

ARLAND THORNTON

Reading History Sideways: The Fallacy and Enduring Impact of the Developmental Paradigm on Family Life

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In the early 1960s, Peter Laslett discovered a seventeenth-century listing of the inhabitants of the village of Clayworth, Nottinghamshire. In that listing, only one in ten of the households included kin other than parents and children—a statistic that was virtually identical for England and Wales as a whole in 1961. The implication was clear: the idea that in England industrialization caused a shift from extended to nuclear families was simply a myth. For the next two decades, Laslett and his followers elaborated on the Clayworth finding, stressing again and again just how wrong the myth was.

But how did the myth come about in the first place? When Daniel Scott Smith (1993) addressed this question, he concluded that the theory of a shift from extended to nuclear families was never more than a minor theme of social science theory; most of the myth, Smith argued, was constructed by the myth-bashers themselves. When I wrote about the issue a year later, I argued that it was not really a myth at all. A substantial shift from stem families to nuclear families actually took place during and after the industrial revolution, but the crude household-level measures employed by the first generation of family historians failed to detect the change (Ruggles 1994).

Arland Thornton takes another look at the problem. Although he addresses several aspects of family change, the motivation for the book is to explain how the social theorists who preceded Laslett could possibly have gotten things so wrong. What were the origins of the myth of the extended family?

According to Thornton, Northwest European scholars from the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries derived a theory of historical family change by comparing the norms in the society around them with those of others they encountered, such as Eastern Europeans, Native Americans, and Asians. Then, reading history “sideways,” they incorrectly inferred that Northwest Europe must have resembled those societies at some point in the past. This theory of family change evolved into a powerful dogma Thornton calls the “developmental paradigm.” Indeed, Thornton argues, the developmental paradigm is such a compelling myth that it has profoundly influenced familial *behavior* worldwide. People started living in nuclear families, behaving individualistically, marrying late, and giving rights to women because they believed the myth and felt that these behaviors and beliefs represent modernity.

For many years, Thornton has been persuasively arguing for an independent role for culture in demographic and family change. His new book usefully warns that using cross-sectional analysis to infer process may produce misleading conclusions. The new book, however, goes much farther than that: Thornton is also arguing that an incorrect social theory that scholars developed hundreds of years ago is now a key influence on social behavior throughout the world.

Thornton subscribes to a strong version of the theory of European exceptionalism: from time immemorial, he argues, the Western family was nuclear and individualistic, with early marriage and high status for women. The reason the de-

velopmental paradigm is incorrect, according to Thornton, is that Europe did not become special at some time in the past; rather, he maintains, Europe was special all along. An equally static interpretation also characterizes Thornton's rendering of intellectual history. He does not attempt to trace the history of ideas across time; for him, the developmental paradigm emerged full-blown in the eighteenth century and remained essentially unchanged until it was demolished by Peter Laslett and Alan Macfarlane in the 1960s.

The evidence presented is scanty. Much of the book relies on Thornton's reading of great thinkers of the European past: Montesquieu, Adam Smith, Hegel, Engels, Hume, Durkheim, Malthus, Westermarck, and so on, along with a few less famous writers. But Thornton never quotes his sources. His method is to make big generalizations and then at the end of the paragraph to cite a long list of primary sources. He writes, for example:

The conceptual apparatus of the developmental paradigm and the reading history sideways methodology provided a ready framework for the scholars of the 1700s through the early 1900s to interpret developmentally the differences they observed across societies. With this framework they transformed the geographic differences that they observed into a series of developmental sequences of changes in family patterns. (pp. 61–62)

The footnote at the end of this paragraph is representative of the references throughout the book; it tells the reader to "see" a list of 16 books by 14 eighteenth- and nineteenth-century authorities, with no page numbers and no indication of which source said what. Did each of these authors explicitly use the reading history sideways methodology to infer a sequence of changes in family patterns? Or did some of them merely contribute to the reading history sideways method? The only way the reader can find out is to read each of the tomes from cover to cover.

In some cases, the documentation is even weaker. Later on the same page, Thornton makes key generalizations with no citations at all:

...the family scholarship of the 1700s through the early 1900s...suggested that, in the Northwest European past, societies were overwhelmingly organized around family and kinship relations, that they were familistic rather than individualistic, that they were relatively undifferentiated (i.e., contained few nonfamily institutions), and that they were characterized by a household structure that was extended rather than nuclear. (p. 62)

Like much of Thornton's intellectual history, the language used in this paragraph is highly anachronistic. There was no "family scholarship" three centuries ago, and social science concepts such as familistic, individualistic, undifferentiated, extended, and nuclear did not exist.

The argument is unpersuasive. Smith concluded that the myth of a transition from extended to nuclear families was largely the creation of those who refuted it. After meticulously tracing the history of these ideas, Smith found only a few mid-twentieth-century sociological works—and nothing significant earlier—that discuss a shift to nuclear families with industrialization. Thornton seeks to overturn Smith's interpretation, arguing that it ignores an influential and coherent intellectual movement that spanned three centuries. In the absence of concrete evidence

to support this revision, however, it is doubtful whether Thornton will convince many intellectual historians.

It is even harder to make a persuasive case that hundreds of years later this elusive set of ideas is a major influence on the family behavior of millions of people in the developing world. Thornton argues that people around the world imitate European family patterns and individualistic behavior because they believe the developmental myth that Europe, like themselves, once had extended families, early marriage, and so on. If the world's people knew that Europe was actually exceptional from the outset, Thornton implies, they would maintain more of their traditional family patterns and values. Few social scientists of any sort will be convinced by this interpretation.

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References

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