

**A Brief Response to Thornton's Response
to my Response to his Response
to my Critique of *Reading History Sideways***

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The first part of Thornton's new response is devoted to a detailed explication of my characterization of my own work. Thornton has found statements in my publications that I had completely forgotten about, and defends himself well against my charge that he misrepresented my work. I regret my allegation that Thornton consistently misread my work.

The next section turns to my critique of Thornton's approach. I confess that I exaggerated some of the shortcomings of Thornton's research. In particular, in my review of the book I made the inaccurate statement that "Thornton never quotes his sources." As Thornton documents, he does quote historical sources at least 11 times in the course of the book (Thornton 2006b: 91).¹ Again, I regret the error.

What Thornton's response does not accomplish, however, is rebuttal of my substantive argument. The central point of my response to Thornton was expressed in my third paragraph:

Even if reading history sideways has the potential for error, not every statement supported by geographic comparison is wrong. I contend, in fact, that most of the generalizations Thornton cites about historical family change by these scholars have turned out to be true. In particular, the four key elements of Thornton's great family transition—an increase in nuclear families, an increase in marriage age, an increase in the status of women, and a rise of individualism—all probably occurred at various points in the European past (Ruggles 2006:1).

Thornton does not address the substance of this critique until page 48 of his response to my response. Then, after summarizing my general point, he argues that I am attacking a straw man: according to Thornton, he never claimed that such changes did not occur. Rather, he merely argued that the changes were of much smaller magnitude than had been anticipated by Laslett, Hajnal, and Macfarlane. He concludes with a statement that he declines to assess my evidence:

In the interest of space, I do not discuss these articles and books and what they do and do not show, but only indicate that I found no support in them for Ruggles' thesis that the historical descriptions of the scholars of the late 1700s and 1800s about the Northwest European past were correct (Thornton 2006b: 50).

¹ I should have said that Thornton does not quote sources that support his novel interpretations of the history of thought about changes in the family. His quotes are generally about the comparative method or broader themes and do not provide documentation for Thornton's revisionist interpretation of theories of family change.

Thornton does not discuss my contention that an increase in marriage age, an increase in the status of women, and a rise of individualism all probably occurred at various points in the European past. He does address, in a footnote, my suggestion that there was an increase in nuclear families in the nineteenth century. Thornton apparently accepts my evidence that a shift from stem families to nuclear families was probably underway in the nineteenth century, but he maintains that “any changes in living arrangements after 1800 are irrelevant” (Thornton 2006b: 50).²

I disagree. The earliest of Thornton’s intellectuals to comment on changes in family structure is Le Play, whose earliest publication on the subject was in 1855. Thornton discusses no other theorists writing before the twentieth century who posit a change in living arrangements.³ Like Le Play, much of the twentieth-century theory on family change assumes that the nuclear family was associated with industrialization, suggesting that the change should have occurred during the industrial revolution, not earlier (Smith 1993). Thus, nineteenth-century family changes are clearly relevant for evaluating the validity of theories of change in living arrangements.

In the second major substantive element of my critique, I expressed doubt about the early timing of a theory of a great family transition. In his first response, Thornton maintained “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” (Thornton 2006a: 9). In my first response, I complained that in a close examination of that section of the book, I found it impossible to determine which idea was being attributed to which author; in general, the section makes large generalizations about transitions in the family, often followed by large footnotes citing a dozen sources spread over three or four centuries, with no page numbers. I do not think this constitutes adequate documentation. In his newest response, Thornton addresses this issue by again listing many authors, without specifying who had what idea or how they expressed those ideas (Thornton 2006b: 32). In the absence of such documentation, I remain unpersuaded.

² The same footnote also makes two comments about my discussion of Le Play: “I will clarify some confusion introduced by several of Ruggles’ incorrect claims in this section of his response. First, Le Play first published his main findings on the issues at hand in 1855. Second, Le Play was certainly discussing a transition from large extended families as he used such families in Eastern Europe and outside Europe as an indication of the Northwest European past” (Thornton 2006b: 50). In evaluating these comments, it is important to understand that Thornton apparently worked from a translated selection of excerpts from Le Play’s extensive writings rather than from the original books. He relies mainly on three brief excerpts from two of Le Play’s books (a total of 20 pages), that were edited, translated, and interpreted by Catherine Bodard Silver (1982). As I noted (Ruggles 2006: 1), Le Play (1870) wrote an entire book about changes in the family, which Thornton does not cite. I cannot find any discussion in Silver’s translated selections from Le Play of a transition from large extended families in the Northwest European past; if this does exist, it would be helpful to provide a more specific citation.

³ “I have not conducted the exercise of specifically cataloguing other scholars before 1900 discussing a change in living arrangements, but am confident that such a systematic review would produce additional examples” (Thornton 2006b: 47).

References

- Le Play, Frédéric. 1870. *L'organisation de la famille selon le vrai modele signale par l'histoire de toutes les races et de tous les temps* (Tours).
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- Smith, Daniel S. 1993. "The Curious History of Theorizing about the History of the Western Nuclear Family." *Social Science History* 17, 325-353.
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