

Preliminary Draft¹

**Frederick Le Play, the Developmental Paradigm, Reading History Sideways,
and Family Myths**

by

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Frederick Le Play, the Developmental Paradigm, Reading History Sideways, and Family Myths

In 1969 the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure held an international conference on the comparative history of household and family. The major issue of the conference was household and family structure and size in the past. The conference participants considered a substantial body of data casting severe reservations toward the “assumption that in the past the household was universally large and complicated, and that historical progress has always been from big and complex to small and simple”. In fact, the conference apparently manifested “...a certain animus against ‘the myth of the extended family’...” (Laslett, 1974/1972:ix-x).

Frederick Le Play was undoubtedly not invited to the Cambridge conference since he had died in 1882. However, his ghost apparently attended the conference since his ideas and legacy dominated the book that reported the conference proceedings. Peter Laslett, editor of the conference volume, asserted that Le Play “...was, and perhaps still is, the strongest single influence on the historical study of the family” (Laslett, 1974/1972:16). In the preface and introduction to the volume, Laslett repeatedly referred to Le Play and his pivotal role in the establishment of the idea of extended families in the past. Laslett also discussed briefly data collected and reported by Le Play in his book The Workers of Europe. An implicit, if not explicit, theme of Laslett’s introductory essay is a sense of bewilderment about how Le Play, given his own data and the data assembled for the Cambridge conference, could have reached his conclusion about the historical transition from extended to nuclear families in Western societies.

Writing nearly two decades after this Cambridge Conference, Laslett (1987:271) displayed a sense of frustration about the inability of present-day historians to dispel the myth of extended families in the past. He wrote that it had been “...a relatively straightforward task to

expose the misconceptions,” yet misinformation about the past continued. “Hard as we have worked on these points in the last fifteen or twenty years,” Laslett complained, “some of the final consequences of Le Play’s having taken the wrong turning in the 1850s still remain.”

So who was this Frederick Le Play? Who was this man who dominated historical family scholarship for more than a century after his death? What theoretical assumptions and methods caused him to take a wrong turn and become the central architect of the myth that families had been extended in the past and had changed to nuclear as a result of the transition from a rural agricultural to an urban industrial society?

In researching Frederick Le Play I discovered one of the giants of social science history. Le Play began his career as a metallurgist and industrial engineer and later became interested in human behavior and family relations.² In the middle of the nineteenth century he carried out and reported in The Workers of Europe one of the most monumental and successful studies ever conducted in the social sciences. One of Le Play’s contributions in The Workers of Europe was a system for categorizing family types that still informs the work of family scholars today. A more important contribution was his description of the geographical distribution of family types in mid-nineteenth century Europe—a description that has been verified by a large battery of family research conducted in the second half of the twentieth century. As I argue later in this

² Le Play, who was born in Normandy in 1806 and died in 1882 in Paris, began his very successful career in the physical sciences and engineering. As Kellner (1972) wrote, “his life before 1855 would provide enough achievement to fill four life-long careers”. Among other things, he conducted and published research in mining, metallurgy, the steel industry, and industrial relations. He was a professor at the Ecole des Mines, sat on three governmental commissions, and managed a mining and industrial operation in Russia (Brooke, 1970).

From the beginning Le Play displayed a strong interest in the human side of mining and industrial operations (Brooke, 1970) and in human welfare more generally (Le Play, 1937/1879: 365-367). He also traveled extensively in his numerous roles as university professor, engineering researcher, government commissioner, and industrial manager, which undoubtedly increased his interest in the issues of social science. Le Play wrote that his social science apprentice was well advanced by 1843, from 1848 to 1855 his metallurgical career dwindled as he devoted more and more time to his social science work, and after the publication of his book in 1855, he devoted himself entirely to social science (Le Play, 1937/1879: 573-575).

paper, Le Play went wrong only when he utilized the developmental paradigm and reading history sideways to draw conclusions about social history and processes from his international comparative family data. That is, he used information from societies he believed to be less developed to proxy for the pasts of societies he perceived as more advanced.

Studying Families by Direct Observation

It is important to note that this metallurgist-turned-sociologist was committed to an empirical approach to the study of human affairs. He strongly believed that social science conclusions should be arrived at inductively through the observation of human experience rather than deductively through reliance on preconceived theoretical orientations.

He wrote that:

In scientific matters, only direct observation of facts can lead to rigorous conclusions and to their acceptance. This principle is acknowledged today in the physical sciences, but it is still unrecognized in social science. The practitioners of social science are generally inspired by preconceived idea... People imbued with such biases tend to disdain the facts and the conclusions which can be induced from them. Social science thus remains in a situation comparable to that of the physical sciences when they were based on the conceptions of astrology and alchemy; social science will not be established until it is founded on observation” (Le Play, 1982/1862:179).

So how did Le Play plan to advance social science beyond astrology and alchemy? It was through the direct observation of individuals and their families. Although Le Play directed a government statistical agency from 1830 to 1848, he was skeptical of the value of statistics in the description and understanding of society (Silver 1982). He believed that statistics were too isolated from the real world and could not provide reliable information concerning people. He wanted detailed and direct observations of individuals and their families rather than the second-hand data of statistics. Because of his distrust of statistics and his reliance on direct observation

of individuals and families, Le Play, unlike some other researchers in the 1800s, did not appear to use in his research the limited statistical data available (for a discussion of the use of statistics by Malthus and Westermarck, see Thornton 2005b, 2005c).

Although Le Play did not use standard sampling techniques, he was aware of the need to choose families carefully in order for them to represent the larger population. As he put it, “we proceed like the zoologist who applies the investigative techniques of anatomy and physiology to a few individuals in order to describe an entire species” (Le Play, 1982/1862:179-180). Families rather than individuals were chosen as the unit of analysis because of Le Play’s conviction that families were the true social building blocks of society.

In practice, Le Play followed a purposive strategy to select families—where individual families were chosen directly rather than through a random procedure. Le Play believed that he could choose average families in a particular area who could be representative of a larger group of families. As he put it: “In any social class, it is important to select a family native to the area and of nearly average conditions, that is, neither superior nor inferior to others in respect to its material situation or its morality” (Le Play 1982/1862, pages 180-181).

Le Play believed that in order for valid information to be collected from the families selected, the investigator needed two essential attributes. The first was “a sincere love of science, which leads one to seek the truth and record the facts with scrupulous accuracy” (Le Play 1982/1862, page 181). He believed that such scrupulous attention to truth and direct recording of observations could overcome any biases a person might bring to a research project. The second essential condition for accurate evaluation was the ability to gain the confidence of the family under observation. This confidence was necessary because Le Play’s method required extensive interaction between the investigator and the family studied.

Once the families were selected for study they were subjected to an intense and multifaceted data collection effort, what Le Play called the monographic method. Le Play suggested that the field worker should spend from eight days to a month with each family participating in the study (Higgs, 1890:423). During this time the investigator observed the family and the activities of its individual members. The field worker also conducted detailed semi-structured interviews with members of the household. Finally, the investigator collected information from people in the area who had known the family for an extensive period and who could provide additional information about the family (Le Play, 1982/1862:181-182).

An extensive amount of information was collected about each family during this intensive data collection period. Included within each family report were sections concerning: the physical, economic and demographic environment; family composition; religion; the family's means of existence; the work and other tasks performed by family members; food and meals; housing and household goods; family history, including school attendance; family customs; and family budgets, including both receipts and expenditures (Le Play 1982/1879:184-205; Brooke 1970:148).

A central feature of the Le Play story is that he was not content to study families living in and around Paris where he lived, but instead launched a truly comparative research effort involving fieldwork in much of Europe and beyond. Le Play's international fieldwork was facilitated by his arrangement with the School of Mines in Paris where he taught metallurgy. For Le Play's entire twenty-five years of teaching at the School of Mines (from 1830 to 1855), he taught during the winters, and in the six months of summer received a paid leave from the School to conduct field research on mining. These leaves gave him the opportunity to collect data from hundreds of families throughout Europe and parts of Asia (Silver 1982, pages 18-19; Le Play

1982/1879, page 139). His research took him to “England seven times, Germany almost as often, Russia and Italy thrice, Spain and the west of Asia twice” (Higgs 1890: 415). Le Play reported completing detailed studies of three hundred different families covering a wide range of European countries, including Austro-Hungary, Bulgaria, England, France, Germany, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and Switzerland³ (Brooke 1970: 146-153). Thirty-six of the most representative family reports were published in his 1855 book (Le Play, 1982/1855:239; Higgs, 1890: 415). His colleagues also collected information about other families as well.

Although there were clearly weaknesses in the methodology implemented by Le Play, it seems difficult to agree with Laslett (1974:18) that Le Play’s evidence was “incidental and superficial.” Instead, there can be little doubt that Le Play was a well-traveled and well-informed scholar who possessed an enormous amount of comparative information concerning European families of the mid 1800s.

A Typology of Families

The wide variety of families observed in Le Play’s research necessitated the formulation of a tripartite typology to assist in the organization and classification of the data collected. The three categories of the typology formed a continuum, with one end point defined by the patriarchal family and the other end point defined by the unstable family; stem families were in the middle. This tripartite typology, in various modified forms, still dominates the measurement and discussion of family and household structure and composition today.

³ Le Play wrote that “travel is to the science of societies, what chemical analysis is to mineralogy, what fieldwork is to botany, or, in general terms, what the observation of facts is to all the natural sciences” (Le Play quoted in Fletcher, 1969:53). In all, he was estimated to have traveled approximately two hundred thousand miles for his research, with much of it by foot (Farmer, 1954: 64). The fact that he spoke five languages facilitated both travel and the collection of information from families (Higgs, 1890:423).

Le Play reported that in the patriarchal family system direct descendants generally remained together, with married sons living with or near their parents. He said that when the families became too large, the households would divide. He also suggested that second generation family members would often continue to live together after the first generation head of the family died (Le Play, 1982/1855:263-264).

These patriarchal family groups lived under the authority of the parents. The property of the family remained undivided and the father directed the labor of the family and oversaw the distribution of the family's production. Le Play observed that any desire of the younger generation for independence was neutralized by economic considerations (Le Play, 1982/1872:259-260; Le Play 1937/1879: 442).

The unstable family in Le Play's typology is what we now know as the nuclear household. This family, according to Le Play, starts with the marriage of the husband and wife. The family expands as children are born, but then contracts again as these children leave the home. Finally, the family is dissolved when the parents die. Thus, this family is always nuclear in that it never contains multiple married couples. It is usually but not always small, as well. Le Play emphasized extensive independence and lack of integration between the generations in the unstable family system (Le Play, 1982/1872:259-260).

Le Play also reported that individuals in the unstable family system were not responsible for the well being of their relatives. In addition, the authority of parents in unstable families was significantly less than in other family types (Le Play 1982/1872: 260-261).

The third kind of family in Le Play's typology was the stem family, which occupied a middle position between the patriarchal and unstable family. In this kind of family system one of the children married and stayed with the parental family, while other children moved away.

Unlike the unstable family system, the stem family offered its members a permanent source of security and protection. This family was also intermediate between the patriarchal and unstable families in the degree of parental authority over young people—striking a balance between the freedom of children and the authority of parents. (Le Play 1982/1872: 261).

The Distribution of Family Types within Europe

As a result of Le Play's wide-ranging data collection activities, he was able to provide a detailed description of the distribution of family types across Europe. As part of his research report, he prepared a map showing the geographical location of the families included in his study. That map is replicated on page 60 of Thornton (2005a).

A review of Le Play's map reveals a remarkably regular distribution of family types across the countries of Europe. As Le Play observed, patriarchal families were very common among "Eastern nomads, Russian peasants, and the Slavs of Central Europe" (Le Play 1982/1872:259). In fact, all of the Russian, Moroccan, and Syrian families were patriarchal, and none of the studied families located outside of Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa were patriarchal.

On the other end of his typological continuum, Le Play observed that "the unstable family prevails today among the working-class populations subject to the new manufacturing system of Western Europe" (Le Play 1982/1872:260). More specifically, as we can see from the map, he classified as unstable all the English and Belgian families and all the families of Northern France. Also categorized among the unstable families were some German families and one family in Vienna.

Finally, Le Play characterized southern France, Spain, and Italy as being dominated by stem families. He also found stem families in Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden.

Le Play's map of the distribution of families within Europe was a remarkable accomplishment—not only for the amount of work it summarized but also for its accuracy. Richard Wall, who has carefully considered Le Play's results, was generally impressed with the close parallels between Le Play's report and views today about the geographical distribution of family types in the European past. Wall concluded that "...it is suggestive that Le Play found multiple-family households in southern, but not northern, France, in North Africa, Russia, and in parts of Italy, that is in just those areas where more extensive research at the level of the community has confirmed their presence or where the existence of the multiple-family household seems likely" (Wall 1983:20-21).

Substantial research by Anderson (1986/1980), Mitterauer and Sieder (1982/1977), Czap (1983), Halpern (1972), Laslett (1978/1977), and Hajnal (1982) all report geographical distributions of family types that are remarkably consistent with the one provided by Le Play. Michael Anderson summarized this evidence as follows:

Recent research has produced evidence from a considerable number of communities in central and southern France and in Tuscany where between 20 and 74 per cent of the households were of a complex type; a body of parallel data now also exists on parts of Germany (and on parts of Hungary, Austria, Latvia and Estonia as well as Russia...). More unexpected, perhaps, are the substantial numbers of complex households found in some parts of eighteenth-century Sweden.

Thus, superficially at least, it seems that the European pre-industrial rural-household pattern was a regionally diverse one with England, northern France, North America and possibly the Low Countries...being unique in both their low proportions of complex households and their overall homogeneity of household patterns. By contrast, areas of much greater complexity predominated in the east and south...while in northern Europe a more locally diverse pattern was found. Even within the complex areas different patterns have been discovered. In Russian-dominated serf areas of the East, figures of over 60 per cent of households with more than one conjugal core have been found, but in some parts of Hungary

and north Italy the figure reached only 40 percent while in central France it seldom exceeded 30 per cent...(Anderson 1986/1980:29-30).

Thus, while today's view of the historical distribution of family types in Europe is more complex and detailed than the map provided by Le Play, the geographical pictures of the distribution of European families provided by Le Play and Anderson are remarkably compatible. The scope and quality of Le Play's empirical work, accomplished during the first half of the nineteenth century, is nothing short of stunning. His family map is certainly close enough to our current understanding to doubt that empirical difficulties were the source of Le Play's reputation as a mythmaker.

Le Play was also poignantly aware of the geographical differences in industrialization, urbanization, and educational advancement across the regions of Europe. We have already seen his allusion to the industrialization of Western Europe. He noted that in the industrial areas of Western Europe the existence of families depended upon wages, whereas in the rest of Europe there was reliance on self-produced commodities. He was also impressed with the great inventions of the day, including the steam engine, the railroad, and the telegraph. He also commented on the urbanization of the population and the circulation of ideas (Le Play 1982/1855:159-161; 1982/1881: 248-255).

Use of the Developmental Paradigm

In his interpretations and analyses of his data, Le Play relied on a model of development and progress. He believed that technological progress was inevitable, as was the expansion of freedom. However, he did not believe in the inevitability of moral progress, believing that the highest stages of society could bring moral degradation.

Le Play explicitly referred to the developmental paradigm and the metaphor comparing human societies to biological organisms (see Thornton 2005a). He asserted that “In the same way that childhood, adolescence, and manhood succeed one another during the course of an individual lifetime, Europe’s most advanced peoples have passed through three main systems of social organization (Le Play 1982/1855: 240).

Le Play categorized the three stages or systems of social organization according to the way in which work was organized.⁴ The first stage or system was based on “non-voluntary, permanent work agreements”. The second stage for Le Play was a work system based on “long-term voluntary work agreements”. The third stage was “a system of temporary work agreements and work without agreements” (Le Play 1982/1865, pages 240-244).

Le Play also had a clear specification of the geographical distribution of societal stages within the continent of Europe. Le Play placed the beginning stages of societal development in the eastern regions of Europe. He stated that “the gradually ascending order of social conditions starts with the shepherd of the steppes in the eastern region of Europe, freed from the uncertainty and violent habits of nomadic life by the principles of authority, the influence of Christian religion, and the appeal of several civilized habits” (Le Play 1982/1865, pages 233-234). Like other developmental scholars of the era (Thornton 2005a), he identified the highest levels of development in the West, commenting on the “incontestable superiority of Western civilization” (Le Play 1982/1855, page 286). With a little more nuance, he stated that “The stability and well-being which we admire in Eastern people are only the first step in the path of civilization; the vices we observe in the social systems and customs of the West are blemishes in a social order which is incomparably more advanced; they are a temporary consequence of human

⁴ Le Play also sometimes divided societies into 4 groups (see Silver 1982).

imperfection, an accidental deviation from society’s principles of self-preservation” (Le Play 1982/1855, page 286).

Returning to Le Play’s three ages or stages of development, we find that the societies Le Play identified in the first stage of non-voluntary, permanent work agreements are all located in the East. He states that, “with many variations, it still reigns over half of Europe, particularly in Russia and the Slavic provinces of Turkey and Central Europe” (Le Play 1982/1855, page 240). Le Play located the second stage of development—societies with “long-term voluntary work agreements”—in “Sweden, Central Europe, and many of the provinces of the South and West” (Le Play 1982/1855, page 241). The third stage of development for Le Play—societies with “temporary work agreements and work without agreements”—was identified to be prevalent “in many parts of England, France, Belgium, and northwestern Germany, where democratic political tendencies have been combined with dramatic technological innovations” (Le Play 1982/1855, page 242).

Reading History Sideways

Le Play explicitly endorsed the comparative method (reading of history sideways) to document how society changed across the stages of development. I noted earlier that Le Play had compared development in societies to the development of individuals, noting that Europe’s advanced people had moved through three main systems or stages. He also noted that “these patterns can still be seen today” (Le Play 1982/1855, page 240).

In another place, Le Play stated:

Thus, without going far beyond the frontiers of Europe, I have been able to observe and compare the primitive organization of work, the characteristic innovations which were gradually introduced during the second age, and finally, the undreamed of transformations which, since the time of my first voyage, have occurred from the shores of the Atlantic to the frontiers of

Asia and which are now spreading throughout the world (Le Play, 1982/1881, page 250).

Observations of this sort led Le Play, like many of his peers, to use his cross-sectional data for the purpose of history. That is, he transformed the cross-sectional East-West contrast that he observed into a temporal sequencing. Instead of reading European history from the past to the present, he used his impressive comparative data to read history from Eastern to Northwestern Europe.

More specifically, Le Play wrote that the pattern of findings “indicated that far-reaching conclusions could be derived” from the data. “This development,” he wrote, “became especially intriguing after the discovery of the many differences between the metalworkers of France and Germany and the workers observed in factories of Northern and Eastern Europe” (Le Play 1982/1855: 159). He wrote that “in many respects, the present living conditions of laborers in Northern, Eastern, and Central Europe are comparable to those of laborers of regions of [Western] Europe in the not-so-distant past.” He also wrote that “readers need not wait for a talented historian to recreate the spirit of the past for them. In many cases we have only to observe the facts which are still before our eyes” (Le Play 1982/1855: 161). Le Play made his approach to using comparative data for making historical conclusions explicit in the following passage:

If we want to recapture the mentality of the past and thereby gain a comprehensive understanding of the present situation of the working classes in the West, the best way to proceed is to study conditions in the countries where the agricultural and industrial techniques, the organization of labor, and the mutual relations of the various social classes remain like those which existed in France in past centuries. A summary of such observations is offered... [by my reports] dealing with Russia, the Scandinavian countries, Turkey, Hungary, and the countries of Central Europe. These studies offer some very useful preliminary findings. They show that although the old

institutions were less favorable to the growth of industry and the rapid advancement of gifted individuals than the institutions recently established in the West, they did offer security to all social classes. A lack of security is keenly felt today, especially among lower-class persons and the improvident classes. A methodical comparison of these two social systems—one designed for stability and the other for progress—will provide a wealth of information... (Le Play 1982/1855:161-162).

As we have already seen, Le Play believed that the trajectory of societal growth and development could be read from east to west in his international data. As he put it, “public opinion unanimously recognizes a gradual amelioration of men and things from the far reaches of Europe to the territory of the richest provinces of Germany, France, and England... Terms of comparison and the approximate rank of each nation can be established without a lengthy investigation; one would surely comply with standard measures of civilization—either certain purely physical facts, such as the extent of means of communication in each country, or elements of intellectual activity, such as the importance of schools or the number of books published each year” (Le Play 1982/1855: 285).

Le Play described the social and economic conditions existing in the various regions of Europe, with special emphasis on family life. In describing these geographical patterns, he explicitly linked them to his classification system that not only defined different societies but defined his stages of development, thereby providing a historical interpretation to his cross-national data.

Le Play began his geographical tour of Europe’s history in the “far reaches of Europe” with the nomads and shepherds of the Eastern European steppes. Le Play observed that these earliest people were agricultural, providing “for their existence by harvesting the spontaneous products of land and waters” (Le Play 1982/1881:251). These most eastern and earliest people

were reported to have a family-based society where “each family procures the products necessary for its existence by its own activity, and it consumes them at the place of production” (Le Play 1982/1881: 249; also see Le Play 1982/1855: 264 and Silver 1982: 77). Le Play also observed that children in these families received their socialization and training within the familial environment, making it easy for parents to supervise and control the ideas and information that the children experienced (Le Play 1937/1879:469-470; also see Silver 1982: 92-93). He further noted that “apprenticeship in the work is completely spontaneous among the youth and is based solely on actual practice” (Le Play 1982/1881: 251).

Le Play observed that group solidarity was high in the nomadic groups of Eastern Europe (Le Play 1982/1855:245). Another observation was that tradition was well preserved among these people, and that innovation only infrequently appeared. Finally, and most importantly for our purposes, Le Play closely linked the patriarchal family to this nomadic type of society.

Le Play observed further that “the family-based society found among nomadic peoples is also widespread among most of the sedentary populations living under a system of non-voluntary permanent work agreements”. For example, he specifically indicated that “this is the distinctive social characteristic of the Slavs of Russia, Turkey, Hungary, etc.” (Le Play 1982/1855:264). While families in these societies were reported by Le Play to continue to be of the patriarchal type, he also suggested that they were smaller and less extended than the patriarchal families of the nomads (Le Play 1982/1855:264).

Le Play believed that the transition of work relations from permanent involuntary ones to voluntary long-term agreements or work agreements that were temporary led to other important changes in social life. Of central importance here was that work relationships were dominated

by individual choice, with individual well-being no longer so closely bound to the pooling of resources (Le Play 1982/1855, page 264).

Le Play also argued that as sedentary agriculturalists began to adopt tools and learned to use domestic plow animals, they ushered in a period of invention and, while tradition continued to be important, it was balanced by a new feeling of innovation. He also noted the concomitant expansion of cities (Le Play 1982/1881: 252-253). This changing structure of society was accompanied, according to Le Play, by a switch to the stem family, with its smaller and simpler composition and more balanced authority between family heads and other family members.

Finally, for Le Play, as for others using comparative data for historical purposes, the pinnacle of development was the West. Here he noted the separation of work from the family. “Master and worker have become strangers. They are only remotely bound by a short-term contract and remain free of all reciprocal obligations. The worker is no longer tied to the workshop which employs him, the house in which he lives, or the land where he was born” (Le Play 1982/1855:243). As a result Le Play noted that the masses had become isolated and lacked basic security.

Le Play discussed the effects of the advance of development in the following terms:

As societies progress, developing social freedom and the material benefits of civilization, they gradually approach the extreme limits of family organization set by human and divine law. At this extreme, the family unit is reduced to the husband, wife, dependent children, and possibly dependent elderly parents. These small families are no longer faced with the problem of maintaining solidarity among a large group of people (Le Play 1982/1855, page 264).

Le Play also suggested that in the developed West “commerce establishes daily contacts among men who come from all over to exchange their products. Amidst these associations, hierarchies, and contacts, parents can no longer insure that their children’s upbringing will

conform to ancestral custom, even in stable families” (Le Play 1982/1881: 249). Schools were also seen as initiators of increased child autonomy (Le Play 1982/1872: 260). The result of these changes, Le Play argued, is the emergence of the unstable family as “the family circle and paternal authority are diminished” (Le Play 1982/1855: 266).

Thus, Le Play used his international data to formulate a description of family change in Europe. In addition, he had articulated, for his time, an impressive and sophisticated theory linking social, economic, and family change. Many dimensions of his causal mechanisms of change remain viable among family researchers today. Unfortunately, Le Play had read history sideways, from Eastern to Western Europe. Ironically, for a metallurgist-turned-sociologist who abhorred the thought of astrology and alchemy entering his science, he had created a system that turned Eastern European shepherds and farmers into Western European industrial workers. And, like numerous others, his route to sociological alchemy was reading history sideways. Thus, Le Play had created or reinforced “the myth of the extended family,” which was to endure untouched for over a century, only to cause so much surprise, bewilderment, and frustration when his intellectual descendants began to search the historical rather than the comparative record and found that the families of England and Northern France had been nuclear, by Le Play’s definition, for a very long time.

It is clear that Le Play’s error in the 1850s was not departing from appropriate and established procedures and thereby making a wrong turn. Instead, the error was his inability to make a departure from the social science biases and misconceptions that he so disdained. At the crucial moment, Le Play was simply swept along with the overwhelming current of social developmental theory and method and thereby became an author of the myth of the extended family in the Western European past. He had been correct that the method of direct observation

would result in him getting his geographical facts right, but it did not prevent him from mistakenly using his cross-national data to make incorrect conclusions about social change.

Revolution, Social Instability, and Family Change

In addition to observing changes in technology and economic organization in Northwest Europe, Le Play was acutely aware of the revolutions and social instability in France during the late 1700s and early 1800s. He viewed this instability as having negative consequences for France, and advocated for a more stable, cooperative, and tranquil future.

Furthermore, Le Play believed that the French Revolution and the subsequent law of 1793 that brought forced partible inheritance among heirs had led to many important negative consequences, including the erosion of parental authority, the reduction of children's inclination to work, less motivation to make investments, and less positive attitudes toward marriage (Le Play 1982/1855, pages 267-280; Silver 1982, pages 32 and 78-79).

Although Le Play believed that the French Revolution, a new inheritance law, and social instability had brought family change, I have found no place in Le Play's writings where he documented actual changes in France in family life following the Revolution of 1789 and the new inheritance law. I have seen no evidence of Le Play quoting other experts on any such changes in France or any place else, citing statistics about such changes, or telling what else he might have observed to have convinced him of the existence of such family change in any particular country. In addition, Le Play's main discussion of the argued influence of revolution, social instability, and inheritance laws on family change appears later in the book than Le Play's discussion of the geographical distribution of family types in Europe and his use of them to describe historical change. Thus, the evidence that Le Play used to "document" family change

came from cross-national data that he interpreted as historical change through the method of reading history sideways.

Interestingly, the change in inheritance law in France to require the division of property among all heirs was seen by Le Play as a primary cause in explaining the family change he “observed” from reading history sideways. This can be seen in one of his descriptions of family types across the continent of Europe. In this discussion, Le Play contrasted the three family types in his family continuum—the patriarchal, stem, and unstable. After discussing patriarchal families and before discussing stem families, Le Play made the following observation about unstable families.

The second type, 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 due to a number of influences, chief among them the forced division of property (Le Play 1982/1872, page 260).

Thus, in this discussion “the forced division of property” required by the new inheritance law is, for Le Play, the chief influence on the growth of unstable families in France—a growth that he discussed and documented in the context of his presentation of cross-national data that he interpreted as reflecting family change.

As I have explained elsewhere (Thornton 2005a), scholars of the 1700s and 1800s sometimes used actual changes in the social, economic, and technological environment to explain the family changes they “observed” by reading history sideways. Le Play followed this practice, and here we have him adding political and legal change as an important influence on the family change that he “documented” from cross-national data. In fact, in this discussion he labeled a legal change as the chief cause of family change.

A Concluding Comment about Le Play

In 1969 Robert Nisbet published a book entitled Social Change and History: Aspects of the Western Theory of Development. In that book Nisbet made a powerful and, in my opinion, convincing critique of the developmental paradigm, the metaphor of biological growth, and the methodology of reading social change using comparative data.

For this reason I found it surprising to find a passage in Nisbet's book contrasting the comparative method (reading history sideways) for documenting history with Le Play's research. Nisbet wrote that the comparative method "is thought, rather vaguely, to be part and parcel of the kind of comparison that goes into all genuinely scientific work; analogous for instance, to the profoundly comparative studies of Frederick Le Play in the nineteenth century...But it is not. Whatever the superficialities of comparison which adorn the Comparative Method, it is not comparative in any vital sense whatsoever, and has no relation to the kind of work that lay behind Le Play's great study of family types in the world..." (Nisbet 1975/1969:190).

Before addressing my difference of opinion with Nisbet's conclusion about Le Play's use of the comparative method for studying history, several areas of agreement need to be stressed. First, Nisbet correctly labeled Le Play's research as a "great study". Putting together a truly international study of family structure and behavior that covered almost the entire breadth of Europe is an enormous accomplishment by itself. To do it by 1855 is even more impressive. And, finally, to do it well enough to have the basic empirical findings fit so closely, at least in general terms, with the knowledge of the 1980s is awe inspiring.

Also, Nisbet was correct in saying that Le Play's research was truly comparative. The primary goal of Le Play's research was to obtain an empirically accurate description of the workers of Europe and their families. In doing so, Le Play collected data using the same procedures in many geographical settings and systematically compared family structures across

those settings. Nevertheless, the evidence presented above makes it clear that Le Play did use his cross-sectional data to draw conclusions about social change. He did this by making what seemed to him self-evident and safe assumptions about the relative progress of Western versus Eastern Europe, and then using the East-West comparisons to talk about family change.

Kellner (1972) has addressed in great detail Nisbet's claim that Le Play did not use the comparative method and also disagreed with his conclusion. Kellner wrote that "...Le Play could offer through his monographs a living example of history. When Le Play writes about Russia, for example, despite his admirable efforts to understand even the strangest of the customs and to avoid exoticism, he is nevertheless always the Frenchman writing for Frenchmen. The Russian families he describes are contemporary Russians, no doubt, with their own particular history and environment; but although it is only rarely made explicit, Le Play's Russian or German represents at the same time...in various and often only approximate ways, the Frenchman's past. Given the premise that Western society has changed from simplicity to complication, it follows that the past must live on to some extent in the simple societies of the present. Thus, the monographs depict a sort of historical tableau vivant; this use of the present to suggest the past is the basis of much modern social science—indeed, when mixed with historical determinism, it is the basis of the Comparative Method Nisbet attacks" (Kellner 1972:190).

Thus, it is a monument to the power of the developmental paradigm, to the metaphor of progress, and to the belief that history can be read from cross-sectional data that Le Play, despite his remarkable successes in collecting massive amounts of useful data and his strong desire to avoid the effects of bringing preconceived ideas to his research, would a century later be best known as the author of the myth about the extended family in Western Europe's past. It is also a

monument to the power of these same ideas that Nisbet, a strong critic of this paradigm, did not see their overwhelming, though subtle, impact on Le Play's conclusions.

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