

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.”

(Thornton, p. 62)

Typical Thornton Citation

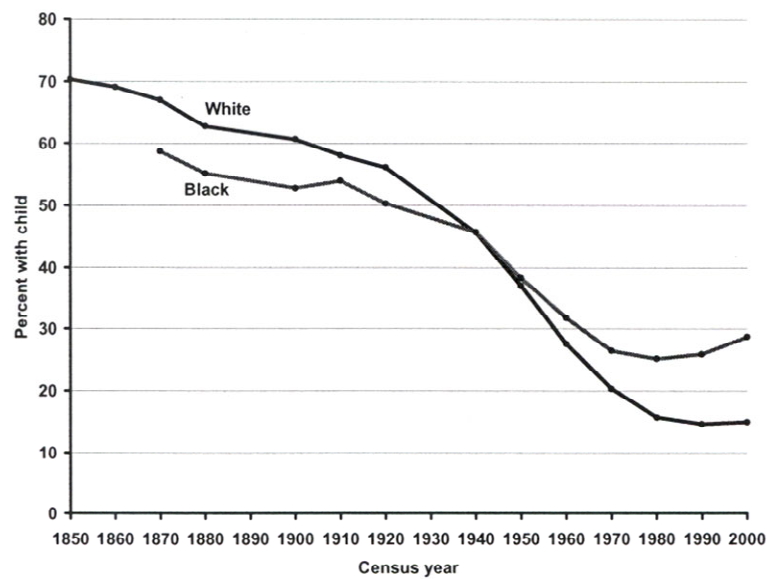
Alexander [1779] 1995; Condorcet [1795] n.d.; Engels [1884] 1971; Ferguson [1767] 1980; Hegel [1837] 1878; Hume [1742] 1825; Le Play [1855–1881] 1982; Maine [1861] 1888; Malthus [1803] 1986; Mill [1859–1869] 1989; Millar [1771] 1979; Montesquieu [1721] 1973, [1748] 1997; L. Morgan [1877] 1985; Robertson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

Le Play (1872):

“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.

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



Why it happened

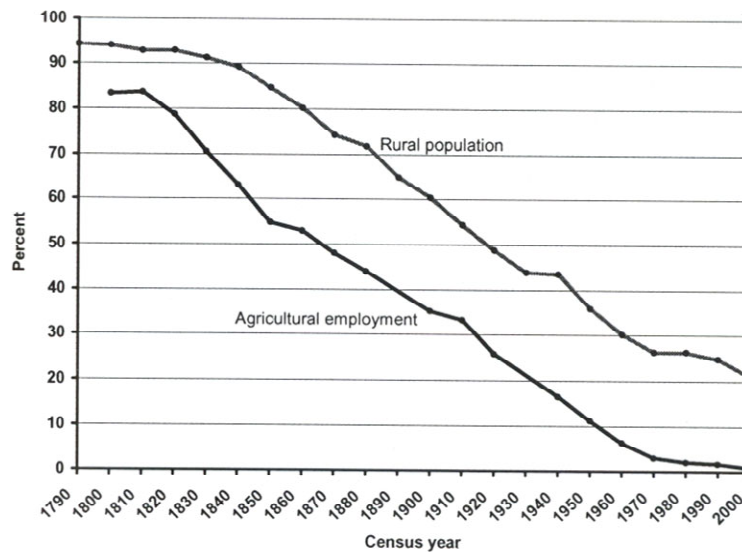
In the old days, the old-age assistance problem was not so great so long as most people lived on farms, had big families, and at least some of the children stayed on the farm. It was customary when the old people got too old to do their share of the work they would stay on the farm and the sons or daughters 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)

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

Thornton on the extended family myth:

“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 statement that “the new historical research found that households had been predominantly nuclear for hundreds of years.”

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" (Smith, 342)

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)

Conclusions

- Thornton is not persuasive in his revisionist argument about the history of theorizing about the family
- 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.