

**A Response to 2005 Social Science History Association Meetings Session on
*Reading History Sideways: The Fallacy and Enduring Impact of the
Developmental Paradigm on Family Life***

by

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Introduction

At the 2005 meetings of the Social Science History Association (SSHA) meetings in Portland, Oregon there was an author meets critics session discussing my book, *Reading History Sideways: the Fallacy and Enduring Impact of the Developmental Paradigm on Family Life* (Thornton 2005a). The session was organized and chaired by Myron Gutmann (University of Michigan), with Katherine Lynch (Carnegie Mellon University), Steven Ruggles (University of Minnesota), Richard Smith (Cambridge University), and Etienne van de Walle (University of Pennsylvania) scheduled to respond to the book.¹ I consider it an honor for the SSHA and such an accomplished and distinguished group of participants to devote an entire session—with the associated preparation time—to my book. I thank SSHA and the session participants for committing this time and energy to *Reading History Sideways*.

During this session, three discussants commented on *Reading History Sideways*. Two of the discussants, Katherine Lynch and Etienne van de Walle, made several interesting observations about the book and its conclusions. I have not made any response to their comments. Rather, this paper is in response to Steven Ruggles and his PowerPoint presentation entitled “Reading History Backwards: A Comment on Thornton’s *Reading History Sideways*”. I first saw Ruggles’ slides when they were distributed at the beginning of his comments in Portland, which made it impossible for me to make an adequate response at the SSHA meetings. The purpose of this manuscript is to make that response and clear up misconceptions about the book that were raised in this discussion.

¹ Unfortunately, Smith was unable to attend the session as scheduled.

The full set of Ruggles' PowerPoint slides are included in the appendix to this paper.² In addition the appendix contains a slide by slide discussion of the comments in Ruggles' PowerPoint. This slide by slide discussion can serve as an overview or summary of the main points in this response. Although I have no manuscript version of the entire discussion in Portland, the discussion and Ruggles' comments closely followed his PowerPoint slides. I also welcome any clarification on my recall and interpretation of these remarks.

Summary of Book and its Main Arguments and Conclusions

In order to respond fully to misconceptions or critiques of the book, I will begin by restating the book's main arguments and conclusions. Readers of this response who have already read *Reading History Sideways* itself may want to skip this section and go directly to my detailed responses to Ruggles' critique, and I encourage those interested to refer to the full text of the book.

Reading History Sideways has two main themes: 1) how scholars of the 1700s and 1800s used developmental thinking and methods to reach conclusions about family life and changes in family life in Europe before 1800—conclusions that in the last half of the 1900s were discovered to be myths; and 2) how developmental thinking and methods and the conclusions of scholars about family change and development became a powerful force for worldwide family change during the 1800s and 1900s.

Origins of Family Myths

In *Reading History Sideways* I argue that prior to the 1960s scholars believed that family life in England and other Northwest European societies in the centuries before 1800 was characterized by great family solidarity, little individualism, overwhelming control of parents

² The slides were scanned directly from Ruggles' handout at SSHA. Quotes from those slides within the body of this paper were copied directly from the slides.

over adolescent children, a young age at marriage, universal marriage, marriages arranged by parents, and large households, with children, parents, grandparents, and married aunts and uncles living together. This belief also held that sometime before 1800 there had been a great family transition in Northwest Europe wherein these attributes of family life had been replaced by little family solidarity, great individualism, little control of parents over adolescent children, an older age at marriage, many people never marrying, marriage arranged by the couple through courtship, and small households consisting primarily of parents and children. I argue that beginning in the 1960s, a wave of new family research showed that the characteristics of Northwest European family life of the 1800s that had previously been thought to be of relatively recent origin—the result of the great transformation—had actually existed for many centuries, at least back to the 1300s. These discoveries caused many scholars in recent decades to see the long-believed great transformation of family life as a myth.

Reading History Sideways documents how the myth of the great family transition was created by developmental thinking and methodology. Scholars of the 1700s and 1800s believed in a developmental model of history that assumes that all societies are on the same pathway, with each going through the same necessary stages of development, but that the pace of change along this developmental trajectory varies across societies. The result of this differential rate of progress, according to this approach, is the placement of societies at different stages of development in any specific period of history. With this framework, scholars created a methodology for writing history that, instead of following a particular society across time, compares various societies at the same time, a method I characterize as reading history sideways. This reading history sideways approach assumes that the previous conditions of life of a more advanced society can be proxied by the life situations of a

contemporary society believed to be at an earlier stage of development. That is, the contemporary society perceived as less developed is used as a proxy for an earlier historical period of the society perceived as more advanced.

One of the important discoveries of the 1700s and 1800s was that family life in Northwest Europe during this period varied substantially from family life in other parts of the world. Compared to family life in many other parts of the world—with extensive family solidarity, little individualism, overwhelming control of parents over adolescent children, a young age at marriage, universal marriage, marriages arranged by parents, and large and extended households—family life in Northwest Europe could be characterized as having relatively little family solidarity, great individualism, little control of parents over adolescent children, an older age at marriage, many people never marrying, marriages arranged by the couple through courtship, and small and nuclear (or stem) households. With their belief that Northwestern Europe was at the pinnacle of development and other parts of the world were less developed, scholars of the 1700s and 1800s concluded that as Northwest Europe had developed it had gone through a great family transition that had changed its family system from being like those observed elsewhere to being what was observed in Northwest Europe in the 1700s and 1800s. It was only in the 1960s and 1970s that the occurrence of this great family transition before 1800 was discovered to be a myth.

An Engine of Worldwide Family Change

The second main thesis of *Reading History Sideways* is that developmental thinking and methodology and the conclusions of several generations of scholars about family change were used to create a set of propositions that have been a force for family change during the last two centuries. These developmental models and the conclusions drawn from them

provided new mechanisms for judging society, family life, and the rights of human beings. They showed the direction for future change and the mechanisms that people could employ to facilitate progress and well-being, and in this way became the engine for many social, economic, and familial changes.

More specifically, the book argues that developmental thinking and methods and the conclusions of several generations of scholars grew into a powerful set of propositions—that I call developmental idealism—that would drive many fundamental changes in family life around the world. Developmental idealism states that a modern society that is industrialized, urbanized, highly educated, and with high levels of knowledge and technology is good and to be sought after. Developmental idealism also indicates a preference for modern families, defined as having high levels of individualism, high status of women, mature marriage, marriage arranged by the couple, the autonomy of children, small households, and controlled and low fertility. Developmental idealism also suggests that a modern society and modern family are causally connected, with a modern society being a cause and/or effect of a modern family system. Finally, developmental idealism emphasizes that individuals have the right to be free and equal, with social relationships based on consent.

Reading History Sideways argues that developmental idealism has been disseminated widely around the world—through a myriad of mechanisms—and has been an exceptionally powerful force for family change during the 1800s and 1900s both in Western societies and elsewhere. I argue that it has been a particularly important force in many recent family changes including declines in childbearing, increases in age at marriage, the increase in the autonomy of young people, growing egalitarianism between women and men, increases in divorce, increases of independent living among both the young and the elderly, increases in

sexual activity and cohabitation outside marriage, and the growing emphasis on individual rights as opposed to the norms of the larger community.

Of course, as developmental idealism was disseminated around the world, it met with indigenous social and cultural systems that were also powerful in that they had for centuries provided models for family and social life. It is not surprising that the messages of developmental idealism created substantial tension and conflict with indigenous historical social and cultural systems. In many instances, developmental idealism has been met with sophisticated evaluation, resistance, and adaptation. The end result, however, has been substantial family change both in the Western world and elsewhere, with the result often being a hybridized form that mixes indigenous approaches with those of developmental idealism.

Responses to Specific Points Made by Ruggles

In the remaining sections of this paper, I turn to the specific points made by Steven Ruggles, one discussant in the SSHA session. I believe that Ruggles missed several of my main points, misread others, and came to inaccurate conclusions concerning *Reading History Sideways*. I will discuss each of these issues, beginning with his faulty characterization of my description of the supposed great family transition.

Characterizing the Supposed Great Family Transition

In the first substantive slide (Slide 2) of Ruggles' PowerPoint, he characterizes my argument about the myths of the great family transition. I recreate below the text of the entire slide.

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 the 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

This slide summarizes part of Ruggles' understanding of the main arguments of *Reading History Sideways*. However, even this beginning slide demonstrates Ruggles' misunderstanding of the main points of the book. There are two important inaccuracies in this characterization of my argument. First, I note in *Reading History Sideways* that the scholars who created the myths about the great family transition distinguished between Northwest Europe and other parts of Europe and used this cross-national difference in constructing their conclusions about family change. Their conclusions about the supposed great family transition were applied to Northwest Europe and not to the whole of Europe as stated in this slide.³ Without taking into account the geographical variation within Europe, it is very difficult to understand and critique the arguments of the book. A second inaccuracy in this slide's characterization is its assertion that *Reading History Sideways* claims that the supposed great family transition occurred before 1700. However, *Reading History Sideways* makes no such claim. Instead, it discusses the difficulties of dating the supposed great family transition from cross-sectional data, arguing that the sideways history approach provides no precise dates for the changes it posits. It is only possible to conclude that the scholars writing in the late 1700s

³ As I describe in some detail in Chapter 3 of the book, there were substantial differences between Northwest Europe and other parts of Europe, particularly Eastern Europe. Especially see the section on pages 58-61 concerning "Le Play's Map of European Families" in which he summarizes some of these differences. Unlike Northwest Europe, which was characterized during the 1700s and 1800s by many nuclear families and an older age at marriage, Eastern Europe was characterized by many extended families and a young age at marriage. The section on pages 61-64 of *Reading History Sideways* concerning "Developmental-Trajectory Interpretations" describes how these differences across Europe provided important material for scholars of the period to read history sideways to make conclusions about family change in the Northwest European past.

and 1800s believed that the supposed great family transition occurred before their times. Unfortunately, without the writers providing precise dates for the supposed great family transition and with them writing in different periods, it is impossible to say when this supposed change was supposed to have occurred. However, as shorthand, as in my summary of the book above, I “date” it before 1800, since it seems to have been mostly “documented” by then.⁴ For a full understanding of my beliefs about the supposed timing of the supposed great family transition, I refer the reader to the section in *Reading History Sideways* (pages 67-69) concerning “The Timing of the Perceived Changes in Family Life”. For the purpose of this response, I repeat the main paragraphs from that text in a footnote.⁵

The Timing and Method for Documenting the Supposed Great Family Transition

One critique Ruggles made of *Reading History Sideways* concerned two aspects of the supposed great family transition in the Northwest European past: when scholars “documented” this supposed great family transition; and the data and methods used to “document” the transition. Ruggles suggests that the great family transition was possibly documented in the late 1800s, but more likely the documentation occurred after 1900. In addition, he suggests

⁴ As I say in *Reading History Sideways* (page 67, quoted in footnote 5 below), “the documentation of the transition from extended to nuclear households was not definitive until 1855, with the work of Le Play.”

⁵ “Although the scholars of the 1700s and 1800s believed that there had been substantial changes in family life sometime in the past, it was difficult for them to date these trends in historical time. The problem was that the reading history sideways methodology provided no mechanism for assigning dates to transitions (Bock 1956). This is true because the comparison points came from cultural groups rather than from historical time periods and thus there were no dates to be attached to the changes they believed they had observed from reading history sideways. Dating therefore became a matter of conjecture. The result, of course, was widespread disagreement about the timing of specific transitions even if there was a consensus as to the nature of the general trends (see Macfarlane 1979/1978; Wallerstein 1991).

We can with confidence, however, place one boundary on the timing of these perceived changes in family patterns in that they had to have occurred prior to the time they were first reported. With one possible exception, all the family transitions reviewed in this chapter had been reported at least by 1803 in the work of such scholars as Millar, Smith, Alexander, Robertson, and Malthus, which implies that they had to have occurred prior to that time.

Although there is conclusive evidence that most elements of the great family transition were documented through reading history sideways by 1803, the documentation of the transition from extended to nuclear households was not definitive until 1855, with the work of Le Play” (page 67).

that the great family transition was documented after 1850 by scholars observing real historical family change rather than by using reading history sideways to interpret cross-sectional data as indicating social change. This critique is reflected in Slide 5, which states:

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

Ruggles' Slide 16 also indicates that the scholars reached their conclusions about family change by describing actual historical changes.

The minority of scholars who actually talked about changes in family structure were usually describing changes they had observed

Timing of the Documentation of the Supposed Great Family Transition. As I understand the first point of this critique, Ruggles believes that there was no consensus of a great family transition among scholars before 1850, and, if a consensus later emerged, it is likely that it did not happen until the early 1900s. I document in Chapter 3 (especially pages 61-72) of the book discussions of specific elements of the supposed great family transition by 1803 in the works of such scholars as Alexander, Condorcet, Home, Malthus, Millar, and Smith.⁶ In addition, there were also many scholars writing in the 1800s, such as Durkheim, Engels, Le Play, Maine, Morgan, Thwing and Thwing, Sumner, and Westermarck who

⁶ Additional scholars from the 1700s who could be added to this list of people reporting family change include Robertson (1783) and Ferguson (1980/1767) (see Thornton 2005b, 2005f).

reported elements of the supposed great family transition (see Chapter 3, page 62).⁷ A claim that there was no substantial belief in significant family change before the early 1900s would need to account for the writings of these scholars.

To be sure, the theme of a great family transition continued intact into the mid-1900s as several scholars of that period came to similar conclusions. I list scholars endorsing such themes in the first half of the 1900s to include: Bosanquet, Burgess and Locke, Calhoun, Davis, Ellwood, Lynd and Lynd, Sumner and Keller, Thomas and Znaniecki, and Weber (*Reading History Sideways*, Chapter 3, page 62). There was, indeed, a general consensus on these points early in the 1900s; however, the claim that these beliefs emerged only in the early 1900s would require dealing with a substantial pre-1900 literature.

Family Change between 1800 and 2000. Concerning the second point in Ruggles' argument - - that there were important and substantial family changes in the United States and Europe after 1850 - - I am pleased that he agrees with me on this matter. Moreover, family change after 1800 is an essential part of *Reading History Sideways*. I argue in the book, in fact, that between 1800 and 2000 there were great changes in Northwest Europe and in the Northwest European diaspora in such family dimensions as gender relations; divorce; parental authority; living arrangements; and marriage, sex, cohabitation, and childbearing (see especially Chapters 8 and 9). Part Three of the book (beginning on page 133) is primarily devoted to the thesis that the developmental paradigm, reading history sideways, the conclusions of earlier scholars, and developmental idealism were forces for great family change during the 1800s and 1900s in the U.S. and Europe (as well as elsewhere).

⁷ Additional scholars from the 1800s who could be added to this list include Senior (1831), Alison (1840), Jones (1859), Lubbock (1889/1870), and the anonymous author of an article in *The Nation* (1868) who asked "Why Is Single Life Becoming More General?" For more discussion of these scholars and their writings, see Thornton 2005b and 2005f.

Personal Observation Method of Documenting the Supposed Great Family

Transition. Ruggles concluded his argument about the methods for, and timing of, the documentation of the supposed great family transition by disagreeing with my thesis that scholars during the 1700s and 1800s documented family change by reading history sideways using cross-sectional data. He suggested that instead of reading history sideways, these scholars reached their conclusions about family change through personal observation. For the purpose of the paper, I call this alternative method the Personal Observation Method. The Personal Observation Method is an alternative method for studying family change, and it is different from reading history sideways in that it involves the investigator making his/her own personal observations about actual family change in at least one particular society. However, Ruggles provides no information about the method and how it was used. He also provides no information about how specific scholars such as Malthus, Le Play, and Westermarck used the Personal Observation Method rather than reading history sideways to describe long-term trends in family life. For example, he provides no indication of how the Personal Observation Method gave Malthus the information he needed to document trends from ancient times to modern Europe (Malthus 1986/1830: 254; also see Thornton 2005b). He also provides no indication of how the Personal Observation Method gave Westermarck the data he needed to trace marriage patterns in the *History of Human Marriage* from what he called “savage and barbarous races of men” to the patterns of what he called “civilized men”, with the conclusion that “modern civilization has proved very unfavorable to the number of marriages” (Westermarck 1894/1891: 135-137 and 145; also see Thornton 2005e).

Statistics in the Documentation of the Supposed Great Family Transition.

Although we have no evidence that scholars of the 1700s and 1800s used the Personal

Observation Method to document family change, some scholars of the 1700s and 1800s tried to use whatever statistical information they could about actual family changes in particular societies (see Chapters 2 and 3 of *Reading History Sideways*). However, scholars of the era also frequently complained about the inadequacies of the historical statistical data available to them, saying that if they were to be successful in documenting societal developmental trajectories, they, of necessity, had to rely on cross-sectional data and reading history sideways.

Using Reading History Sideways to Document the Supposed Great Family

Transition. In contrast to the lack of scholars using the Personal Observation Method, *Reading History Sideways* provides a substantial amount of evidence showing the use of sideways history in the 1700s and 1800s. Chapter 2 is devoted exclusively to the reading history sideways method—and the conceptual paradigm and data underlying it. In this chapter, I provide numerous examples of scholars from the era using the method with cross-sectional data. I also provide numerous examples of later scholars documenting the use of the method by scholars during the 1700s and 1800s. I cite Bock (1956) suggesting that reading history sideways with comparative data often became the method of social science (page 41 in *Reading History Sideways*) and Harris (1968), stating that “All theorists of the latter [1800s]... proposed to fill the gaps in the available knowledge of universal history largely by ... the ‘comparative method,’” the comparative method being what I refer to as reading history sideways (page 43 in *Reading History Sideways*). As I document in the book, the gaps in the historical data were huge, and reading history sideways was frequently used to document family change.

In *Reading History Sideways* I did not go into great detail about the specific ways in which particular family scholars used the reading history sideways method to arrive at their

conclusions. Instead, I provided the conceptual framework they used, their data sources, and their conclusions to document the practice, with numerous references to the actual work of these scholars for readers to peruse on their own. I took this approach, with strong encouragement from reviewers and the University of Chicago Press, to produce a readable volume that was not burdened with extensive quotes from earlier generations of scholars.

However, to provide more information for readers interested in this detail, I have written a separate paper in which I provide the descriptions by several scholars of the 1700s and 1800s of the reading history sideways methodology they used for studying social change using cross-sectional data (Thornton 2005c). I have also written four papers on the ways in which many family scholars used the developmental paradigm, reading history sideways, and cross-sectional data to create or reinforce myths about family change. One of these papers describes how Malthus and subsequent writers used extensive cross-national data and reading history sideways to document and explain the supposed substantial increases in both celibacy and the ages people married (Thornton 2005b). A second paper describes how Westermarck used even more extensive cross-national data and sideways history to reach similar conclusions as Malthus about marital change (Thornton 2005e). A third discusses Le Play's monumental cross-national study and the ways he utilized it to document a supposed transition from complex extended households to predominantly nuclear households (Thornton 2005d). Finally, the fourth paper (Thornton 2005f) examines how several scholars, including Millar, Durkheim, and Maine, used cross-national data and reading history sideways to document supposed changes in family relationships and processes.⁸ I will not repeat here the information in these papers about specific scholars, but, to illustrate the use of sideways history, will

⁸ All of these papers are posted on the web at <http://di.psc.isr.umich.edu/pubs/rhs-ssha05.html>

highlight the data and approaches of three particularly important scholars: Malthus, Westermarck, and Le Play.

Malthus Reading History Sideways. I begin with Malthus, who provides a difficult case for the belief that scholars of the 1700s and 1800s documented family change from their personal experience. As I document in detail in *Reading History Sideways* (and in Thornton 2005b), Malthus wrote a brief treatise on population dynamics in 1798 that contained very little data. In subsequent years he devoted extensive time, energy, and travel to collect an enormous amount of information about societies around the world (*Reading History Sideways*: page 29, 63-64). Then, in 1803 Malthus published a manuscript in which he devoted an incredible amount of space to documenting family and population in numerous groups around the world, including: the American Indians, the South Sea islanders, the Chinese, Turkey, Persia, India, Siberia, and Africa. He also devoted considerable attention to the contemporary situation in Norway, Sweden, the Baltic areas of Russia, Central Europe, Switzerland, France, England, Scotland, and Ireland. It is unlikely that one of the most important scholars of the last 300 years would devote so much time and energy to collecting and reporting this extensive cross-national data if he was going to reach his conclusions about family change using the Personal Observation Method in England or some other specific country.

Malthus devoted Book 1 of his manuscript to “the less civilized parts of the world and in past times” and Book 2 to the “different states of modern Europe” (*Reading History Sideways*, page 64). In his analysis, he explained how societies developed from what he called “less civilized parts of the world” with young and universal marriage to what he called “modern Europe” with its older age at marriage and extensive celibacy (also see Thornton 2005b).

To be sure, Malthus did try to use historical statistical data to confirm what he had concluded by reading history sideways (page 65 of *Reading History Sideways* and Thornton 2005b). However, this effort to read history from the past to the present represented a very small effort compared to his use of sideways history. In addition, the historical data for England were of very poor quality and he could make conclusions from them only by using as assumptions some of the conclusions that he had obtained from his theory and reading history sideways. These assumptions led him to make conclusions about previous English population history that Wrigley and Schofield (1981) later showed to be different from what had happened in England in the decades before Malthus wrote.

Westermarck Reading History Sideways. Edward Westermarck was a scholar who was very explicit about his reading history sideways methodology. Westermarck, writing his masterpiece on the *History of Human Marriage* late in the 1800s, exceeded Malthus in the amount of international cross-sectional data he used (see pages 29-30 of *Reading History Sideways*). The latest edition of his book included more than one hundred pages of citations documenting marriage patterns around the world. With the sideways history methodology, Westermarck used this extensive cross-national data to write a history of human marriage rather than with a history of marriage from personal observation in either his native Finland or England where he lived for many years (page 63 of *Reading History Sideways*).

There can be little doubt about Westermarck's use of the reading history sideways method, as he made it explicit in the beginning pages of his manuscript. I cite the relevant passages both in Thornton 2005c and Thornton 2005e. As those papers document, Westermarck explicitly used reading history sideways as his method to write a history of human marriage in which he concluded that civilization was bad for marriage. Interestingly,

Westermarck, like Malthus, observed the East-West gradient in European families which he interpreted in historical-developmental ways. Westermarck supplemented his cross-sectional materials with actual historical data, but gave priority to international comparative information (see Thornton 2005e).

Le Play Reading History Sideways. My third example of an important scholar of the 1800s reading history sideways to document family changes is Frederick Le Play who conducted one of the most ambitious international cross-sectional studies ever done (see pages 30-31 and 58-64 of *Reading History Sideways*). Le Play is particularly important for our current purposes because Ruggles identified him as a scholar who documented family change through the Personal Observation Method rather than through the sideways reading of history. I cite below the Ruggles slide making this argument (Slide 8).

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.

I make two comments about Ruggles’ slide before documenting Le Play’s monumental cross-national data collection and his reading of history sideways. First, the Ruggles’ quote of Le Play truncates both the first and second sentences in the quote. As I will explain later, this truncation of the second sentence eliminates information useful for a full understanding of Le Play’s intentions. The full two sentences of the Le Play quote are provided below.

“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).

Second, Ruggles is using the slide to contradict a straw man—my supposed belief that the scholars of the 1700s and 1800s believed that the supposed great family transition occurred before 1700. As I said in an earlier section of this paper, *Reading History Sideways* never claimed that Le Play or anyone else believed that the supposed transition occurred before 1700. Instead, *Reading History Sideways* claimed that the scholars of the era had to believe that the transition occurred before they wrote—in Le Play’s case in the mid-1800s.

Le Play’s collection of enormous amounts of cross-national data was facilitated by the fact that he traveled prodigiously—seven times to England, almost as often to Germany, three times to Russia and Italy, and to Spain and West Asia twice—traveling about 200,000 miles altogether, with much of that distance on foot. He conducted detailed multi-method data collections with families across Europe and elsewhere that lasted from between eight days and a month for each family. He reported conducting such detailed data collections from 300 different families from many different European countries, including Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, England, France, Germany, Italy, Norway, Russia, Sweden, Spain, and Switzerland. His amazingly accurate family map also contains data from the Middle East and North Africa (replicated on page 60 of *Reading History Sideways*). Thus, we have evidence that Le Play went to remarkable lengths to gather international cross-sectional data.

Le Play used his extensive cross-national data to research the geographical distribution of family types across Europe and beyond. He observed that large patriarchal families were common in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa; that stem families were common in Southern France, Spain, and Italy; and that nuclear, or unstable, families were

common in England, Belgium, and Northern France. The Le Play quote about nuclear or unstable families being predominant in the manufacturing areas of Western Europe provided by Ruggles is part of Le Play's discussion of cross-national differences rather than part of a discussion of actual family change observed by personal observation by Le Play in France or elsewhere in Europe.⁹

Le Play used his wealth of cross-national data rather than personal observation in his native France or elsewhere to reach his conclusions of a great family transition. Le Play wrote that the pattern of findings in his cross-national data "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 even more 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

⁹ For more information about Le Play's description of cross-national differences in family types, see pages 58-61 of *Reading History Sideways*. The first sentence of the Le Play quote is provided on page 60 of *Reading History Sideways*, where I am explaining the cross-national differences in family structure documented by Le Play. On pages 61-64 of *Reading History Sideways*, I explain how Le Play (and others) interpreted their cross-national data in historical terms by reading history sideways.

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).

In using international data to make historical inferences, Le Play explicitly referred to the developmental paradigm and the metaphor comparing human societies to biological organisms (Chapter 2 of *Reading History Sideways*). 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. These patterns can still be seen today” (Le Play 1982/1855: 240).

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). With this framework and data it was easy for

Le Play to conclude that, with development, family life in France and England had changed from being like what he had documented in Eastern Europe to being like what he had documented for England and Northern France. I provide elsewhere further discussion about how Le Play used his cross-national data to make conclusions about historical change (Thornton 2005d). At the same time that Le Play described the reading history sideways method and how he used it in making his conclusions about family change, I have found no evidence of him using the Personal Observation Method to document actual family change in France or anywhere else.

Le Play's travels throughout most of Europe demonstrated to him an important geographical gradient in socioeconomic circumstances. He knew that technological innovation, commerce, and manufacturing were more extensive in Western Europe than in Eastern Europe. He interpreted this geographical gradient in socioeconomic circumstances as a developmental gradient with Western Europe being in the vanguard of development. He also applied this same developmental interpretation to the family differences he observed and concluded that there was a historical trend from the kinds of families that he studied in the East to the families he knew in the West. It was also easy for Le Play to use the differences he observed in socioeconomic conditions from East to West to explain the differences in family conditions.

Many of the scholars of the 1700s and 1800s knew of economic changes occurring in Western Europe during their lifetimes (such as increases in manufacturing), and they used these economic changes to explain the changes in family structures that they believed they observed from reading history sideways. I make this point in the following quote from

Reading History Sideways, where I use Le Play as an example of one person using this approach.

I noted earlier that most of the changes in family life that these scholars set out to explain were observed from reading history sideways. However, many of the changes in the factors believed to produce the perceived changes in family life were observed by reading history from the past to the present (for example, Le Play 1982/1855, 1982/1881; also Condorcet 1795/1795; Millar 1979/1771; Smith 1978/1762-3). That is, these scholars knew from the historical record that there had been several dimensions of Western European societies that had changed significantly in previous decades and centuries, including religion, education, modes of production, communication, transportation, and location of residences in rural or urban areas. It was, therefore, easy for them to use these historical changes to explain the trends in family structure and relationships that they observed from reading history sideways. (Page 72)

I argue that Le Play was using actual economic change to explain family change “documented” from reading history sideways in the quote partially presented by Ruggles in his slide, and provided more fully above by me. As I documented in Thornton 2005d, the Le Play quote emphasized by Ruggles is part of a discussion of the three family types in Le Play’s continuum – patriarchal, stem, and unstable – and how they were distributed geographically across Europe, with this geographical distribution providing data for describing historical change. In the first sentence Le Play was implying that the “new manufacturing system of Western Europe” was related to the nuclear or unstable families in that region. In the full second sentence (quoted earlier), Le Play indicated that the multiplication of unstable families was due to multiple influences, “chief among them the forced division of property” (Le Play 1982/1872, page 260). As I documented in Thornton 2005d, the “forced division of property” in this quote referred to the law enacted in 1793 in France requiring that inheritances be split

among heirs rather than be given to a single heir. Thus, here Le Play was including legal change as one of the forces for family change.

Misunderstanding of My Representation of Ruggles' Work

In his discussion at the SSHA meetings, Ruggles expressed concern that *Reading History Sideways* had not represented his work correctly. This is apparent from his Slide 13 that I reproduce below.

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 precise nature of Ruggles’ concern is not specified in the slide, but it appears that the concern centers on two issues: 1) How did I characterize households in the Northwest European past? and 2) How well does my characterization fit with the data about households in the past that Ruggles has presented in his own work? I believe that my representation of these matters in *Reading History Sideways* was misunderstood, and I plan to clarify that here.

Clarifying My Statement and Its Meaning. I begin by suggesting that some of the misunderstanding could be caused by the fact that the slide discussing my conclusion about Northwest European family history misquoted my specific text and missed the context and meaning of the statement. Important information needed to understand the meaning of the statement and how it relates to my understanding of Ruggles work was left out of the slide,

with important implications that I will discuss later. I provide below the two relevant paragraphs from *Reading History Sideways* (page 84).

The new historical research found that, in Northwest Europe, households had been predominantly nuclear (or a weak stem form) for hundreds of years (see Anderson 1986/1980; Goode 1970/1963, 1982/1964; Hareven 1977; Laslett 1984/1965; Laslett and Wall 1974/1972; Mitterauer and Seider 1982/1977; Mount 1982; Ruggles 1987; Seccombe 1992; Segalen 1986; Seward 1978; Stone 1982; Wall 1995). Laslett, for example, reported that expectations of large and complex extended households “have been demonstrated to be false...for traditional England...It is not true that most of our ancestors lived in extended families...It is not true that the elderly and the widowed ordinarily had their married children living with them, or that uncles, aunts, nephews and nieces were often to be found as resident relatives” (Laslett 1984/1965, 91; see also Laslett and Wall 1974/1972). In short, Laslett found that there was no evidence that family arrangements seven hundred years ago were markedly different from those of “early modern times.” “The further we go back” he wrote, “the more elusive the origins of the interrelated characteristics of the Western family. As of the present state of our knowledge we cannot say when ‘the West’ diverged from the other parts of Europe” (Laslett 1978/1977, 48).

Steven Ruggles subsequently called the idea of extended households 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” (Ruggles 1987, 4). Examples of other scholars maintaining this view include M. Anderson (1986/1980), Goode (1982/1964), Hareven (1977), Levine (2001), Mitterauer and Seider (1982/1977), Mount (1982), Segalen (1986), Seward (1978), Smith (1979, 1992), and Stone (1982). There was, thus, apparently no evidence for the purported substantial decline in extended households in Northwest Europe during the centuries preceding the 1700s and 1800s.

My Quote of Ruggles is Accurate. I have verified this statement with Ruggles’ book and found my citation in its entirety in his book. In addition, my verification confirmed that my quotation fits within the context of the larger material within which it is embedded. The section of the book containing the quote—“There are now few adherents to the myth that

extended families predominated in the world we have lost”—is devoted to the scholarly literature stating as myth the belief that extended families predominated in the past (Ruggles 1987, pages 3-4). Ruggles has also discussed this scholarly consensus in more recent publications (Ruggles 1994, page 106; Ruggles 2003, page 140).

Intergenerational Families in the Northwest European Past. Following his discussion of the myth of the extended family in the past in his 1987 book, Ruggles stated that “Unfortunately, a new myth has replaced the old one. It is now believed that American and English family structure has always been overwhelmingly nuclear” (Ruggles 1987, page 4). Ruggles has also conducted extensive research for nearly two decades documenting many intergenerational families in the United States in the 1800s (Ruggles 1987, 1994, 2003, 2005). In addition, Slide 9 of his PowerPoint presentation contained a graph showing that in the United States in the 1800s considerable fractions of elderly couples and individuals lived with children.

I wrote *Reading History Sideways* to be consistent with Ruggles’ primary data about many intergenerational households in the past in the United States. My consistency with the facts about intergenerational families is demonstrated in my statement in *Reading History Sideways* that Ruggles misquoted in his slide. I stated that “The new historical research found that, in Northwest Europe, households had been predominantly nuclear (or a weak stem form) for hundreds of years”. In his presentation of this sentence Ruggles deleted the parenthetical phrase—“or a weak stem form”—which made my statement, as he presented it, inconsistent with his research when my original position was not. My statement in this passage took into account the presence of some stem families in the Northwest European past—a fact that was erased in the rendition of my statement in the slide. In addition, *Reading History Sideways*

indicates that in the United States and England in the past “significant percentages of the elderly lived with a married child” and that, in fact, when demographic conditions became more conducive to stem families that such living arrangements probably increased in these countries in the 1800s¹⁰ (pages 84-85). Furthermore, I observed that it was possible “for large numbers of elderly people to live with their unmarried or married children, and many did so” (page 52). I thus recognized the existence of intergenerational households in the past, making my statements consistent with Ruggles’ documentation of extensive intergenerational households in the past. I discuss below the appropriateness of calling this system “predominantly nuclear (or a weak stem form)” rather than a stem household system.

Comparing Northwest Europe with Other Parts of the World. My full statement in *Reading History Sideways* (quoted above) also makes clear that the comparison point I was using for characterizing Northwest European families of the 1700s and 1800s as “predominantly nuclear (or a weak stem form)” was the large and complex families existing in many other parts of the world at the time. I said that scholars before the last half of the 1900s believed “that the Northwest European households of the past were large, with children, parents, grandparents, and married aunts and uncles all living together” (page 5). Laslett expected to find that “the elderly and the widowed ordinarily had their married children living with them, or that uncles, aunts, nephews and nieces were often to be found as resident relatives” (see quote above). Furthermore, Laslett clearly had in mind distinctions between ‘the West’ and other parts of Europe, which did have many large extended families. This fact is indicated further in Laslett’s question: “Can it yet be said when ‘The West’ began to diverge from the rest of Europe and the rest of the world in its familial outlook and behaviour?” (*Reading History Sideways*, page 83) The main conclusion of my statement is that the large

¹⁰ This is an argument made by Ruggles (1987).

and complex extended households found in many other parts of the world—including many parts of Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and East and South Asia—have not existed for hundreds of years in Northwest European societies. I also note that the contrast that Laslett and I have made between Northwest Europe and other parts of the world has been made by Ruggles (see Ruggles 1987, pages 63 and 125; Ruggles 1994, page 110).

One of the most important reasons for the contrast between Northwest European households and households elsewhere is that Northwest Europeans almost never lived with a married sibling whereas in other societies married siblings often lived together. Ruggles made this point cogently in his 1994 article which I quote below.

In other societies, historians and anthropologists have observed high frequencies of joint families, which include married siblings residing together. Such families were common in places such as nineteenth-century central Italy and late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Russia.

In the United States, the joint family pattern has barely existed. At least for the period 1850 onward, the percentage of persons whose spouse is present and who reside with their sibling whose spouse is present is barely measurable, never amounting to more than 0.1 percent of the married population.

The strong aversion to co-residence between married siblings in nineteenth-century America sharply limited the potential for multi-generational families. (Ruggles 1994, page 110)

I cited this article on page 52 of *Reading History Sideways* where I observed that in Northwest European societies “very few married siblings lived together.” Ruggles reconfirmed this point in his 2003 article about the United States in which he stated that “...married brothers and sisters almost never resided together” (Ruggles 2003, page 145).

The Predominantly Nuclear (or a Weak Stem Form) Description is Appropriate. I now turn to a discussion of the appropriateness of my characterization of Northwest European households in the past as being “predominantly nuclear (or a weak stem form)”. I specifically

address whether this characterization fits the data reported by Ruggles from the United States in the 1800s, with the conclusion that it does. Addressing this issue requires a brief digression into the specification of definitions. In *Reading History Sideways* I defined stem households as consisting of “married parents and one married child” (page 51). Ruggles’ definition of a stem household as one “containing parents and married child” is consistent with mine (Ruggles 1987, page 62). He also stated that a nuclear household “becomes a stem household...upon the marriage of a child” (Ruggles 1987, pages 62-63, also see page 77).

I now turn to the data and ask whether the American household formation system and the composition of households matched this definition of a stem household system. To what extent did American households in the 1800s contain married parents and a married child, and how often were stem households formed as children married and lived with parents. I begin with a paragraph from Ruggles:

Only a minority of married elderly persons in the nineteenth century resided with married children. More often, married elderly resided with unmarried children and unmarried elderly resided with married children. About 17 percent of married couples in the mid-nineteenth century resided with married children; by contrast, 56 percent of widowed elderly resided with married children. (Ruggles 2003; page 154).

This paragraph suggests that fully 83 percent of older couples and 44 percent of widowed elderly were not living with married children. Many of these elderly people were undoubtedly living in intergenerational households with their unmarried children, but households without married children do not meet our definition of a stem household. In fact, these elderly couples and individuals who were not living with married children would be classified as living in nuclear households in every classification system that I know.¹¹ This

¹¹ This includes the 1987 definition by Ruggles who states that “a nuclear family is one which contains no relatives other than a husband, wife, and their children” (Ruggles 1987, page 3).

suggests that the vast bulk of Americans in the 1800s, both the young and the old, were living in households that would be classified as nuclear.

Furthermore, the 56 percent of the widowed elderly living with married children do not meet the criteria of living in a stem family that I established earlier. In these cases there is only one parent rather than the two parents required by the definition. Although one might use a less restrictive definition of stem households to include an elderly widowed person who is living with a married child and that child's spouse, this household would not meet the stem definition that I was using in *Reading History Sideways*.

Of course, as others, including Berkner (1972), have noted, the fraction of people who have ever lived in a stem household with two married couples is larger than the fraction doing so at any one point in time (also see Laslett 1984/1965). This can happen because it is possible for many married children to live with their married parents early in marriage but then to experience a considerable period living in a nuclear household after the parents die and before one of their own children marries and lives with them in a stem household.

However, Ruggles' description of the marriage and household formation system in the United States in the 1800s suggests that the American system greatly limited experience in stem households. He reported that "In most cases, the children had to wait for the death of the father in order to inherit, and in most cases they could not marry without the inheritance" (Ruggles 2003; pages 154-155). He went on to suggest that the death of the mother also facilitated the marriage of the children, especially sons. These data and interpretations suggest that the United States in the 1800s did not have the kind of stem household system described by Berkner and others in which a child and his/her partner married and lived with the married parents until the parents died. Instead, this American system sounds like one in which the

child remained single until one of the parents died and then the child married and lived with the surviving parent.

For all of these reasons, I believe that my description of the Northwest European family system in the past as “predominantly nuclear (or a weak stem form)” matches quite accurately the American data of the 1800s. It is difficult for me to describe in very different terms a system where married siblings almost never lived together, where most older couples did not live with married children, where nearly half of the widowed did not live with married children, where children usually did not marry and live with married parents, and where the coresidence of married children and a parent usually occurred only after one parent died. The American household system of the 1800s, thus, poses no challenge to my general characterization of being “predominantly nuclear (or a weak stem form)”.

Theories for Family Changes in the 1800s and 1900s

Slide 9 provides an interesting graph documenting changes in intergenerational households in the United States between 1850 and 2000. As I noted earlier, such change after 1800 is consistent with the theory I presented in *Reading History Sideways*. In addition Slides 10-12 offer a theory to explain those changes. The explanation offered in these slides is basically an economic one relying on the transformation of the economy from agriculture to manufacturing and large-scale commerce. This is a theory that I mention in my theoretical explanations section on pages 69 to 72 of my book. I am not accepting or rejecting the theory here, but it has been well-stated and discussed in other literature, and I have nothing to add to the discussion of these theories that I made in the book. These theories also pose no threat to the theses presented in the book.

Daniel Scott Smith and Family Change

On another point, Ruggles discussed Daniel Scott Smith's 1993 paper, noting that Smith and I have different views of the origins of the myth about the change from extended to nuclear households (see Slides 14-15). I acknowledge and explain this disagreement on pages 96-97 of the book, arguing that Smith came to the wrong conclusion because he showed no awareness of the use of reading history sideways methods in the past. No new information or argument was presented in Ruggles' discussion to show that Smith's position is preferred over my own. I retain the position I took in the book.

I also note that Smith's article is not consistent with the argument that there were many extended families in the Northwest European past. As I state in the book, "Smith argued that it was well known to these scholars of the 1600s, 1700s, and 1800s [John Locke, Adam Smith, and Alfred Marshall] that, in Northwest Europe, parents and their married children tended to maintain separate residences and lead relatively independent lives" (*Reading History Sideways*, page 96). Consequently, Smith's argument is not sympathetic to the position that there were many stem households in the Northwest European past.

Plausibility of Developmental Thinking as an Influence on Family Change

Although Ruggles spent most of his time in his discussion of *Reading History Sideways* on my first thesis concerning the influence of the developmental paradigm and reading history sideways in creating myths about a great family transition, he also expressed skepticism about the influence of these ideas and conclusions on later family change. He wrote in his final point of the final slide (Slide 16) that "I find it implausible that these people had a significant impact on behavior either in the West or elsewhere in the world."

I will clarify this point by noting that *Reading History Sideways* argued that it was the ideas of the developmental paradigm, reading history sideways, and the conclusions of scholars

of the 1600s, 1700s, and 1800s that had an important influence on subsequent behavior. I observed that these ideas were translated into four propositions of developmental idealism: that modern society is good and attainable; that modern family is good and attainable; that the modern family is a cause as well as an effect of a modern society; and that individuals have the right to be free and equal, with social relationships being based on consent. I argued that these ideas grew out of the developmental paradigm, reading history sideways, and the conclusions of several generations of scholars and have had enormous subsequent impact in the West and elsewhere.

In *Reading History Sideways*, I provide extensive evidence showing the power of these ideas for various aspects of social change. For example, I provide extensive information showing how the ideas espoused by such individuals as Locke, Malthus, Smith, and Marx on a variety of topics including liberty, equality, birth control, and family structure have been powerful for subsequent events and behavior. Similarly, the ideas of the Enlightenment (the period of many of the scholars I deal with in *Reading History Sideways*) have had implications for subsequent behavior and events. Chapters 8-12 provide much of this evidence and additional evidence could be presented in support of the thesis.

Although I am convinced that these ideas have had great influence around the world, I state at the end of *Reading History Sideways* that because scholars have not focused a systematic research agenda on developmental idealism “we still know very little about the distribution of developmental thought in the general population, the extent to which beliefs in developmental idealism have changed over time, the precise factors influencing the adoption of such beliefs, and the consequences of beliefs in developmental idealism for family processes and relationships” (page 241). I outline in the book an agenda for expanding this knowledge

and have launched a research program implementing parts of this agenda. I am happy to report that the new data are consistent with the thesis presented in *Reading History Sideways* (see Thornton et al. 2004, 2005; available as working papers on the web at: <http://di.psc.isr.umich.edu/pubs/>).

My Citation System

Another issue that came up in the critique of *Reading History Sideways* is that the citation method used in the book may have caused some difficulties. For example, Ruggles' Slide 7 states:

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] 1894.¹²

The citation system that I used in the book, the *author-date citation and reference list* system, is, with a modest variation, the same citation system that I have used throughout my career, without a single complaint. I apologize if this system has caused confusion or difficulties. However, it is one of the standard citation systems, with a modest variation, described in the *Chicago Manual of Style*¹³ (1993: p. 637-699).

¹² Please note that the exact citation style mentioned here by is slightly different than the one used in *Reading History Sideways*.

¹³ The Manual notes that “the system of documentation generally most economical in space, in time (for author, editor, and typesetter), and in costs (to publisher and public)—in short, the most practical—is the author-date system. The University of Chicago Press strongly recommends this system of documentation for all its publications in the natural sciences and most of those in the social sciences” (p. 641). Additionally, the *Manual* provides guidance on dealing with reprints of “very old books, [in which case] the original publication date, enclosed in brackets, may precede the reprint date” (p. 699). Also the basic author-date citation and reference list system is used in the journals *Demography*, *American Sociological Review*, and *American Journal of Sociology*,

Because the citation system used in *Reading History Sideways* represents a slight modification to the standard system, I wrote an explanation of it to include in the book. However, the Press editors requested its removal because they believed that the system was standard, straightforward, and did not need to be explained; I acceded to their authority and wisdom on the subject and deleted the explanation.

However, in the spirit of aiding future readers, I provide here an explanation of the system. First, the system identifies authors by last name and date in the text and footnotes, with that information being used to find the full bibliographic information about the cite in the list of references beginning on page 249. Second, for many of my references, I do not use the original version of the article or book, but use a subsequent edition or printing. In these cases I list the date of the edition that I use first and the date of the original edition (to the extent I know it) second (which I note is the opposite order stated by Ruggles in his slide). I like this system because it both gives the reference to the edition that I used and gives the reader the original date of publication to provide historical context. Third, in those cases when there are few citations supporting a point, I put those citations in the text, but when there is a long string of supporting citations, I place them in a footnote. Fourth, I often cite in the text and footnotes both the work of original scholars and the work of scholars commenting on the original scholars. In these cases, the decision was to list the original scholars first and then list the commentators later. In these cases, I inserted the words “see also” in front of the list of subsequent commentators on the original scholars and points. Fifth, in some cases, in the text I referred to a specific author and then provided additional scholars supporting the points of that

primary journals of my main disciplines, demography and sociology. It was also the system recommended by the University of Chicago Press, the keepers of the *Manual of Style*, for *Reading History Sideways*.

author. In those cases, I indicated the specific reference with the word “see”, and additional supporting people were introduced as “see also”.

Conclusion

I conclude this paper where I began—with an expression of appreciation to the participants in the 2005 SSHA session for the time and energy they committed to *Reading History Sideways* and thank them for the helpful observations they made. I appreciate the opportunity the session gave to discuss the book and debate its conclusions and implications. As I said in the preface of the book, quoting Francis Jennings, “This book ranges widely in subject matter and research disciplines, and it offers more than the ordinary number of opportunities for error; that I have inadvertently taken advantage of some of these opportunities may be the one certainty of the whole process” (page x). However, as I have indicated throughout this paper, Ruggles did not identify any of these errors. Instead, he missed several of my main points, misread others, and came to inaccurate conclusions concerning *Reading History Sideways*. At the same time, I appreciate the impetus that Ruggles’ comments gave me to provide clarification concerning the book and to prepare additional material providing detailed documentation of how specific scholars from the 1700s and 1800s read history sideways to create beliefs about family change that were later discovered to be myths. I look forward to future discussions and critiques of the issues, arguments, and conclusions of the book.

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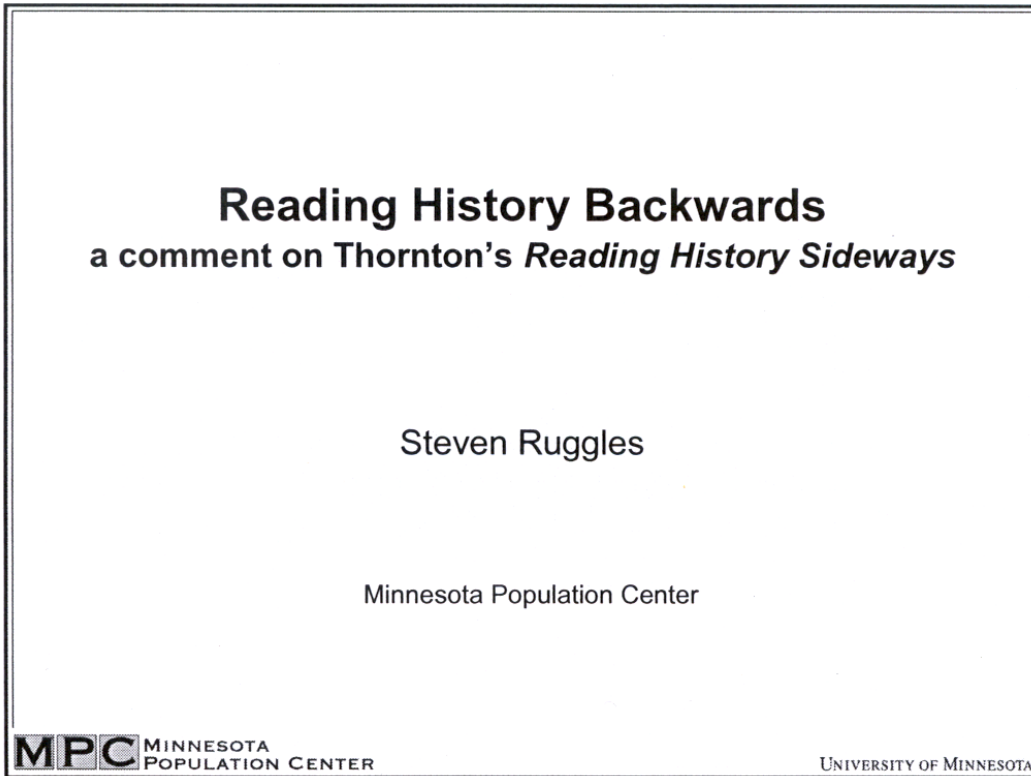
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Appendix

Ruggles' PowerPoint Slides with Brief Thornton Discussion

Slide 1:



Title Page¹

¹ This and other PowerPoint slides were scanned directly from Ruggles' handout at the Social Science History Association meetings.

Slide 2:

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

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The first problem with this slide is that the suggestion that the scholars of the 1700s and 1800s described "Europe" as a single entity represents a misunderstanding of my arguments. I made great efforts in *Reading History Sideways* to follow the arguments of earlier scholars by making various important distinctions between Northwest Europe and other parts of the continent, especially Eastern Europe. Such distinctions are critical to a proper understanding of *Reading History Sideways*. (*Reading History Sideways*, pages 47-72; Thornton paper, pages 6-8)

The second issue with this slide is that I exerted great effort in *Reading History Sideways* to show that scholars of the 1700s and 1800s could not pinpoint when they thought the supposed great transition in family life occurred, and there is no place in *Reading History Sideways* that justifies Ruggles' claim that I said it occurred before 1700 (*Reading History Sideways*, pages 67-69; Thornton paper, pages 6-8).

Slide 3:

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.

For my brief summary of the book, please see Thornton Paper, pages 2-6. Also, see *Reading History Sideways*, pages 3-12 and 230-243.

Slide 4:

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 ling 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.

For my brief summary of the book, please see Thornton Paper, pages 2-6. Also, see *Reading History Sideways*, pages 3-12 and 230-243.

Slide 5:

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.

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The claim that "there was no scholarly consensus about a great family transition among scholars writing before the mid-19th century (or more likely, early 20th century)" would have to account for the extensive discussions of elements of the supposed great family transition in the works of Alexander, Condorcet, Hume, Malthus, Millar, Smith, Durkheim, Engels, Le Play, Maine, Morgan, Thwing and Thwing, Sumner, Westermarck, Senior, Alison, Jones, Lubbock, and Robertson (all writing in the 1700s and 1800s). In addition, to the documentation in *Reading History Sideways* (see especially pages 61-64) and in my response (pages 8-10), see Thornton, 2005b, 2005d, 2005e, 2005f.

Regarding the statement that "A great family transition did actually take place, starting after 1850 in the U.S. but perhaps earlier in the industrialized parts of Europe," I indicate that *Reading History Sideways* presents enormous amounts of evidence documenting family change after 1800. Not only do I argue that there were many changes in family life in Europe and the U.S. after 1800, but the discussion of those changes are central to the later sections of my book and are supportive of my overall thesis. (*Reading History Sideways*, pages 133-179; Thornton Paper, page 10).

The slide concludes that "Therefore, theories of family change appearing after 1850 were probably based mainly on observation rather than reading history sideways." A similar claim is repeated in Slide 16. In my paper, I referred to this alternative method as the Personal Observation Method (pages 11-22). Ruggles does not explain what the Personal Observation Method is or show how scholars of the 1700s and 1800s used it. I refer readers to the enormous body of writings showing the widespread use of reading history sideways by scholars of this period. These writings are documented in the book (pages 13-80) and reviewed (with links to further strong evidence) in my paper (pages 11-22). Also see Thornton 2005b, 2005c, 2005d, 2005e, 2005f.

Slide 6:

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)

This quote is slightly (but not consequentially) different from what I said in the book. I stand by the claim in the quote.

Slide 7:

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

The criticism of my citation scheme is baffling. With encouragement from the University of Chicago Press, I used this citation method, which is a clear and commonly used one (Thornton paper, pages 32-33).

Slide 8:

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.

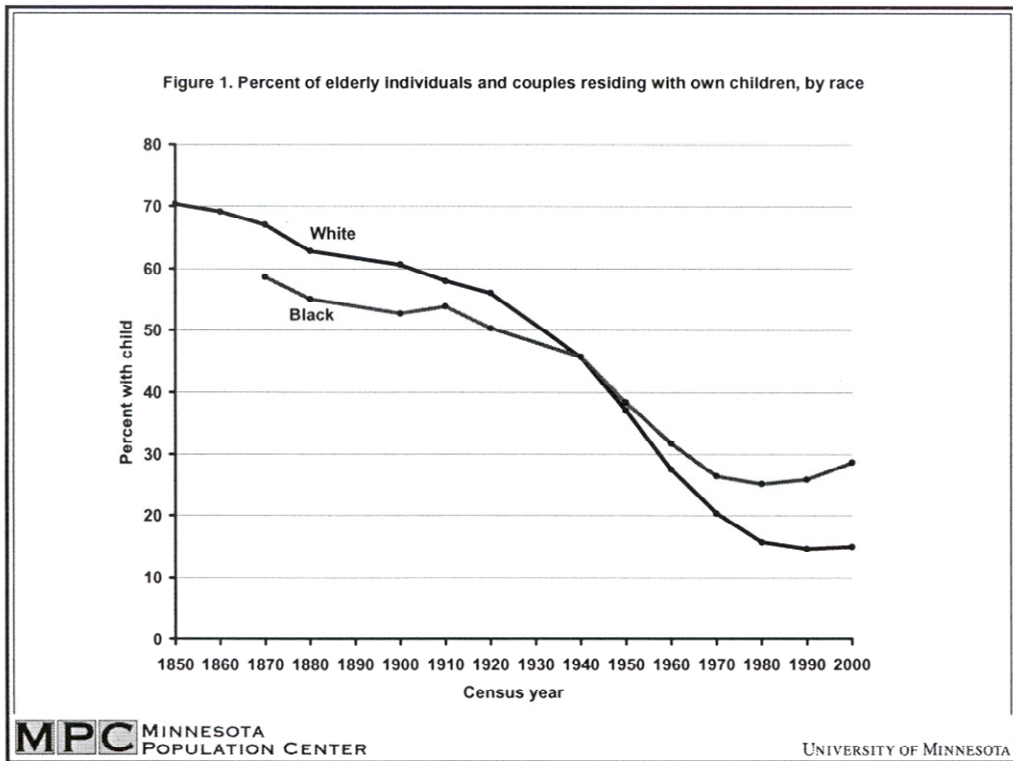
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The first sentence in this Le Play quote was provided by me on page 60 of *Reading History Sideways*. The quote comes from a section of Le Play’s work where he was describing his family classification scheme consisting of patriarchal, stem, and unstable family types and their distribution across the regions of Europe. I use the quote in *Reading History Sideways* in exactly the same way—describing the three family types and Le Play’s findings concerning the distribution of family types across Europe. (Thornton paper, pages 16-22).

Ruggles suggested that this quote from Le Play backs up his claim that scholars were really writing from personal observation rather than reading history sideways (see also Slides 5 and 16). The suggestion that Le Play was actually using the Personal Observation Method here is unsupported as Le Play does not indicate in this section of his writings why he believed that unstable families were multiplying in France. He is silent here as to whether his data come from the Personal Observation Method, censuses, surveys, other scholars, or reading history sideways. In this section of Le Play’s writings where this quote appears, he is only contrasting Western Europe with Eastern Europe and other places. As I argue in *Reading History Sideways* and elsewhere, Le Play used that distinction and the reading history sideways approach to turn his geographical insights into a story about family change (*Reading History Sideways*, pages 58-64; Thornton paper, pages 16-22; Thornton 2005d)

The final point concerning this slide is that the point about Le Play “not talking about changes that took place 200 years earlier” is a straw man. I never claimed that Le Play believed the changes occurred 200 years before Le Play. (See Slide 2).

Slide 9:



This is an interesting graph documenting changes in intergenerational households in the United States from 1850 to 2000. The purpose for presenting it, however, is not clear. One possibility is to show the enormous changes that occurred in living arrangements in the United States after 1850. I have addressed the relevance of that point in my discussion of Slide 5. A second possibility is to show the existence of many intergenerational households in the United States in 1850. I postpone my discussion of the relevance of that point until Slide 13.

Slide 10:

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)

This slide provides a quote from Thomas Eliot in 1935 explaining why intergenerational households had declined in the United States from 1885 to 1935. It is not clear how this explanation relates to *Reading History Sideways*. I discuss this and other theories in *Reading History Sideways* (pages 69-72; also Thornton paper, page 29). The theory poses no threat to the theses of *Reading History Sideways*.

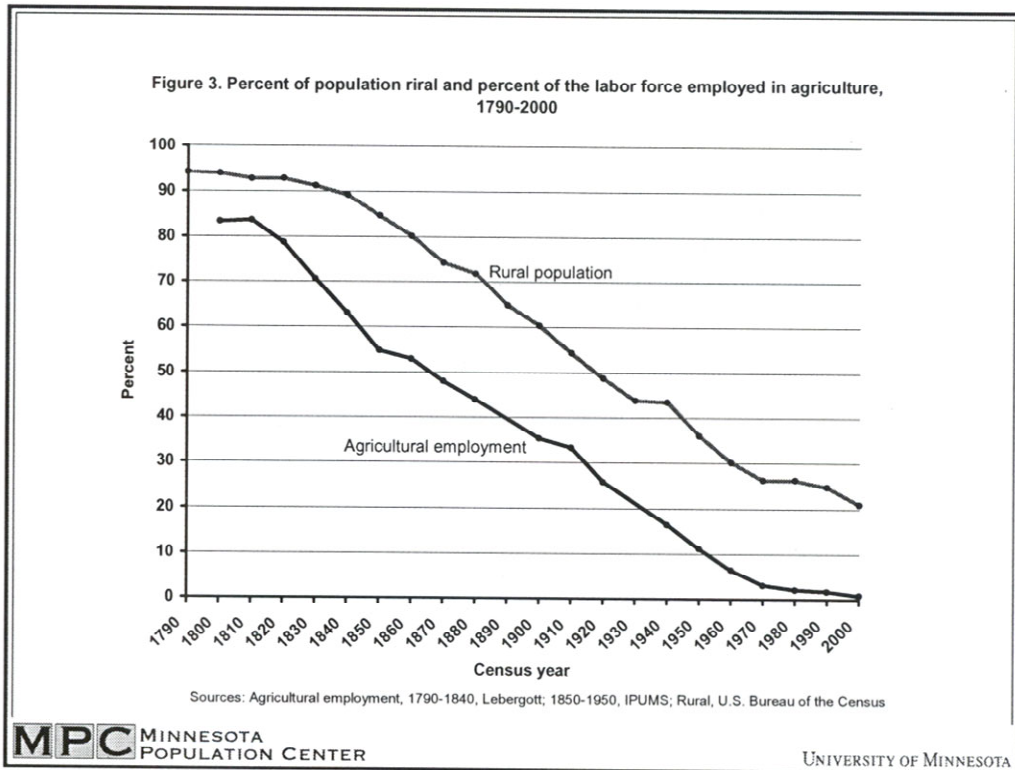
Slide 11:

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

This slide provides a socioeconomic theory for the decline in intergenerational households. It has no effect on the arguments in *Reading History Sideways*. I discuss this and other theories in *Reading History Sideways* (pages 69-72; also Thornton paper, page 29). *Reading History Sideways* offers an ideational theory of family changes after 1800 in the United States and elsewhere (pages 133-179) and recognizes and accepts as part of a complete explanation the theory offered here (see *Reading History Sideways*, page 175-177).

Slide 12:





This slide documents the well known decline in the United States of rural residence and agricultural employment from 1790 to 2000. This supports the theory in Slide 11, which I have already addressed.

Slide 13:

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.”

In my paper (pages 22-29) I reported that my quote of Ruggles is precisely accurate and is consistent with the rest of the text surrounding the quote.

My paper (pages 22-29) indicated that Ruggles misquoted me in an important way. The quote of mine in his second paragraph of his slide should read: “The new historical research found that, in Northwest Europe, households had been predominantly nuclear (or a weak stem form) for hundreds of years.” In addition, the Slide’s quote of me left out important contextual information from my two paragraphs which is important for interpreting my meaning (See page 84 of *Reading History Sideways* and page 23 of Thornton paper).

In my paper (pages 22-29) I showed that Ruggles has stated in multiple publications that there are few adherents to the myth that extended families predominated in the past.

In my paper (pages 22-29) I used data from Ruggles publications to show that my description of households in the past as “predominantly nuclear (or a weak stem form)” accurately portrays the United States in the 1800s. I find it difficult to use a very different phrase than the one I used to succinctly describe the kind of household system described for the United States by Ruggles.

Slide 14:

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)

See Slide 15

Slide 15:

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)

In *Reading History Sideways* (pages 96-97) I reported in a section labeled “A Dissenting Voice” that Daniel Scott Smith had a different position concerning the creation of the myth about large and complex extended families in the Northwest European past. I argued in that section of the book that Smith reached a different conclusion than I did because he was not aware of the reading history sideways approach and that the scholars of the 1700s through the early 1900s based their descriptions of Northwest Europe in a yet earlier period on the non-Northwest European present. Ruggles provided no additional evidence to adjudicate my difference of opinion with Smith, and I maintain the correctness of my position. (Also see Thornton paper, pages 29-30)

Slide 16:

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.

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As I stated in my paper, Ruggles' comments on *Reading History Sideways* missed several of my main points, misread others, and came to inaccurate conclusions concerning the book.

I discussed in Slide 5 the Personal Observation Method that Ruggles posits as the method used by scholars in the past to document family change. Also, see Slide 8 in relationship to Le Play and his method.

Finally, as I argued in my paper (pages 30-32), *Reading History Sideways* makes a strong case that ideas and arguments about many family and personal issues emphasized by scholars during the 1600s through the 1800s—a period that included the Enlightenment—had significant influence on subsequent family beliefs and behaviors. The ideas and arguments supporting freedom, equality, small families, and independent living promulgated by such authors as Locke, Malthus, Smith, and Marx are widely believed to have been influential (See pages 133-243 of *Reading History Sideways*).