

Reading History Backwards

a comment on Thornton's *Reading History Sideways*

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The argument

1. In the 1700s to the 1900s, “consensus of scholars”, reading history sideways adopted a set of myths about historical change in the family

They thought that Europe from the 1700s to 1900s was characterized nuclear families, individualism, and late marriage, and high status for women

They thought that at some time before the 1700s European society had been organized around families, and had lots of extended families, early marriage, and low status for women

The argument

2. In the 1960s and 1970s, scholars (especially Peter Laslett and Alan Macfarlane) showed this to be wrong:

The nuclear family, individualism, late marriage, and late marriage existed in Northwest Europe from time immemorial. There was no change, so that the consensus of scholars was a myth.

The argument

3. These mistaken theories of family change and the rise of individualism “have been an overwhelming force for family change” and “became the engine for social, economic, and familial changes.”

Throughout the world people starting living in nuclear families, marrying late, being individualistic, and giving rights to women mainly because they bought into the myth and felt these things were modern.

All three points are unsupported.

There was no scholarly consensus about a great family transition among scholars writing before the mid-19th century (or more likely, early 20th century)

A great family transition did actually take place, starting after 1850 in the U.S. but perhaps earlier in the industrializing parts of Europe

Therefore, theories of family change appearing after 1850 were probably based mainly on observation rather than reading history sideways.

The claim:

“The family scholarship of the 1700s to 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 . . . and that they were characterized by a household structure that was extended rather than nuclear.”

(p. 62)

Why I was skeptical

There was no such thing as “family scholarship” before 1850.

These kinds of concepts—familistic vs. individualistic, extended family vs. nuclear—come from a later era; I felt attributing them to authors in the 18th century must be reading history backwards, anachronistically imputing ideas to people.

Thornton's Evidence for the Big Consensus

- There are big generalizations, usually many to a paragraph
- There are no quotes whatsoever from primary sources
- Many generalization have no citations
- When citations do appear, they look like this:

Typical Thornton Citation

Alexander [1779] 1995; Condorcet [1795] n.d.;
Engels [1884] 1971; Ferguson [1767] 1980; Hegel
[1837] 1878; Hume [1742] 1825; Le Play [1855–
1881] 1982; Maine [1861] 1888; Malthus [1803]
1986; Mill [1859–1869] 1989; Millar [1771] 1979;
Montesquieu [1721] 1973, [1748] 1997; L. Morgan
[1877] 1985; Robertson 1783; Smith [1762–1763]
1978; Westermarck [1891] 1894

This is not sufficient

- Specific points are not tied to specific evidence; after several paragraphs with many huge generalizations that rewrite the history of social thought, we get one big citation that doesn't even have page numbers.
- This is a dramatic revision of intellectual history, but there is no attempt whatsoever to trace the ideas from one author to the next.

Why I don't believe it

- The language Thornton uses when ascribing theories to 18th century writers is highly anachronistic
- It seems implausible that these writers had the exactly same interpretation as mid-twentieth century sociologists
- I think it is much more likely that Arland is reading history backwards, reading between the lines to find modern ideas that these writers did not actually express.

At the reception after Arland's PAA presidential address, I expressed strong skepticism that anyone had talked about a shift in living arrangements before Le Play.

In the book, Arland now concedes that Frederic Le Play was the first to explicitly talk about this, in mid-19th c.

But Le Play cannot be used to support Arland's argument that there was a consensus of scholars who agreed that there had been a massive change in the family sometime before 1700.

Le Play was talking about changes that were occurring as he wrote, in the second half of the 19th century; in 1872 he wrote,

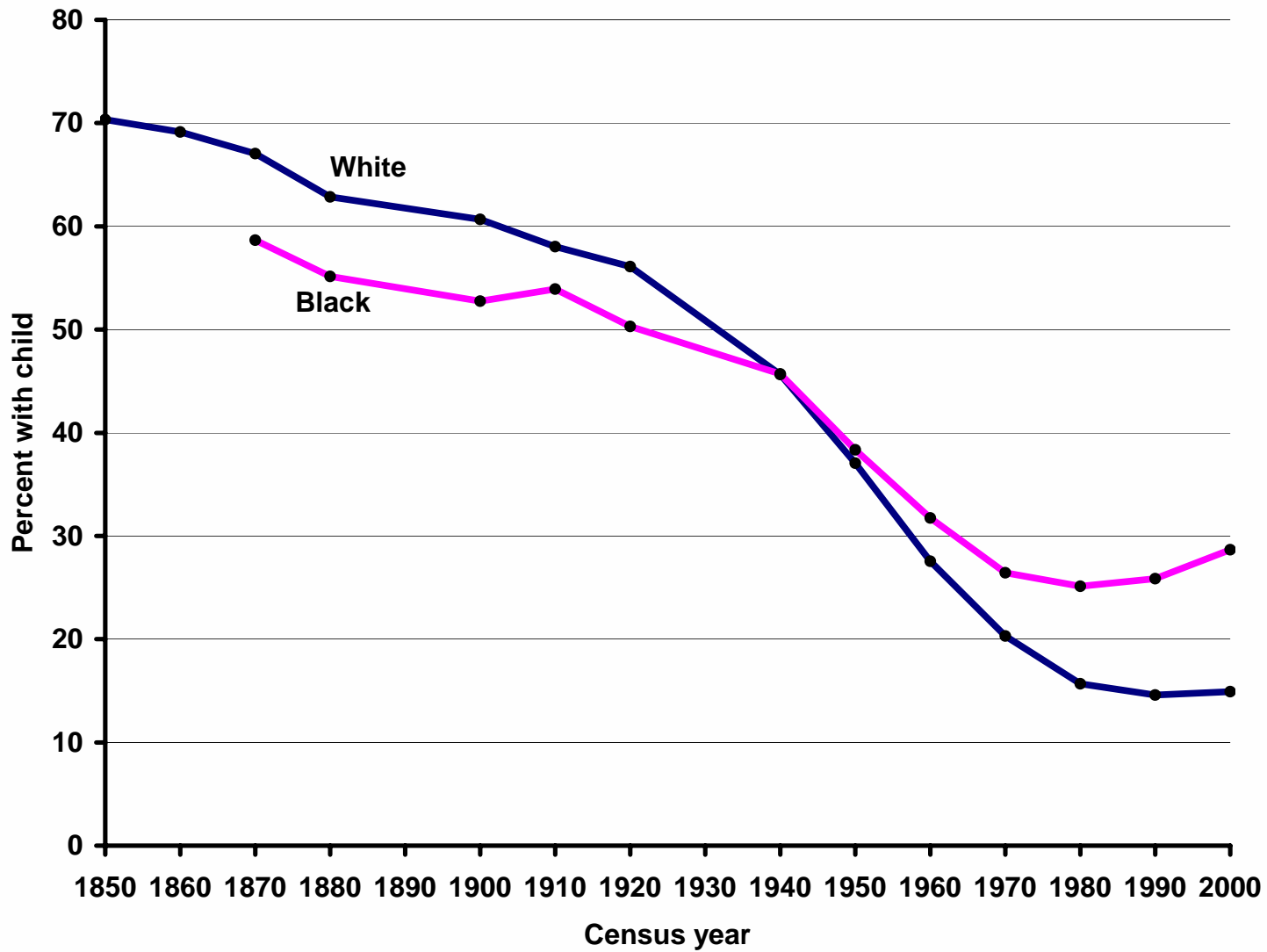
“the unstable family prevails today among the working class populations subject to the new manufacturing system of Western Europe. Moreover, this type of family is multiplying among the wealthier classes in France”

Clearly he is not talking about changes that took place 200 years earlier.

The new family Le Play was describing was one in which all the children left the parental home, leaving the elderly living all by themselves.

Le Play did not infer this change by comparing Europeans and non-Europeans: he could see the change taking place before his eyes.

Figure 1. Percent of elderly individuals and couples residing with own children, by race



Why it happened

In the old days, the old-age assistance problem was not so great so long as most people lived on farms, had big families, and at least some of the children stayed on the farm. It was customary when the old people got too old to do their share of the work they would stay on the farm and the sons or daughters would keep them there in the home. That pattern changed slowly but continuously from the early part of the century as more and more of the young, rural population left the farms. The three generation household (aged parents, children, and grandchildren), perfectly common 50 years ago, had begun to become very rare indeed. By the time people got old, the children had already left and gone to the city. There was no one to take care of them. Hence, an increase in the problem of the needy age.

-Thomas H. Eliot, Council for the Committee on Wage Security (1935)

Why it happened

Nelson A. Cruikshank, another early advocate of Social Security, explained that before the 1930s most people thought “all a family needed for a secure old age or to ride out a period of depression was a quarter section of good land and a couple of sons to help farm it, or even a couple of daughters through whom able-bodied sons-in-law might be acquired.”

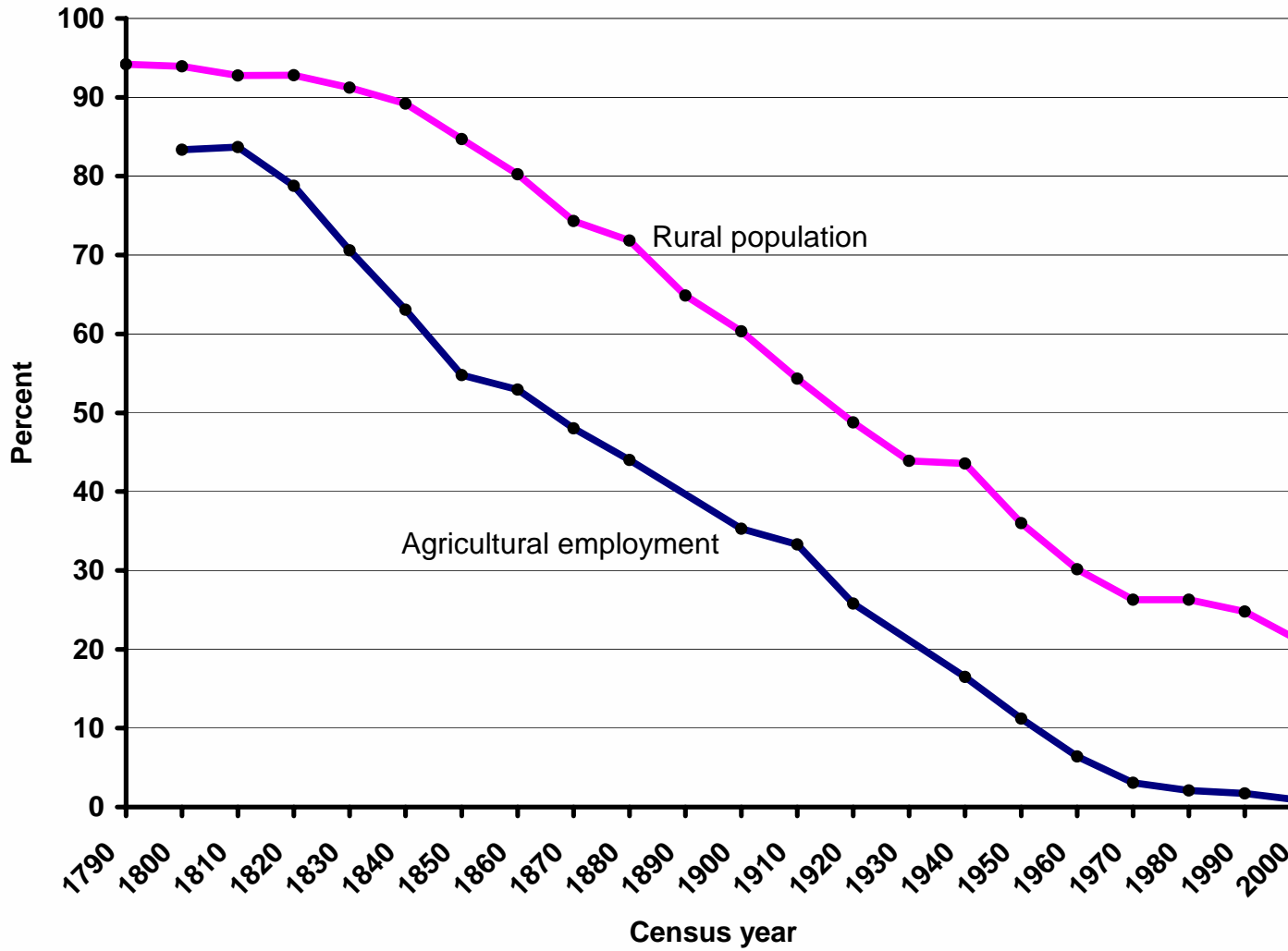
Why it happened

And Ewan Clague, who joined the Social Security Board in 1936, wrote that earlier in the century, “old people simply lived on the farm until they died ... consequently, the modern old-age problem hadn’t developed.”

Effect of the transformation of the economy

- With growth of jobs in large-scale commerce, manufacturing, transportation, incentives for coresidence disappeared
- Young men left the farm for the high wages, independence, and excitement of town life
- Fewer and fewer parents could offer the incentive of eventual inheritance to keep children home
- Without labor demands of the farm, fewer aged had reason to try to keep a child at home

Figure 3. Percent of population rural and percent of the labor force employed in agriculture, 1790-2000



Sources: Agricultural employment, 1790-1840, Lebergott; 1850-1950, IPUMS; Rural, U.S. Bureau of the Census

But what about the myth of the extended family?

“Steven Ruggles called the idea of extended families in the past *the extended family myth*, noting: ‘There are now few adherents to the myth that extended families predominated in the world we have lost.’”
(p.84)

So virtually one of the exceedingly rare quotations in the book is one from *me* in support of the thesis that households in Northwestern Europe have always been nuclear.

The quote is out of context

The central thesis of my book was that Laslett's findings are an artifact of bad measurement.

I concluded that “there was a marked preference for stem families in eighteenth-century England”, and an enormous shift in residential behavior after the late nineteenth century.

Other problems with Ruggles citations

Arland cites Ruggles (1987, 1994) to support the statement that

“Recent research confirms the nuclear/extended household contrast between Northwest Europe and other parts of the world.” (p. 51)

But I have never written about this.

Other problems with Ruggles citations

“Ruggles (1994) himself interpreted the strong correlation between education and living arrangements as representing the influence of ideational factors” (p. 176)

Ruggles (1994) reports no analysis of education, and the only mention of education is the statement that “As life chances were increasingly determined by education instead of inheritance, the incentives for grown children to remain in their parents’ households would have diminished” (p. 127).

The meaning here is very close to the opposite of Arland’s interpretation.

It is not important that Arland consistently misrepresents my work—that is an insignificant part of his argument.

But it casts serious doubt on his ability to interpret sources.

If he so completely misreads an article I wrote in 1994, why should we believe him when he cites 18th-century authorities to support his revisionist intellectual history, without providing a single quotation or page number.

- The most important analysis of the intellectual history of ideas about change in the family is Dan Smith's classic paper on the *Curious History of Theorizing on the Western Family*, in which he made the case that the idea a shift the Western Nuclear from extended to nuclear families was a straw man when it was blasted by Laslett and the other revisionists of the 1960s and 1970s.
- "The myth that industrialization transformed the family from extended to nuclear was largely a creation of those who refuted it" (342)
- By carefully tracing the intellectual antecedents of the idea, Smith persuasively argues that the idea of a shift was never more than a minor theme of a few sociologists, mostly concentrated in the period 1930s to the 1950s.

- Thornton dismisses Smith: “Smith shows no awareness that, using the developmental paradigm and the reading history sideways method, scholars of the 1700s through the early 1900s . . . came to believe that households in Northwest Europe had been transformed from extended ones to nuclear ones . . . Thus, this myth was created in the 1700s and 1800s, not in the 1900s.” (p. 97)

- No evidence is offered to support this, and it appears to directly contradict Thornton's earlier statement that Le Play was the first one to explicitly talk about a change.

- One can disagree with Dan's argument—as I have in the past—but it deserves to be taken seriously. After I read *Reading History Sideways*, I went back and re-read Dan's article.
- The contrast is dramatic. Dan's analysis is careful intellectual history, with a subtle analysis of the evolution of ideas, and with extensive evidence—mostly quotations—marshaled to back up every point.

Conclusions

- Arland is not persuasive in his revisionist argument about the history of social thought
- The minority of scholars who actually talked about changes in family structure were usually describing changes they had observed
- I find it implausible that these people had a significant impact on behavior either in the West or elsewhere in the world.