

GRAND QUESTIONS AND SMALL-SCALE ETHNOGRAPHIES

The Usefulness of Kinship Studies in Contemporary Europe

Martine Segalen

In order to be part of the socio-political dialogue within Europe, anthropologists have to address questions which are policy relevant. In this paper, I examine under which epistemological and methodological conditions the study of kinship – a core topic of the discipline – can become useful in the debates regarding family changes in contemporary Europe. Next to large statistical databases that delineate gross divergences and convergences in family trends, the anthropological gaze helps explain various lifemodes. As part of this scheme, an ongoing programme aiming at comparing kinship interactions in various European countries, KASS (Kinship and Social Security) is presented.

Keywords: Europe, kinship, comparatism, policies

In 1992, a conference was convened to “debate issues of current concern for European anthropology, with particular reference to the study of those wider social, political and economic processes that are affecting change and levels of integration within and between European societies” (Goddard, Llobera & Shore 1994: VII). The book which ensued the conference, underlined the weakness of research on Europe until then, stating that “while anthropology in Europe benefited from [a] plurality of approaches, the anthropology ‘of’ Europe [...] remained a largely unchartered and undefined project”. This however appeared a more feasible possibility with “the introduction or perspectives which were more sensitive to historical and global determinations” (1994: 19). In the span of fifteen years, a number of researches have changed the face of the discipline, leaving small communities to tackle central problems and institu-

tions, making it more present on the European stage and accompanying the formation of a political Europe, through its national convulsions. In this process, anthropology has adopted new methods, with multi-sited fields, taking stock of the consequences of globalisation and opening a dialogue with other parent disciplines (Gullestad & Segalen 1997).

What I want to argue here, on discussing European kinship studies, is that European ethnology can contribute to prepare the European challenges of tomorrow, thus implying that we, ethnologists or anthropologists (whatever the name), are eligible for academic support from our national institutions, as well as public funding from European instances. Alongside with economists and political scientists we can manage to make ourselves heard.

If a topic is eligible for interest at the European level, it is for sure the study of kinship, because it opens

to fundamental questions such as care and gender, and beyond these theoretical questions, to problems facing European countries related to public policies. For instance, as in a laboratory, the consequences of the shift away from socialist policies can be scrutinized in connection with the changes in the labour market at the individual and familial levels.

If the study of modernity brings up challenging questions regarding new methodologies and epistemological dilemmas, kinship studies are particularly fit to comparatism, which means the delineation of convergences and divergences among the various countries of Europe.

Comparing Kinship

It is well known that kinship is a core topic of social anthropology which has been erected upon comparisons. Contrasting kinship terminologies, marriage systems have been the founding pillar of the discipline for a few decades. But this trend also enjoys a certain antiquity in European ethnology, which developed a dialogue with demography and history. Studies regarding inheritance practices and systems, marriage strategies, reproduction of domestic groups set in rural contexts led to the establishment of various family geographies. Contrasting partible versus impartible systems, stem family households versus nuclear family households etc. were dealt with first in Western Europe in the second half of the 1960s (Laslett & Wall 1972), and in Eastern and Central Europe thirty years later (Grandits & Heady 2003). In some aspects a revival of ethnographic atlases, the mapping of inheritance systems fuelled rich discussions and produced a vast corpus of literature.

This is why the impact of Schneider's paradigm on kinship has not been as radical in Europe as it has been in the United States. The rebirth of kinship in the Anglo-Saxon post-Schneiderian world addressed the consequences of the new reproductive technologies, international adoptions, surrogate motherhood, gay parenthood, which were to shed light on representations regarding blood and genes versus social aspects of kinship (Franklin & McKinnon 2001). Even though these topics have been tackled by European scholars (Bestard Camps for instance

2004), research continued also on the more classical aspects of kinship (family exchanges and support). However, it shifted its focus from rural to contemporary settings, as anthropologists decided – as hinted in the book afore mentioned – to deal with modernity. Kinship which had long been associated with social structures of the past appeared at the end of twentieth century as a component of modernity and many European researchers went on studying the good old topic (Segalen 2006).

A shift in methods ensued because of the differences in carrying out urban fieldwork compared to a rural context. People are employed and work outside their homes most of the day, and one has to turn to interviews rather than long immersion in a single place. Anthropologists also make use of all the possible literature which is excessively abundant on those matters. They have to get acquainted with the scientific literature produced by other disciplines, political sciences and sociology mainly, to be posted about the State policies, welfare-state provisions, but also the level of feminine employment or the level of public supply in the domain of child care and care for the old and dependant, all of which are strongly kin related.

Care and Support

The European family that politicians have had in mind is the one that emerged from demographic statistics: in the 1980s, they appeared to announce that since all the indicators were moving in the same direction, the unity of Europe's families had been achieved. For sure, twenty years later, these figures are diverging when comparing the number of births outside wedlock, rates of divorce or fertility. Yet, even if some trends are comparable, one of the strengths of anthropology is to offer fresh ways of looking at those data: working with the interviewed persons, analyzing relevant texts, providing a critical view on contemporary debates, discussing wider social questions and economic processes. Kinship being particularly sensitive to historical and global determinations, its in-depth study is in a position to illuminate divergences and convergences in Europe.

Up to now, these topics have mostly been in the

hands of statisticians, sociologists (Finch 1989) and political scientists who have dwelled on statistical data; but surveys and censuses focussing only on the nuclear unit, the data fail to capture exchanges within kindreds. There are also a host of surveys, like ISSP (International Social Survey Programme), an annual programme of cross-national comparisons on surveys covering topics important for social science research. It provides comparative figures of answers to questions like “How often do you see or visit your mother?”,¹ or “Adult children have a duty to look after their elderly parents”,² or the ECPH (European Community Household Panel). Hardly any use can be made of this material as the statistical basis is inconsistent, and results rather gross.

Socio-economists have developed typologies of care and support which deal, but indirectly, with family help and support within various welfare-state systems (Esping Andersen 1990; Lewis 1992). They delineate challenging, contrasted, contextual frameworks in regard to economic changes, but they fail – for sure it is not their goal – to understand how systems work at the individual’s level. Only monographs can throw some light on these topics (Attias-Donfut & Segalen 2006), but they are such, that each being conducted with a specific goal, they are not comparable.

Support and care carry hidden dimensions that in-depth interviews can capture, because they involve “symbols and contents which vary cross-culturally” (Comas d’Argemir 1994: 213) and not only between countries, but also between social groups in the same country. In depth-interviews following an identical protocol are thus likely to provide comparative data. This is what the KASS programme is meant for.

The Kinship and Social Security Programme

An immense interest has been stirred among a group of European anthropologists when the Max Planck Institute launched KASS,³ a vast comparative programme with the aim to provide strictly comparative data by the use of the ethnographic method of the pedigree questionnaire. In a first stage, the informant is asked to answer questions regarding its

kindred, size, extent, degree and forms or relationships with the help of a computerized program, the Kinship network questionnaire (KNQ), in order to understand the amount of mutual aid.⁴ The second central idea is that the factors underlying current trends need to be understood within their historical context.

Eight teams of researchers were enthralled (at least was I, tired of monographical work) at the idea of a first-for-one comparative enterprise.⁵ For sure, and probably to lure European money, the authors of the project stressed that

Among other goals, the project was paying particular attention to the importance of gender in the construction of different kinship systems, the inclusion of or exclusion of women as full members of the kindred, and the ways in which kinship obligations are understood, formulated and mediated or enforced differently for the two genders [...].What are the variations, historical, regional, and across class, income and ethnic boundaries, in gendered constructions of kinship and in gendered aspects of kin/based social security ideologies and practices?

However, even if gender was discussed, the central question was rather geared towards investigating and understanding the differences in the level of family support in view of the various European social policies, with a specific interest for former socialist countries that had experienced strong discontinuities in these policies.

The interest in understanding the historical background stemmed from the idea that beyond modern social and political changes, European countries were presenting very strong cultural continuities through times, as David Reher developed in a famous paper (1998). He has shown that the ethics of North Western individual independence and that of mutual help between households in the rest of Europe dates back to as far as can be seen in historical demography.

The KASS programme thus allows, as Michael Herzfeld (2001) stated, “for a very structured kind of

comparison within eminently recognizable parameters, syntagmatic (they have a historical relationship) and paradigmatic (they share formal characteristics”).

Comparing, Contrasting

After four years of hard work, after various meetings and many reports and chapters waiting to be published, one can evaluate the work done⁶ in regard to the questions which were set at the opening of this paper.

The monographs all deal with the same topics, based on the KNQs' results and free interviews. To summarize, they bring forth an enormous amount of data on family help in relation to women's work, state policies relevant to family problems (child care, dependent elders). The level of kin interaction appears surprisingly developed, even in countries which enjoy a high level of social state security. The original hypothesis on the divide between countries with strong or weak ties, between state policies “crowding out” or “crowding in”, kinship does not seem to be validated. The results of the KASS programme are thus twofold: they compare kinship interaction and assistance in specific settings (urban, rural); they contrast values and representations that underline the variability of the patterns.

What interviews have showed is that the same situation might house different meanings and values, as is the case for grandparenting which appears a generalized pattern throughout Europe. However, taking care of grandchildren can be a choice for some and a burden for others. The difference or variability in the pattern can be scrutinized in terms of demographic size of families, age, health, degree of love and intimacy, residential propinquity or social services, etc. For instance, it is often the case in former socialist Germany that grandfathers fetch their grandchildren (children of their employed children) at the nursery or primary school. Contrary to their wives who have been able to hold on to their jobs as employees, these men who were industry workers were laid off and thus have some spare time to pick up the children. In view of the refusal they oppose to the ethnographer who wants to discuss with them, it

is clear that they do not find the situation enjoyable (Thelen 2005). In other countries and situations, grandfathering is discovered as a new social role. In connection with changes in gender relationships, as a sort of compensation for men who, while very active in their mature years, did not take very close care of their children, they now, as they age, so to speak, “catch up” with the next generation.

Next to the scientific output, the programme states explicitly the possibility to fuel European politicians with information for policy planning, e.g.:⁷

- what kind of protection does kinship provide in contemporary Europe and with what effects on other objectives relevant to social policy?
- what differences are there in the social security role of kinship, in the various rural and urban fieldsites?
- what time trends are observable in the social security role of kinship, and why?
- how much and how fast would the social security role of kinship change in response to changes in the state system and with what side effects?

With kinship interacting with public systems of aid in various forms, but also with the structure of the labour market, the comparative research should illuminate the way values and wider social contexts are related.

Conclusion

In the middle of the nineteenth century, a nascent anthropology, to assert its legitimacy, adopted the model of natural sciences, based on classification, collection and comparisons. For a long while, kinship studies were based on typologies and classifications, until these were criticized for their uselessness (Leach 1961; Needham 1974).

The goal of comparing kinship interaction, in the context of Europe, is not to return to old typologies, but rather to understand apparent convergences or false divergences. It is also to go beyond statistical data, which seem to embody the “hard” facts versus the “soft” ones. The discipline's specificity in understanding lifemodes puts it in a position to address

wide questions of general interest, as is mentioned above. Besides, when studying kinship, the relevance of a historical perspective adds a new arrow to the anthropologist's quiver.

Even an eminent sociologist such as Franz Schultheis who specializes in the comparison between French and German economic data (unemployment rates, workers' salaries etc.) states that "intercultural comparison [based on the comparison of statistics] is one of the most productive means of acquiring knowledge, but also a source of misunderstandings and false interpretations" and must resort to the reconstruction of specific socio-historical origins of both systems to understand the "ideal" opposition between German "Wohlfahrtsstaat" and the French "société assurantielle" (Schultheis 1989).

Kinship is both a hard and a versatile topic, always ready to pop up under new clothes. Much work, illuminating European questions, can be produced through our modest ethnographies, in connexion with historical processes to address major contemporary debates: Is Europe already in a time "after" the welfare state (not to speak of the virtual collapse of the welfare state in post-socialist countries)? How does kinship survive or thrive in an individualistic world? How will kinship interaction be transformed by the ageing of population and increased risk of dependency? How does it work in relation with marriage instability? Etc. All these questions are better addressed from down below than from top to down. Like identity, kinship is not given; it is built in everyday interaction.

Notes

- 1 Answers range from: Lives in the same household to never, with in between: daily, several times a week, several times a month etc.
- 2 Answers range from: Agree strongly to disagree strongly.
- 3 <http://www.eth.mpg.de/kass/> Patrick Heady is in charge of the programme.
- 4 As of this writing, the computerized data are still in the process of an interpretative and mathematical analysis to illuminate these differences and trends.

- 5 These teams are Austria, Croatia, Germany, France, Italy, Poland, Russia, and Sweden, with fieldsites both in urban and rural places.
- 6 At least three volumes in preparation.
- 7 Which after all would be a première, if politicians were reading our work.

References

- Attias-Donfut, Claudine & Martine Segalen 2006: *Grands-parents. La famille à travers les générations*. Paris: Odile Jacob, 2nd edition.
- Bestard Camps, Joan, 2004: *Tras la biologia: la moralidad del parentesco y las nuevas tecnologías de reproducción*. Universitat de Barcelona, Estudis d'Antropologia Social i cultural.
- Comas d'Argemir, Dolores 1994: Gender Relations and Social Change in Europe. On Support and Care. In: Victoria A. Goddard, Josep R. Llobera & Cris Shore (eds.), *The Anthropology of Europe. Identities and Boundaries in Conflict*. Oxford, Providence: Berg, pp. 209–225.
- Esping-Andersen, Gosta 1990: *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Finch, Janet 1989: *Family Obligations and Social Change*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Franklin, Sarah & Susan MacKinnon (eds.) 2001: *Relative Values, Reconfiguring Kinship Studies*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Goddard, Victoria A., Josep R. Llobera & Cris Shore (eds.) 1994: *The Anthropology of Europe. Identities and Boundaries in Conflict*. Oxford, Providence: Berg.
- Grandits, Hannes & Patrick Heady (eds.) 2003: *Distinct Inheritances. Property, Family and Community in a Changing Europe*. Munster: Lit Verlag.
- Gullestad, Marianne & Martine Segalen (eds.) 1997: *Family and Kinship in Europe*. London, Washington: Pinter.
- Laslett, Peter & Richard Wall (eds.) 1972: *Household and Family in Past Time*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Leach, Edmund 1961: *Rethinking Anthropology*. London: Robert Cunningham and Sons.
- Lewis, Jane 1992: Gender and the Development of Welfare Regimes. *Journal of European Social Policy* 2(3), 159–173.
- Needham, Rodney 1974: *Remarks and Inventions. Skeptical Essays about Kinship*. London: Tavistock.
- Reher, David 1998: Family Ties in Western Europe: Persistent Contrasts. *Population and Development Review* 24, 2, June, 203–234.
- Segalen, Martine 2006: *Sociologie de la famille*. Paris: Armand Colin, 6th edition.
- Schultheis, Franz 1989: Comme par raison-comparaison n'est toujours raison. Pour une critique sociologique de l'usage social de la comparaison interculturelle. *Droit et sociétés* 11–12, 217–246.

Thelen, Tatjana 2005: Caring Grandfathers. Changes in Support between Generations in East Germany. In: Haldis Haukanes & Frances Pine (eds.), *Generations, Kinship and Care. Gendered Provisions of Social Security in Central Eastern Europe*. Bergen: University of Bergen, pp. 163–188.

Martine Segalen is professor emeritus at Université de Paris X-Nanterre. Among her recent publications on family is the sixth edition, thoroughly revised of *Sociologie de la famille*. She is currently working within the KASS project and preparing a book on *Changing Childhood*. She is editor-in-chief of *Ethnologie Française*.
(msegalen@u-paris10.fr)