

# THE FAMILY IN EUROPE

## Contents

Classical Greece and Rome  
Postclassical Period :Christianity  
Early Modern Western Europe/British North America  
19<sup>th</sup> Century : (Industrial Society - The Western Family )  
Contemporary Period

## Classical Greece and Rome

**Background** Classical society in the Mediterranean region developed first in Greece and then the Hellenistic states, but was then followed by the rise of Rome and the expansion of the Roman Empire. The society was marked by a rather flexible polytheistic religion, which yielded stories of the often chaotic family life of the gods and goddesses but not the kind of religious endorsement provided by Hinduism. Political life was vital, as in China, but with less emphasis on the family as mirror of the state. In Rome, however, particularly under the early Empire, the government actively promoted the importance of family life and procreation. (The Emperor Augustus was concerned about signs of a decline in the birth rate of the aristocracy, and worked to redress this.) Social structure was marked by the importance of slavery, along with strong emphasis on the importance of an aristocracy at the other end of the social scale.

**Household** Extended families were emphasized both in Greece and Rome, and households often included grandparents, a variety of servants and others – providing a number of adults who might relate to the children involved. Extended families were defined, as in China, by relationship to the father. Families were also responsible for the arrangement of marriage. While very young marriage was rare, women were often committed in their early teens, to males in their mid-20s.

**Family honor** Mediterranean society developed strong notions of family honor, associated particularly with the need to control female sexual behavior and punish deviation or violation. In Roman law, for example, the father of a married woman who committed adultery was authorized to kill her, while the husband was expected to divorce her; failure to do so was a mark of dishonor. Revenge efforts against rape were also prominent. To some extent the famous Trojan War was a demonstration of the power of possessive sexual jealousy.

**Gender patterns** Greek culture held women to be markedly inferior, and in the upper classes there was some effort to seclude them in the family compound. Roman attitudes were more lenient, though early Roman law stipulated the power of husbands to punish deviant wives. Later Roman law provided more protection for women, who also had considerable presence in public gatherings. At the same time, divorce was not uncommon among the upper classes in Roman society. In cases of divorce, as in all patriarchal families, the children went to the father.

**Homosexuality** Upper-class men widely indulged homosexual relationships with adolescent boys, even when the men themselves were married and heads of household. The practice continued in Rome to a lesser degree, though amid some disapproval. Romanic and sexual attachments often exceeded those involving wives. Lesbian experience was also described, but there is far less information about actual practice.

**Slavery** Slavery in the classical Mediterranean was a diverse state, though always involving the slave as property. Some slaves were assigned to difficult and dangerous work, for example in silver mines, but others served as tutors, operated shops, performed other services. It was not uncommon for slaves to marry, sometimes to freeborn men or women. Roman law devoted a great deal of attention to the legal status of the offspring of such mixed marriages, usually concluding that the children remained slaves though with opportunities for manumission. Mediterranean slavery does not seem to have involved the

massive issues of family disruption that would be associated with American slavery in the early modern period.

**Childhood** Infanticide was widely practiced; it has been estimated that up to 20% of all female infants born in ancient Athens were killed, again mainly through exposure to the elements. Roman governments (like their Chinese counterpart) passed laws against the practice, but they had little effect. Again as in China, the Mediterranean provides vivid examples of the tension between grief at the death of an older child, and considerable resignation. Roman writers noted how dangerous it was to form attachments to a child given the uncertainty of its survival. (As one put it, “when you kiss your child, you say to yourself, ‘Perhaps it will be dead in the morning’”). The importance of obedience to parental authority was strongly emphasized. On the other hand, classical Mediterranean society also admitted the beauty or energy of youth, and in some cases this may have created a certain degree of latitude. There is interesting evidence, from Rome, of adolescent boys openly complaining that their parents were not indulging them sufficiently.

**Legacy** The collapse of Roman society in the West by the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE, and the attendant rise of Christianity, differentiated families in the classical Mediterranean from those that would emerge later on in many, often decisive, ways, particularly in Western Europe. This contrasted with the greater continuity in China and India. On the other hand, some features, like the attachment to family honor, clearly persisted at least around the Mediterranean basin itself.

**Conclusion** Comparisons among the major classical societies are understandably complex. Similarities are vital, based particularly on reliance on extended families and patriarchal gender assumptions and on the importance of the family as an economic unit. On the other hand, distinctive features stand out as well. Some, like the approval for homosexual relationships in classical Greece, would prove transient, but others were more durable. The obvious challenge is to sort out the shared and civilization-specific features, and also to tackle the issue of ongoing legacy after the classical period itself.

### Study questions

1. What features of family life in the classical Mediterranean were most clearly shared by the other major classical societies?
2. Compare the impacts of Mediterranean slavery and the Indian caste system on family life.
3. One of the great unknowns of early family history is the rate of what today is called domestic abuse or violence. Do you think this kind of abuse was likely to have been widespread? Would it have been equally likely in all the classical societies?
4. Why did women not rebel against the inferior position in classical societies?

### Further reading

Suzanne Dixon, *The Roman Family* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992)

Beryl Rawson, *Children and Childhood in Roman Italy* (Oxford University Press, 2003)

Geoffrey Nathan, *The Family in Late Antiquity: the rise of Christianity and the endurance of tradition* (Routledge, 2000)

Roger Just, *Women in Athenian Law and Life* (Routledge, 1989)

Thomas K. Hubbard, *A Companion to Greek and Roman Sexuality* (Blackwell, 2010)

## Christianity: Western Europe

**Cultural geography** Christianity spread to many regions, and not all versions of the religion were the same, even before the advent of Protestantism in the West. This first exploration deals with impacts in Western Europe from late Roman days into the 16<sup>th</sup> century, even though during the first half of this period Orthodox Christianity in Eastern Europe was in many ways more significant. Historians have zeroed in on some particularly interesting, possibly decisive, effects of Catholic Christianity, against which other versions (and, later, Protestantism) can be compared.

**Basic approach** Christianity maintained from Judaism a strong emphasis on the family as a divinely ordained institution, with important collective obligations (not aimed at the happiness of individual members). Priorities showed clearly in the unusually strong opposition to divorce.

**Tensions** Families played a vital role in the early church, often centering religious services. However Jesus offered a somewhat ambivalent view of family, encouraging many initial followers to abandon their families in service of religious truth – an approach reminiscent of Buddhism. The apostle Paul, himself unmarried, also encouraged followers to avoid the distraction of marriage if possible. This ambivalence would be maintained in a sense in Catholic doctrine. On the one hand, marriage was a sacrament, providing divine sanction for the formation of the family. On the other hand, the holiest state, maintained by priests as well as monks and nuns, was one of celibacy. In practice some Christian families experienced the tension themselves, as a husband or wife might pull away to join a religious institution.

**Sexuality** Ambivalence was on full display concerning sexuality. On the one hand, the Christian family was urged to procreate. Jewish regulations aimed at protecting family sexuality were fully installed, including the commandments against adultery and coveting a neighbor's wife. Sexuality before marriage was strongly reprobated, and most Christian communities worked hard to discourage it, with group-oriented rather than individual courtship practices as well as parentally-arranged marriage. In principle masturbation was also considered sinful, though there is no way to determine the practical impact of this approach. Sexuality, in other words, was both essential and dangerous. And of course many individual Christians, from ascetics who flourished in the early centuries to members of monastic orders, deliberately shunned sexuality altogether. Christianity also discouraged earlier practices of concubinage in the upper classes, which both expressed the hostility to unregulated sexuality and reinforced the institution of monogamy.

**Homosexuality** Western Christianity was firmly opposed to homosexuality, here too incorporating a Jewish tradition. This dramatically reversed patterns that had prevailed in the classical Mediterranean, forcing most homosexual liaisons underground for many centuries. There is some debate over when this policy was established – early in the Church or a bit later – but it seems to have intensified by the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

**Gender** Christianity departed from Judaism with regard to the spiritual position of women, granting them equal footing in religious services. And the revered image of Mary, as mother, permeated Christian culture at various points. Yet male superiority was maintained, including a longstanding belief that women were the more likely sources of sin, particularly in their potential for sexual temptation. It is simply not clear whether the Christian approach to gender had any particular impact on ordinary families, in terms of tempering assertions of male superiority. There is considerable evidence concerning the frequency of domestic violence in Christian Europe during the postclassical period. On the other hand, one relevant feature of the religion was a belief, in principle, that marriages should be contracted only with the consent of both parties. This did not inhibit the prevalence of arranged marriages orchestrated with the economic or political interests of the family in mind – with the inevitable result that some women, particularly, were saddled with older or objectionable partners. However the practice of child marriage was probably somewhat less common in Christian societies than in some other cultures. Finally, the position of widows was often precarious, as they frequently were under the control of sons or other male relatives for access to any property and usually discouraged from remarriage.

**Childhood: a debate** One of the first great works in the history of childhood, Philippe Aries' *Centuries of Childhood* (orig. 1960, tr. 1962) contended that childhood was not a formally recognized stage in premodern Europe. Possibly because of the need for diligent child labor, children with adult qualities were particularly valued. This thesis provoked a considerable backlash, from historians who found varied evidence concerning the care and affection that parents expressed for children in the postclassical period. As the dust settled, it seemed likely that an accurate picture lay somewhat in between. Adults were concerned for children; they enjoyed watching children play and participated directly; they lamented the loss of a child. On the other hand, a certain degree of fatalism, given high levels of mortality, entered in as well. And children were sometimes allowed to make decisions, for example about jobs and apprenticeships, as if they were adults; in England, a 12-year-old was even elected to the medieval parliament at one point. Boundary lines were less sharp than they would become in later periods.

**Children** Images of children were common in Christianity, from the baby Jesus to Christ's reaching out to children. The opposition to infanticide has been noted. At the same time, Christian families maintained many traditional practices, including a preference for sons (though this may have been slightly less pronounced than in some other societies). Belief in original sin was a potential complication: children were seen as born tainted until purified by baptism, and this might encourage unusually strict disciplinary practices. American Indians, for example, noted the unusual reliance on spanking among European colonists. Efforts to encourage Christian education long contended against the widespread need for children's labor.

**Kinship and innovation** Arguably the most important change that Christianity introduced into family life centered on kinship. While Christian families maintained kinship ties, the religion downplayed their importance as part of the effort to change the balance between family loyalties and religious devotion. Furthermore, the Catholic Church imposed some very clear limits on marriage among kin, particularly limiting selection of cousins. Incest taboos, in other words, were extended more widely. Many scholars – particularly, anthropologists – have seen in this a fundamental distinction from “Oriental” family traditions, promoting greater individualism and ultimately the other trappings of modernity. These are big claims that go beyond an assessment of family history, and probably they took shape over an extended period of time. There is little sign of unusual individualism in European personality types during the postclassical centuries. (Note that, discussed above, Christian definition of core family was not really individualistic, an interesting complication.) But the claims deserve serious attention, at least over the longer haul; they may link to more measurable cultural changes in the West later on.

**Kinship and family** Whatever the larger consequences, it is clear that marriage among close relatives fairly quickly declined in Western Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire. By the postclassical period reliance on large kinship networks, and even knowledge of extensive kinship ties, had also declined – particularly outside the aristocracy. European families remained patrilineal, but the mother's near relatives might remain important as well. Most important, the reduction of kinship emphasis increased reliance on the nuclear family (and therefore also on husband-wife interaction) or a narrower definition of the extended family. Large family compounds, with many collateral relatives, were uncommon. These changes would generate further redefinitions in the early modern period, with the rise of what is commonly called the “European-type family”, discussed in chapter 17.

### Study questions

1. What aspects of family life were not deeply altered by Christianity?
2. Did Christianity encourage basic redefinitions of gender relations in the family?
3. What were the key complexities in the Christian approach to sexuality?
4. Why does the Christian approach to kinship seem particularly important in introducing wider change in European society?

### Further reading

Rosemary Ruether, *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family* (Beacon Press, 2000)

David Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy and Heresy in Ancient Christianity* (Oxford University Press, 2007)

Margaret Mitchell, *Early Christian Families in Context* (Erdmans, 2003)

Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: men, women and sexual renunciation in early Christianity* (Columbia University Press, 1988)

Jack Goody, *Family and Kinship in Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 1983)

## Early Modern Western Europe/British North America

**Main trends** Several factors introduced some fundamental changes into Western family life, some of which were then carried over into the coastal colonies of North America. The rise of what is called the “European-style” family took shape early in the period, with huge implications for family structure and gender roles. Then the rise of Protestantism stimulated further changes, some of which also affected

Catholic regions. Growing commerce and the increasing role of cities, even before industrialization, provided a final element from the late 17<sup>th</sup> century onward, supplemented by other new cultural influences in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Not all of these developments neatly meshed, and there were significant divisions in family behavior between middle and lower classes, and between cities and the countryside.

**European-style family** Catholic kinship rules may have created some of the basis for a further change in family structure, but it was apparently a new concern for protecting access to property that prompted a more decisive shift. Beginning in the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries, a growing number of West European peasants and artisans began raising their marriage age, to a standard of roughly 25-6 for women, 27-8 for men (an unusually small age gap, as well as a delayed arrangement). This was truly a change from below; the aristocracy did not participate. The goal seems to have been assurance that the new family would have access to property as a nuclear unit (either land or an artisanal shop); concurrently, a growing number of propertyless people simply could not marry. This pattern also helped control the birth rate, which rose slightly in the 16<sup>th</sup> century but then stabilized during most of the 17<sup>th</sup>.

**Implications** Beyond the demographic result, this distinctive family pattern highlighted the independent nuclear unit. Late marriage meant that the children of the union would have little contact with grandparents, who would be reaching an age near death. (This has raised interesting questions about the role of grandparents in children's socialization, as a historical variable.) The importance of broader kinship ties declined further. And while nuclear families might locate near other relatives (based still on patrilineal definitions), literally extended households became far less common. The independent nuclear unit, perhaps supplemented by a laborer or two living in the household, also increased the importance of cooperation between husband and wife as workers, probably modifying though not eliminating patriarchal inequality. Late marriage also increased the importance of community controls over the sexuality of young adults. While there was some expansion of the rate of illegitimate births, they remained in check until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, a growing number of couples, once engaged, did begin to have sex, resulting in a rise in "prebridal pregnancies" that led to births about 7 months after actual marriage. Here was an interesting new tension in family and community life.

**Protestantism** From a family standpoint the obvious result of Protestantism was increased emphasis on the importance of marriage and the family; the idea of a spiritual advantage in celibacy was simply removed. Martin Luther thus pointedly married a former nun. In consequence, by the 17<sup>th</sup> century family manuals in Protestant countries like England began emphasizing the importance of the husband-wife relationship and the importance of mutual happiness, including sexual pleasure. Husbands and fathers, though, were still assigned special responsibility for the moral education of children. Protestant countries, headed by places like Sweden and Scotland, also rapidly expanding schooling, though still particularly for boys, as the literacy rate began to rise rapidly. Here was an interesting change in the experience of childhood and in the obligations of many parents. Some of these changes also began to show up in Catholic countries, though often slightly later. Growing commerce provided new motivations to promote literacy and numeracy regardless of religion.

**New consumerism: the family as haven** By the late 17<sup>th</sup> century family life was further altered, at least for those with some means, by new consumer opportunities. Overseas trade was bringing products like coffee, tea, sugar, chocolate, and while some of these were consumed in shops, like the burgeoning coffee houses – largely a male preserve – others contributed to new family occasions. This shift was further enhanced by growing interest in chinaware and table settings. Increasingly, many families took an evening meal together, organized and scheduled by the wife and mother – this replaced more slapdash eating patterns. Revealingly, cookbooks, which previously had focused on preparing food for occasional village festivals, now focused on cooking for the family. Interest in better bedding, decorated armoires and other furnishings, similarly demonstrated a desire to make the home a more attractive and comfortable place – indeed, the family was one of the principal foci of rising consumerism in general. All of this further suggested a partial separation between family and the local community. Some historians had argued that, in a more competitive economic environment, men were shifting from strong emotional reliance on male-male friendships, to greater attachment to family members. These changes were clearest for families above the poverty level, but they applied to rural as well as urban settings. And even among the poor, emotional investment in marriage (where it was economically possible) may have risen as well.

**Rise of romantic love** Love was not a new topic for the Western family. In the late postclassical period, troubadours had entertained the aristocracy with tales of chivalric love – intense devotion, often outside marriage. It was in the 18<sup>th</sup> century however that romantic love and family began more clearly to intertwine. A new reading genre, the novel, helped promote the notion. The spread of domestic manufacturing gave some young people opportunities to earn some money without waiting for inherited property. Rapid population growth now kicked in as well (British population grew a full 100% between 1750 and 1800), and this meant that parents could no longer provide customary inheritances for all their children anyway, which reduced their authority. The upshot was that a growing number of young people moved away from arranged marriage, forming attachments on their own. By midcentury some law courts in places like Switzerland agreed that if a young person, male or female, objected to a parental choice on grounds that love was impossible, the arrangement was void. Consumerism played a role in this category as well: growing numbers of young people developed new interests in more fashionable and colorful clothing, with courtship appeal in mind. Arranged marriage still occurred; courtship often involved selection of a mate in the same socio-economic category in any event. But the basis for marriage, and perhaps even more the expectations surrounding marriage, were changing for many people.

**A sexual revolution** Among some groups, particularly the lower, less propertied classes in both countryside and city, sexual habits began to change in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as well. Quite simply, more and more people engaged in sex before marriage – with a considerable resulting increase in the rate of illegitimate births. Here was another demonstration of the declining control of parents and community. In some cases, young men and women both eagerly participated in the new license. In other cases, men undoubtedly took advantage of propertyless women, as some propertyless girls, eager for marriage, sought to substitute sexual willingness for dowry only to be disappointed as the men moved on. Respectable groups deplored this trend (and exaggerated it), and by the 19<sup>th</sup> century worked to devise an alternative courtship model that would delay sex. But the disruption was considerable, and lasted certainly for several decades among some groups.

**British North America** Most of the features of the early modern European family were brought by the British colonists to the Americas – including some of the internal tensions and contradictions. American experience was altered somewhat by the greater availability of land and the desperate need for labor. This prompted somewhat younger marriage ages particularly for women – 23 instead of 26 – and slightly higher birth rates – but within the basic framework of the European-style family including its emphasis on nuclearity. New interests in romantic love and selective changes in sexual behavior involved 18<sup>th</sup>-century North America as well, and for essentially the same reasons as applied to Western Europe. American parents may have been somewhat more careful in dealing with their children than was true in Europe, if only because of the need for labor in a situation where older children might simply take off for the frontier. American child-centeredness was more obvious by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as noted by European visitors, but it may have had origins earlier on. In some cases, fathers ceded some property to sons even before the full inheritance, in hopes of maintaining good relations – though there were cases (as in Europe) of bitter, even violent disputes between impatient adult sons and their fathers. (The European-style family was not necessarily good for intergenerational relations.) Overall, however, an overlap in basic family patterns would continue to describe transatlantic history from this point onward – bolstered, of course, by frequent travel and contact and shared reading matter.

**Conclusion** The early modern period saw some intriguing and fundamental changes in Western family life. They were not all fully consistent, and important social class differences opened up as well. But the distinctiveness of the Western family, already suggested in features such as kinship patterns, notably increased. Some of the changes may help explain other innovative behaviors, in areas such as economic innovation or political unrest, though the connections are complicated and debatable. One result however was very clear: by the 18<sup>th</sup> century Europeans boasted family values – including Christian traditions but now more besides – through which they confidently judged and often condemned the family systems of other societies – including their growing colonial holdings. Judgments about marriage, sex and parenting in Asia and Africa became standard fare, into the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beyond.

### Study questions

1. What was the European-style family and why did it take shape?

2. What were some of the new social class differences in family life in the West?
3. How did consumerism intertwine with changes in family life and family formation?
4. What were the main similarities and differences between West European and British North American family patterns?

### Further reading

Mary Hartman, *The Household and the Making of History: a subversive view of the Western past* (Cambridge University Press, 2004)

Marilyn Francus, *Monstrous Motherhood: eighteenth-century cultures and the ideology of domesticity* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013)

Hugh Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western History since 1500* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Longman, 2005)

Katherine Lynch, *Individuals, Families and Communities in Western Europe, 1200-1800* (Cambridge University Press, 2003) (excellent in itself, but also with references to a vast previous historical literature on the subject)

Marilyn Coleman and Lawrence Ganong, eds., *The Social History of the American Family* (4v., Sage, 2014)

## Industrial Society

**Background** The industrial revolution first took shape in Britain, then in other parts of the West from the late 18<sup>th</sup>-early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries onward. It would develop in Japan and Russia beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and then after World War II, and particularly by the 1980s, became the dominant economic form throughout most of the world. The shift from agriculture to industrial base had deep consequences for the family, just as the earlier advent of agriculture had done. This short chapter captures essential features which were then combined with regional traditions and distinctions over the course of the last two centuries.

**Purpose** The most sweeping change involved the virtual elimination of the family as a production unit, aside from some small shops and (declining) family farms. Economic functions remained, but they became somewhat more diffuse. In many cases also, work itself moved outside the home, necessitating difficult decisions about adult family roles and household care. On the other hand, with economic functions shifting, other family purposes might receive greater emphasis, for example as sources of emotional and sexual satisfaction. Over time also, families surfaced an additional role as a consumer unit, for example with the emergence of family vacations or the advent of television as a source of family entertainment.

**Children** Changes in the location and organization of production reduced the economic contributions of children, though child labor might remain a vital resource for some families for some time. New technologies eliminated some children's tasks and also created new safety hazards. Many families also disliked the idea of having their offspring work for total strangers in the new, impersonal settings. To these changes were added laws restricting certain forms of child labor and requiring schooling, though enforcement varied. All of this added up to a redefinition of children from economic assets to liabilities. In turn, this required parents ultimately to move toward a lower birth rate. The typical industrial family ultimately involved 2.5 children or fewer, compared to the earlier 8 or more. Parental expectations had to adjust to this new restriction, which might also encourage much greater attention to the individual child. Birth control methods also gained new importance in marriage, and in some cases the role of marriage as a source of sexual pleasure expanded.

**Child mortality** Industrialization broadly construed also generated the new public health measures and living standards, particularly in the growing cities, that began to cut into traditional levels of child mortality, mainly from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onward. Higher survival rates added to the reasons to cut birth rates, as families realized the implications. But they also freed families from the expectation that one or more children were likely to die (and children from the deaths of siblings). This might make the deaths that did still occur even more painful, but it dramatically changed the emotional experience of most families.

**Gender** Industrializing societies have all generated new educational opportunities for women and this along with the birth rate change raises important questions about traditional patriarchal family relations. These questions might be further sharpened when daughters and particularly wives took jobs outside the home. Generally, women continued to be held to special family responsibilities, but their voice in family decisions often increased (particularly when they brought in a wage of their own). Opportunities for dispute might also become more common.

**Extended family** On the whole the importance of the extended family declined. With industry, many young people moved to the cities, which automatically attenuated family ties at least for a generation or two. The same shift resulted from the ability to earn money independently in young adulthood, without waiting for property inheritance. Often these changes also saw a decline in arranged marriage. Extended family relations did not disappear, particularly amid some regional cultures, but the centrality of the nuclear family increased. At the same time, greater life expectancy might increase interactions between grandparents and grandchildren, though it might also produce new pressure on adult children to care for ageing parents.

**Conclusion** Families managed to adjust to the industrial revolution – another sign of the resilience of the institution. But they had to negotiate a number of changes and on the whole their importance probably declined. On the other hand, in many cases the family's role in providing active emotional support and affection may have increased. A number of cultures saw an increase in discussions of the importance of familial love, both in marriage and in parent-child relations. Overall, the industrial family was a considerably different institution from its more traditional counterpart, though some adjustments were and are painful and regional variations on the industrial pattern were (and are) important as well.

### Study questions

1. Why did industrial societies ultimately require a redefinition of childhood?
2. Why did industrialization ultimately require some shuffling of adult family roles?
3. How did families compensate for the decline of their production functions?

### Further reading

Peter N. Stearns, *The Industrial Turn in World History* (Routledge, 2016)

Edward Shorter, *Making of the Modern Family* (Basic Books, 1975)

## The Western Family in the 19<sup>th</sup> century

**Context** Western European families in the 19<sup>th</sup> century must be approached from several angles. First, they dealt with some of the trends already emerging in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, including new interest in romantic love and new sexual patterns. Second, they were the first families to react to the industrial revolution. Third, their patterns revealed new kinds of social divisions, not only urban-rural but also middle-class/working-class. The results were not uncomplicated. They reflected a mix of some standard reactions to industrialization with some distinctive Western features. Finally, basic Western trends now applied not only to Western Europe but to the settler societies: United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, though with some special features attached to high rates of immigration and the treatment of the indigenous minority. (All the settler societies experimented with trying to destroy indigenous cultures by forcing children into boarding schools, with hideous consequences.)

**Middle-class families** Middle-class families, a rapidly-growing minority in the cities, quickly began to set up some distinctive family styles and goals, that are sometimes covered under the heading of the "Victorian" family. They tended to react to early industrialization by defining the family as a place of emotional and moral refuge from the brutishness of business life – a "haven in a heartless world", as one American manual put it. In this vision, women were withdrawn from the workforce; they were held to possess the special qualities needed for nurturing children and maintaining an emotional oasis. Men were the breadwinners – extending an old tradition of male responsibility – but were supposed to be able to control their more aggressive impulses in the family context. No longer a production unit, the family became a consumer center, now adorned with fashionable goods like a family piano, and of course an

emotional refuge. The practice of family vacations began to develop, though men often stayed at work at least part of the time.

**Courtship and marriage** Formally arranged marriages declined, though parents still oversaw the courtship process. Courtship itself presumably allowed a couple to get to know each other and fall in love, ultimately leading to marriage. Men could not participate in this process until they were on a sound economic footing, so normally there was an age gap of five years or more with the objects of their initiatives. Men clearly wielded economic power within a marriage, but wives had moral authority as well as the time available for family matters, so the union was seen more as a partnership at least in principle, sustained as well by ongoing affection. Urbanization raised challenges for finding a suitable partner. In most cities, newspapers began to carry marriage want ads, to facilitate matches in an unfamiliar environment; the new messages mixed economic appeals – the practical needs for a partner – with more novel aspirations for love.

**Sexuality** Middle-class families reacted strongly against the sexual revolution of the lower classes, and they also took the lead in reducing the birth rate – in some cases, from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century onward. Initially, birth rate reduction required periods of sexual abstinence within a marriage, as well as avoidance of activity during courtship. By mid-century, thanks to the vulcanization of rubber, new devices like condoms and diaphragms (called pessaries) became available, but respectable middle-class people were slow to adopt these, fearing they would encourage sexual license. Victorian respectability involved a belief that women had low levels of sexual desire and thus could appropriately regulate overall sexual behavior in courtship and marriage alike. This did not always work – courtship intensity might go too far – and young men (and doubtless some husbands) also might avail themselves of prostitutes or abuse the family servant. But the culture remained vigorous through the middle decades of the century, including fierce efforts to prevent masturbation. In the final decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century interest in sexual pleasure did gain ground, though haltingly, and some use of birth control devices within marriage also took hold.

**Childrearing** The middle-class family ideal emphasized the importance of mutual love between parents – particularly mothers – and children. Smaller family size encouraged more attention to the individual child. A growing interest in assuring children's happiness showed in the new tradition of celebrating their birthdays, a practice that gained ground during the middle decades of the century. The rapid decline of the infant mortality rate between 1880 and 1920, throughout the Western world, further encouraged these patterns. Mothers now assumed a growing responsibility for moral guidance, and middle-class parents also took the lead in promoting education for their offspring, at least through primary school levels and often beyond; children were not expected to hold jobs. In other words, the middle class sponsored a considerable redefinition of childhood and of the role of children in the family.

**Working-class patterns** The working class might be influenced by middle-class family values – and their family habits were often criticized by middle-class observers, but their patterns differed in several ways. They were slower to reduce birth rates, continuing to expect, or hope for, some economic contribution from children. When the class realized that traditional rates were economically damaging, thanks to limited child labor opportunities, they still maintained higher levels than their middle-class counterparts. Achieving lower rates often required difficult periods of sexual abstinence, for birth rate devices were often either unavailable or expensive; levels of abortion rose as well, though illegal. Marriages were not formally arranged, but they were often negotiated within the urban working-class community, sometimes after a girl had become pregnant. The pattern here was not traditional, but it also deviated from the starchy-eyed courtship ideals of the middle class. Finally, working-class families typically developed particularly tight bonds between mothers and daughters, which often extended into the adulthood of the latter, even after marriage, as both men and women sought somewhat separate entertainment options.

**Immigrants** The immigrant experience in the settler societies offered special features of its own. Many immigrants were expected to send money to families back home, reflecting older ideals of economic responsibility. Immigrants often brought high birth rates into their new settings. In some cases, as with Jewish immigrants to the United States around 1900, they quickly learned novel birth control goals from co-religionists already in the country; in other cases, it took a generation or more to drop to native working-class levels. Immigrants also had to decide about family control over children, amid new public school requirements and work opportunities. Again in the United States for example, Slavic families were

generally willing to let daughters work as domestic servants, but Italians strove to keep daughters engaged in operations within the family.

**Extended families** In all urban families, extended families took a hit with the process of urbanization itself; this was one of the reasons that formally arranged marriages declined. Unexpectedly however extended households actually became more common in the urban environment, in both working- and middle classes. The typical pattern involved an older parent – most commonly, a woman given higher life expectancy rates – moving into the household of an adult daughter, both to seek support but also to provide child care services. This trend would only begin to be reversed from the 1920s onward, as co-residence began to recede.

**Schooling** All Western families were deeply affected by the expansion of school requirements during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, even though attendance was not yet rigorously enforced. This played a role in birth rate decisions, and it also contributed to changing gender dynamics as the education gap between boys and girls steadily declined. Famously, French peasants began to decide that it was important to let their offspring go to school by the 1860s and 1870s, even as they still hoped to preserve a family-based economy. Boys now needed literacy and numeracy to facilitate better farming practices and more effective marketing; girls might qualify for jobs as teachers that would provide family resources at least for a while. In the process, of course, the authority of parents over children – after their early years – declined, not infrequently leading to new tensions, particularly around the period now newly defined as “adolescence”.

**Divorce** All Western societies displayed an increase in the divorce rate, though levels differed depending on religious framework (lower in Catholic societies) and differing legal provisions. The decline in arranged marriage and extended family controls, in some cases marriage at earlier ages, and new disputes about family goals and achievements fueled this new instability – including complaints about consumer living standards or about the absence of sufficient affection. Divorce was not yet common, though in the United States there was talk of a “crisis” by the 1870s, but it was definitely becoming a new factor in family life. For men particularly, it was now economically possible to do without a family, and this could promote some change as well. In another important shift, when divorce did occur with disputes over child custody, the new culture led to the practice of awarding to mothers, assumed to be the natural custodians of the young child – another sign that traditional patriarchal assumptions were eroding.

**Conclusion** Three points stand out, amid a welter of significant changes and adjustments. First, obviously, no single Western family model emerged; class and gender differences complicate generalizations. Second, some of the changes in family life were distinctively Western, reflecting special cultural features like greater individualism; Western patterns of adjustment to industrial conditions were not necessarily attractive outside this cultural zone. But third, Western attachment to their new family values, including the standards of the Victorian family, provided a new basis for judging the habits of other societies, and often finding them uncivilized. This would affect the family policies of Western colonial administrations, but it would also put cultural pressure on independent regions like the Ottoman Empire or Japan.

### Study questions

1. What were the main differences between middle- and working-class families?
2. Why did Victorian culture generate new concerns about sexuality, and with what results?
3. What was the impact of new schooling requirements on family life?
4. What were the main functions of the Western industrial family by 1900? How did they compare to more traditional functions?

### Further reading

Judith Flanders, *Inside the Victorian Home: a portrait of domestic family life in Victorian England* (Norton, 2004)

Christopher Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World* (Norton, 1995)

Wally Secombe, *Weathering the Storm: working-class families from the industrial revolution to the fertility decline* (University of Chicago Press, 1993)

Hugh Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500* (Longman, 2005)

## The Western Family in the Contemporary Period

**General** The past century has seen a number of important changes in the Western family and, overall, probably a weakening of family structure. At the same time a number of basic modern trends continued to intensify. This was the period after all when the very low child death rate was confirmed and extended; when birth rates continued to drop overall, with increasing reliance on various artificial birth control devices. The continued expansion of schooling, and growing importance of school success in advanced industrial economies, affected parents and children alike. The idea of love-based marriages continued to flourish, even amid the rise of online matchmaking services in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century: references to finding a “soul mate”, a term first coined in 1832 in the Victorian era, actually expanded.

**Class structure** Family trends continued to be conditioned by social and economic differences, though middle-class patterns gained greatest attention given the position and size of the class. Birth rates still varied a bit, with middle-class families smaller except during the baby boom. Parental expectations and behaviors varied. A study in 1970s Britain showed that both middle-class and working-class parents hoped for professional jobs for their children (doctors, lawyers etc), but middle class parents put far more emphasis into supervision of their children’s schooling efforts. Even dating and marriage patterns varied, with higher marriages ages and more “shopping around” for middle-class families during most of the period.

**The Baby Boom** For two decades after World War II the Western birth rate unexpectedly increased, particularly in the middle classes and particularly in the affluent United States. Some observers thought a new commitment to larger families would prove a durable choice. What happened was a catch-up effort, after the birth rate reduction forced by Depression and World War II, that then maintained momentum for two decades (often with children very closely spaced together). It was an interesting development, producing a pronounced demographic bulge, but it was temporary. Birth rate reduction resumed in the 1960s and then accelerated.

**Role of the state** Government impact on families increased, particularly with the development of the welfare state (more pronounced in Western Europe, Canada, New Zealand and Australia than in the US). Government-provided housing was an important resource for many families. Pensions measurably reduced the reliance of older people on younger kin. State regulations also increased: governments might intervene against parents found deficient, even, by the 21<sup>st</sup> century, to protect children against excessive obesity. Battles in 2020-21 over government-mandated masks and vaccines, in dealing with the Covid pandemic, showed the recurrent possibility of tensions between the state and parental autonomy.

**Extended family** Structurally the extended family continued to decline. From the 1920s onward co-residence of an older person with an adult child, a common pattern in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, began to drop away, and no one seemed particularly concerned. Greater resources allowed older people to live on their own or in group facilities. At the same time, informal contacts remained important. Mother-adult daughter bonds continued strong, particularly in the working class. Telephones and, later, social media contacts allowed intergenerational interactions. The role of the loving grandparents gained new attention.

**Sexuality** Probably the biggest shifts in the Western family involved sexuality and gender. Interest in sexual pleasure grew steadily, at least into the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. In Britain experts like Marie Stopes urged women to seek enjoyment, and in general the Victorian notion of the passionless female declined notably (aided by a variety of sex manuals). Dating began to replace courtship, and while dating did not necessarily involve sex it did decrease parental supervision. In families, growing use of artificial contraception helped promote recreational sex – and expectations for pleasure and performance. Even Catholic families participated despite the official opposition of the Church. Among young people on both sides of the Atlantic, a “sexual revolution” in the 1950s and 1960s made premarital sex increasingly common, accepted, and even expected; assumptions of virginity at marriage declined markedly, and

sexual jealousy was also discouraged. By the same token, sexual dissatisfaction undoubtedly became an increasing cause of marital infidelity and also divorce.

**Abortion** After World War II all Western societies faced increasing controversy over abortion. On the one hand, advocates of sexual pleasure and women's rights urged latitude, along with citing the importance of avoiding unwanted children as a basis for good parenting. But religious conservatives, some of them deeply concerned about overall sexual license, firmly resisted. In most European countries some consensus was reached, often with latitude for abortions in the first three months of pregnancy, stiffer approval requirements thereafter. But the debate remained unresolved in the United States despite a 1970s court ruling that allowed the procedure.

**Gender** Married women increasingly sought work outside the home, during both World Wars and then from the 1960s onward. A desire for higher family living standards and greater personal fulfillment combined, amid a second wave of feminism. This was not an easy change. For several decades German wives continued to argue that mothers should stay home – even though they themselves were working. Care facilities for children became crucial, and in the United States considerable reluctance to turn young children over to others, plus inadequate state support, created ongoing tension. Other patterns, like carefully prepared evening meals, had to shift. The change obviously contributed to birth rate decline and a growing increase in deliberately childless marriages or acceptance of a single child.

**Parenting** Smaller family size obviously affected parenting, and sibling relations. Increased emphasis on schooling prompted many parents to devote greater supervision to this aspect of their children's lives. The rise of childrearing expertise, deriving now from pediatricians and psychologists, might assist parents but could also create new pressure and concerns, reducing parental confidence. Anxiety also increased when mothers were working, generating some often frantic efforts to maintain contact and supervision over children. In some countries like Britain and the United States what was called the helicopter parent emerged by the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, with hovering attention to children's activities and emotional as well as cognitive development. While child death rates dropped, concern over health issues might actually increase. Some people – parents and experts alike – believed that parenting was becoming more difficult and stressful, particularly in the middle classes. At the same time, parents in Western culture were united over one point: they wanted their offspring to be happy. An early 21<sup>st</sup> century poll showed surprising uniformity here, in contrast to several nonWestern societies where children's health or achievement were rated more important; 86% of French parents, 75% or so of parents in most other Western countries agreed that happiness was the main point.

**Household tasks** The issue of responsibility for household tasks had existed since the industrial revolution but it now took on new dimensions. New appliances cut into the labor needed, but in some cases heightened standards of cleanliness balanced the gains. When women began more commonly to take jobs outside the home, husbands on average increased their responsibilities but not to equal levels; women still bore disproportionate responsibility, including child care. At the same time, children's chores around the house dropped steadily, thanks to school work and recreational interests. The result was some obvious potential tension. Men sometimes felt that their extra contributions were not recognized, while women even more reasonably might resent their fuller load – a latterday reminder of older inequalities.

**Divorce and marriage** Through most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century divorce rates tended to rise in Western society, though there were important national variations based on religious tradition and specific law. Cultural acceptability of divorce expanded steadily. By the later 20<sup>th</sup> century almost half of all American marriages were ending in divorce, and about a third of those in the United Kingdom. Remarriage often occurred, and the complications of stepparenting contributed a new or renewed element to modern family life. The trend also caused an understandable flurry of concern about the basic stability of the family itself. By the 21<sup>st</sup> century, marriage age was increasing, and marriage rates were dropping – leading to a significant decline in the divorce rate in places like the United States, though perhaps not, overall, to a real improvement in family stability given the rise of single parenting and unmarried couples.

**Consumerism** Though not a new trend, family life in the West was increasingly enveloped with consumer expectations. The family vacation became a common ideal (though beyond the reach of poorer families). Extended family trips marked the rise of vacation time in Western Europe. Institutions like the Disney

worlds cropped up to lure families in the United States, and ultimately Europe as well (EuroDisney, after some growing pains, became the top vacation destination in France). At home, the rise of television placed a new premium on home-based entertainments, though some affluent families, buying separate televisions for children, reduced the solidarity impact. Increased expenditure on family-based holidays like birthdays and Christmases was another sign of change. Some authorities argued that, with the decline of the birth rate, shared consumerism was becoming the chief purpose of Western families above the poverty line –with shared spousal decision making from partners both working outside the home. Another term frequently applied to many Western marriages from the 1920s onward was “companionate”, with spouses developing primary emotional as well as recreational relationships with each other.

**Gay marriage** A vital change in the contemporary history of the Western family involved the rise of demands for legalization of gay marriage, and the increasing acceptance by the Western public. The dramatic shift in attitudes occurred throughout the West from the 1960s onward, leading to legalization in most societies, beginning with steps in Denmark in the 1970s. The rate of gay marriages and gay parenting soared, and the result was a clear if unexpected conformation of the importance of the family in Western life.

### **Study questions**

1. Why did the baby boom prove to be an anomaly in the contemporary history of the Western family?
2. Should the history of the contemporary Western family be considered mainly as a story of decline?
3. What were the main changes and issues in parenting during the contemporary period?
4. Why and how did Western marriage become more sexualized, and with what main results?

### **Further reading**

Donna Bee-Gates, *I Want It Now: navigating childhood in a material world* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007)

Peter N. Stearns, *Anxious Parents: a history of modern American childrearing* (New York University Press, 2003)

Pamela Druckerman, *Brining Up Bebe: One American Mother Discovers the Wisdom of French Parenting* (Penguin, 2014)

Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a history* (Viking, 2005)

Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: a social history of American family life* (Free Press, 1989)

Peter Willmott and Michael Young, *The Symmetrical Family* (Pantheon, 1970)