined familial and marital relations as well as questions of inheritance and family life. The industrial revolution and subsequent urbanisation drew more and more families from the countryside into the cities. These families adapted to their new surroundings and work, and in so doing changed the way their members lived and worked together. Innovations in medicine, food, and sanitation raised life expectancy and therefore prolonged lifecycles. Moreover, in the late nineteenth century the introduction of the welfare state, especially old age pensions, and the expansion of primary education created phases in the lifecycle in which Europeans were either not yet allowed to enter working life and thus contribute to their family's income, or in which it was no longer necessary for them to work.

Generations

To understand what generations are, it is of utmost importance to first clarify the function of family. According to the interpretation of historical anthropological literature, the traditional family is a closed group of people living together, established by marriage (sexual relations), based on lineage, socially recognised and tailored, having separate legal status, and segregated assets—all with the ultimate aim of creating offspring and ensuring the continuation of these conditions for their upbringing. Thus, families had diverse tasks, including

 https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0323.74

sexual, weed- and species-maintenance, and educational functions, but in terms of their historical importance, the protective, emotional, cultural, and religious functions of the family have been decisive for centuries. Generations were typically related to each other, although the particular relationship varied depending on the family's composition. The small family, i.e. the cohabiting couple and their child(ren), was composed of two generations. The stem family was typically made up of parents and married sons, or even married daughters. Large families were groups of families belonging to the same kinship, in some places living on a plot of land, under one roof—composed of several generations, typically three or even five.

Fig. 1: Several generations of a German family working, living, cooking and sleeping in one room (ca. 1900), Public Domain, Wikimedia, https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:Familie_um_1900.jpg.

Forms of cohabitation in Europe show territorial differences. While small families were predominant in Western Europe, in Central and Eastern Europe many patterns of cohabitation were displayed. These patterns could sometimes change dynamically. The *zadruga*, which operated in the Southern Slavic regions, was a large and close form of cohabitation: the family often numbered between sixty and eighty people, living in one house or in several houses built on the same plot. A much smaller but still tight-knit unit was the large family that was present in some parts of Hungary. In this case, the married couple lived under the same roof as their children, the parents of either half of the couple, and often with one of the brothers, who perhaps even had a wife and children of their own. However, from the beginning of the nineteenth century, especially after the death of the old parents, this pattern of cohabitation began

to wither slowly—a process triggered by complex economic and cultural conditions. More specifically, the farming system had since the last third of the eighteenth century been transformed. Consequently, tax was levied on individuals rather than on villages and families. This made the economic community more and more superfluous. Alongside this process, the *zadrugas* were abolished by law during the last decades of the nineteenth century. The intention behind this move was to make propriety relations more transparent and individualised. The results of the resolutions were rather weak.

The cohabitation of multiple generations was also dictated by the order of succession. In addition to the universal order of Roman law, the legal folklore of inheritance also prevailed. In traditional places, heirs held to the instructions of an oral will as much as those of a written one, especially if the former was confirmed by local customs. In some regions of Hungary, inhabited by communities accustomed to German legal institutions, it was common practice for a son, usually the oldest, to inherit the land (herd inheritance), while the others mastered craftsmanship with the financial support of their father. In that case, the son who had inherited the land stayed together with his family and with his parents, but his siblings eventually moved out of the household. In the wake of Napoleon's conquests, the Code Civil impacted the various legal regimes to different degrees. In contrast to the earlier regimes, the Code Civil made inheritance by equal share commonplace in Europe. This new practice, typically among those with less wealth, involved the fragmentation of the land. If there was no possibility of emigration, equal inheritance was not only economically damaging, but also a regular source of strife among the brothers. Another option was a practice documented from the end of the eighteenth century, wherein one of the married sons or daughters (with her spouse to support her) entered into a contract with their parents to inherit the parental wealth. Other siblings would receive a small amount of compensation, but they were exempt from the burden of parenting.

Industrialisation and Families

One of the main drivers of the historical change in lifecycles, generational relations and family structures was industrialisation, which went hand-in-hand with urbanisation. Growing cities with lively industrial and service sectors drew in more and more Europeans from rural areas. In Germany for example, sixty-four percent of people lived in communities with less than 2,000 inhabitants in 1871. By 1910 this number had decreased to about forty percent. In that time, the number of German cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants increased from eight, accounting for five percent of the overall population, to forty-eight cities, accounting for twenty-one percent. Living in urban areas

and working in industrial or service jobs forced families to change the ways they lived and worked together, as well as how individual family members related to each other.

Strictly regimented industrial and clerical work in specialised factory or office spaces dissolved the old mode of family cohabitation, in which the family's house was an economic as well as private space. It transformed the familial living space into a purely or mostly private sphere, creating a spatial distinction unknown or uncommon in pre-modern Europe. Urban families adapted to that separation in different ways. Among the urban middle classes, this differentiation of space re-enforced the model of a nuclear family with a male breadwinner, a housewife, and their children. It furthermore strengthened the patriarchal power of the father, since family life was mostly built around the needs of the breadwinner. In these urban middle-class families, the private home became a sphere of retreat and recreation away from work. Although urban working-class families also experienced the separation of the economic and the domestic spheres, their experience was of a very different sort. To finance their livelihoods and pay their rent, working-class families usually lived as extended families in rather crowded apartments. Often, they had to take in lodgers, non-family members living in the same apartment for a certain sum of money. In these working-class families, the women and sometimes even children were often part of the workforce too, making family life much less centred around a single person. Due to the harsher conditions and longer working hours of working-class jobs, working-class living spaces were not regularly used for recreation from work. This situation was barely comparable with the middle-class lifestyle of the nuclear family. Yet skilled workers on the brink of moving up into the middle classes often strove to imitate the nuclear family model with a sole male breadwinner.

Urbanisation also changed the space in which families lived together. The quick influx of mostly low-income, newly urban families firstly caused a rise in mortality. During early industrialisation, mortality rates in urban areas were often significantly higher than in rural areas, mostly due to overcrowding, harsh working conditions, and especially to a lack of public sanitation and clean water, which led to infectious diseases such as cholera and typhoid fever. This made it quickly apparent to urban authorities and social reformers that newly industrial cities had to be carefully planned. Aside from sanitation and public health, that also included the ways families were housed. Whereas the aforementioned rural forms of familial conviviality could vary greatly across Europe, most industrial towns chose a model in which a family lived together in one flat, which they rented, situated within an apartment building consisting of several flats. However, there still were great differences from today's one-family apartments. While today one family within an apartment consists of two generations, in the nineteenth century it was more often three.

Furthermore, nineteenth-century families tended to have more children than today's norm. Familial living spaces were much more crowded and multiple people would have to share one room. Lastly, unlike today, many flats did not have their own sanitary facilities. The apartment building instead had common facilities, in a space shared by multiple families. The United Kingdom remained a notable exception to the apartment model, which still today dominates most urban areas of Europe. There, working-class families were predominantly housed in single-family houses, which remain ubiquitous today in Britain's old industrial cities.

Although early industrialisation and urbanisation initially raised mortality, this effect eventually waned and gave way to increased populations and prolonged lifecycles, with mortality rates strongly reduced all over Europe. The mass production of canned and shelf-staple foods, now relatively cheap, enabled Europeans to consume a healthier and more varied diet with improved nutritional values. This was further supported by cheap, industrial, yet nutritious products such as meat extracts and especially by advancements in medicine, public health measures, and improvements to public sanitation. These trends led to Europeans growing older, backed by the invention of vaccinations and the emergence of bacteriology. More and more infants born to European families now lived to see childhood and adulthood. Of course, the decline of infant mortality varied greatly across Europe and even regionally within European countries. A few examples; from 1800 to 1900 the number of deaths per 1,000 live births dropped from 200 to 100 in Sweden, while England and Wales saw a slower decrease from about 150 in 1840 to 125 in 1880, before registering an increase to the previous level by 1900, followed by a sharp decline. In Austria, infant mortality decreased from just over 300 in the 1830s to around 200 in 1900.

The demographic transition that the European continent was undergoing at the time did not just lead to a rejuvenation of the population. Better health conditions also led to the ageing of populations, albeit unevenly distributed in Europe. At the end of the eighteenth century, only one in five French people reached their sixtieth birthday, but by the beginning of the twentieth century more than one in two would live to see it.

Old age was not only distributed geographically. It also became, more than ever in the nineteenth century, a matter of social class. The promise of deserved rest after work was slow to be fulfilled for working-class populations. Although mutual aid funds, which included old-age allowances, developed during the nineteenth century, many indigent old people still depended on public charity or that of religious orders. In France, assistance became a recognised right for the elderly and the disabled in 1905. but it still had to be earned. In the hospices that replaced the general hospital, the elderly were housed in vast dormitories, forced to work, required to respect strict schedules, and to behave

appropriately on pain of punishment. Above all, however, the nineteenth century is marked by the new role of childhood as a social grouping.

The Welfare State and Primary Education and Its Effect on the Lifecycle

The link between education on the one hand, and childhood and youth on the other is not a modern phenomenon. Nonetheless, since the eighteenth century this relationship has become far more structured, diversified, and institutionalised. The intervention of public authorities has played a key role in this process. In the early modern era, municipalities and religious authorities (Christian, Jewish, and Muslim) had often catered for the basic instruction of young children, boys and girls, whose parents could not afford a private tutor, and talented youths of modest means were spotted and sent to study at institutions of higher learning, together with the sons of well-off families. In the late eighteenth century, ruling elites took an active approach in promoting education, convinced as they were of the benefits that an educated population would have for the wealth and might of the realm. This Enlightenment belief in the usefulness of education permeated both Catholic and Protestant countries, although there were important differences in the priorities of rulers and in the ways this creed manifested in institutions. For example, Catholic Austria, an absolutist monarchy, implemented mandatory education under the Empress Maria Theresa in 1775, while Catholic Spain, a constitutional monarchy with a decades-long liberal parliamentary tradition, did not do so until 1857. Revolutionary and imperial France set the example of a systematic approach to all levels of education, understanding the school not only as a sort of factory producing patriots, but also as the cornerstone of a meritocratic selection of national elites. Not all countries were willing to follow this model and a great diversity of public and private institutions has remained the norm, rather than the exception. But it is undeniable that a state-supervised, three-stage model of education gradually became the norm in Europe, while the mandatory period in school has tended to expand to mid-teen age. Public investment in education has become a substantial part of a country's budget.

The stress on education had a great impact on the lives of children and young people, increasing the hours they spent in school and reducing their participation in labour which, salaried or not, became not only more complicated, but also less desirable for school pupils. Poorer families had to learn how to get by without contributions from their children, sometimes on the promise of eventual social ascension as a result their child's studies. The stress on education as key to the prosperity—or indeed the survival—of a country or an ethnic group sometimes led to arguments in favour of women's emancipation, as in the case of the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey.

However, the notion of childhood as a critical period of human development—when intensive moral, patriotic, and scientific education was supposed to take place for the child's sake, as well as society's—generally steepened the requirements of parental involvement, particularly by mothers. While elite couples continued to leave their children with hired women of poorer origins or, particularly in Great Britain, sent them off to boarding schools before they reached puberty, a model of intensive motherhood appealed to all social classes, compounding the division between the figures of the father as the breadwinner and the mother as the caregiver and educator.

The democratisation of access to secondary and, to a much lesser extent, higher education often increased the gender gap between siblings, as the families tended to follow gender, rather than academic criteria, when choosing which child to support through their studies, anticipating that the future respectable professional would, in turn, financially support his parents and unmarried sisters. However, middle- and upper-class women soon understood that the overall emphasis on education and the introduction of meritocratic procedures made their exclusion from higher education hard to sustain. While in some countries this led to a rapid conquest by women of some of the high-status professions (on this front, for decades, the communist countries stood out), in most of capitalist Europe it was a slow process and many women who had received secondary or even higher education became homemakers after marrying a man with a similar or higher level of studies.

Overall, a structured, institutionalised education has come to mark the early lives of all people in Europe and far beyond. Firstly, it demarcated between an age of carefree play and the age of academic learning, a frontier that has become more blurred with the growing focus on 'academic' (as opposed to play-based) learning in childcare, before mandatory schooling begins. It has also created a strong sense of belonging to very specific age groups—a specific year group, even. Education has made youth last longer and, in some cases, has impacted family dynamics, such that going to university now means leaving home. While there are important regional differences concerning the relationship between education and family-generational dynamics, it is remarkable how many of the above-mentioned trends are transnational, despite education being one of the most important areas of intervention for each country's government since the nineteenth century.

Conclusion

The nineteenth century was a period of profound change for family structures. The reshaping of the legal systems inaugurated by the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Code redefined family relations and inheritance, and ultimately affected family structure. But perhaps the most powerful force in

the transformation of family structures was the transformation of European economies through industrialisation. By displacing populations and redefining occupations, industrialisation profoundly reshaped social roles within families. At the same time, European elites developed a new family model, which gradually spread to the middle classes. Centred around the nuclear family, this model ascribed a new importance to childhood, which was placed at the centre of attention. It was only in the twentieth century that this model gradually spread to all strata of European society.

Discussion questions

1. Describe the differences between family structures in Eastern and Western Europe in the nineteenth century. Do you think these still have an influence today? Why or why not?
2. What was the impact of industrialisation on the family in nineteenth-century Europe?
3. Describe how the idea of motherhood changed in the nineteenth century. Does this still influence our society today?

Suggested reading

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