

Contextualizing the Stem Family

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Review of:

Antoinette Fauve-Chamoux and Emiko Ochiai (eds.) *The Stem Family in Eurasian Perspective: Revisiting House Societies, 17th-20th Centuries*.

Volume 10 in the series 'Population, Family, and Society', edited by Michel Oris. Bern: Peter Lang, 2009.

It is entirely fitting that the first book review to appear on the ICHD website should concern the stem family, a topic which historians of population and the family have been discussing for over 150 years. We are indebted to Antoinette Fauve-Chamoux and Emiko Ochiai for distilling the essence of more than a dozen conferences and professional meetings between 1997 and 2004 and to Michel Oris who has edited ten volumes in the Peter Lang series. This volume represents the evolution of a long series of scholarly discussions about the stem family.

Admittedly, the focus of inquiry has shifted from the identification of an ideal type of rural family organization in Western Europe to a global discussion of how a limited number of families organized to protect their members from potentially destructive government policies, industrialization and economic exploitation, urbanization, and even international migration.

In this collection, the term 'stem family' has two connotations: "the residential rule that only one married child remains with the parents" which makes the family "a domestic unit of production and reproduction that persists over generations, handing down the patrimony through non-egalitarian inheritance (3)." Thus, the stem family is a collective kinship-based response to the Industrial Revolution, which transformed the world economy from one in which most of the population needed to participate in food production into one where fewer people are needed to satisfy the demand for food, thus freeing the great majority of the population to work in industry and services.

The study of stem families thus began well into the Industrial Revolution. As Richard Wall shows (53-80), Frédéric Le Play [1806-82], the author of the 1855 study which first used the term, was concerned with the consequences of transforming farmers into workers. He proposed a close analysis of individual European rural families, which he divided into three types: patriarchal, stem, and unstable. In the patriarchal family, elders retained authority over their descendants, dispensing resources for the good of the group. In the unstable family, by contrast, elders renounced control over resources as soon as their children married, leaving them free to dispose of their patrimony however they saw fit and leaving no one to look after the needs of the family as a whole. The stem family, according to Le Play, retained unity of purpose through the designation of a lone child—and spouse—in each generation who would inherit all of the family's property. This transfer which usually took place before the elder's death carried with it the obligation of the new family head to redistribute resources to the rest of the family.

Jürgen Schlumbohm (81-102) traces a parallel line of thought by Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl [1823-92] who made a global analysis of the social divisions of German society. Riehl

praised certain German peasants as preserving rural society by forming strong houses, which protected family members and their dependents from moral decay.

As with Le Play's stem family, order was preserved through impartible inheritance, in which one designated heir looked after the needs of his relatives and dependents. The notion of family authority and unequal distribution of wealth within the household was eventually appropriated by the Nazis as a model of rural order, even though rural Germans proved more flexible than the Third Reich in managing family resources.

Indeed, other authors in this collection demonstrate that the term stem family must be used with considerable latitude. In the 1960s and 1970s, John Hajnal and Peter Laslett suggested that the region where the stem family predominated could be geographically defined as lying east and south of a line running from Trieste to St. Petersburg (151). More recently, the contributors to this collection have identified clusters of stem families in many parts of Europe and Asia. Quantitative microstudies have shown the diversities of villages where stem families can be found. Indeed, Solvi Sogner (152-172) has shown that the largest incidence of the phenomenon so far discovered occurred in the Rendalen in eastern Norway in the 18th century, where two-thirds of families followed this residence and inheritance pattern. During the 19th century, the largest incidence--one-third of families--can be found in the Pyrenean baronies and the Colpach valley in Luxembourg (201-252), Finland (173-202), and Northeastern Japan (273-377). From a 21st century perspective, then stem families can not be defined through microregions or time periods. Indeed, Fauve-Chamoux (242-243) goes so far as to observe that the multigenerational nature of individual stem families varies according to the life cycle of their members.

Another issue which arises in this collection is the problematic relationship between families and the state. This issue first arose during the French revolution and especially upon the proclamation of the Code Civil of 1804 which decreed that all children should receive equal shares of their fathers' estate which, if enforced, would have made impartible inheritance illegal. After the Meiji Restoration, Japanese law-makers based their first civil code in 1898 on the French model despite the existence of the *ie*, their own equivalent of the stem family. Ochiai shows that Japanese legislators, however, soon replaced their new civil code with a German model which was more compatible with their own family structure (287-289). In Germany the Third Reich [1933-45] attempted to force a rigid definition of the stem family on German farmers but soon encountered resistance (88-90). One might add that in much of the developed world, the capacity of both nuclear and extended families to assure the economic security of their members has been supplanted by the safety net provided by the welfare state.

Related to the question of the economic function of stem families is that of their role in social stratification. Both Le Play and Riehl refer to the feudal estates of Early Modern Europe. But their generalizations specifically exclude nobles, priests, town dwellers and ethnic minorities from their discussions of stem families, limiting their purview to peasants, lumping together those who owned their own houses and land with those who leased them. What is more, several of the studies in the collection demonstrate that not even all peasants could establish stem families. The rural poor—cottars, servants, and lodgers—of Austria, Norway, Finland, and Central Japan found it difficult, if not impossible, to create and maintain stem families.

Twenty-first century scholars are left with a number of questions about the contemporary significance of stem families. These unions have lost their function of protecting family members to the welfare state. Stem families existed in small clusters rather than in contiguous regions or states. Not only does the term exclude nobles, priests, town dwellers, and ethnic minorities, but it seems to include only their wealthier farmers. Perhaps the time has come to see family organization in a new framework.

Instead of looking for ideal types which may themselves be constantly changing in form and substance, we need a framework which captures the diversity of societies by representing them as matrices of components and then analyzing the patterns which emerge. One row might consist of family types: nuclear families, multi-generational families, temporary unions, individuals. Another could capture various patterns of fertility and mortality. A third could measure migration at various scales ranging from movements within cities to interregional movements to international migrations. A fourth could measure wealth at various spatial levels ranging from the household to the locality to the nation.

This proposed change of framework does not mean that analyses of stem families have been conducted in vain. The collection under review demonstrates the broad spectrum of social inquiry made possible by the study of stem families. In the future, however, a more comprehensive framework offers the possibility of uncovering new and unanticipated insights into the growth and development of families and, indeed, of whole populations.