

Notes on Household Composition and Socio-cultural Change

DURING RECENT YEARS the *Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure* has enriched the international discussion about family and household in historical perspectives, especially through the work *Household and Family in Past Time*, Cambridge 1972, by Peter Laslett and others. Generally speaking the focussing on the family in the past seems to be exaggerated, and does not accord with facts such as that in pre-industrial times a majority of households was composed not only of members of the nuclear family. The ideographs representing "household" structure also draw attention to family and kinship relations in a misleading way. The Cambridge group has worked without paying much attention to the ecological situations. Their main hypothesis as expressed by Laslett is that the family in history was always and invariably nuclear (the null hypothesis). Laslett adds: "It is simply untrue as far as we can yet tell that there was ever a time or place when the complex family was the universal background to the ordinary lives of ordinary people."

We are not given any explanations of such a remarkable condition; how, for instance, did the peasants arrange for their retired and weak parents? This was regulated by law in Sweden. The Code of Land Laws of 1442 chapter XXXI, states: "Now man or woman might be struck by age or illness, then children should keep and feed them until their dying day, irrespective of whether they possess more or less . . . The same law should be in force for other relatives, if there are no children. He who is next to inheritance is also next to feed the farmer. If a son or daughter refuse to take care of father or mother he is fined three marks per year. Payment for such subsistence should be taken from the personal property of the retired person or, if the ward is son or daughter and no personal property is available, from the real property."

When and under which circumstances could the destitute and the poor people look after themselves in cottages? Is it possible that we sometimes see very few grandparents in the households because of a swift circulation between farmsteads and villages and a high mortality rate? In such cases, inmates will still be present, if not as retired parents. Laslett and his collaborators triumphantly declare that the nuclear family was predominant in most known societies and seem to be satisfied to have disproved an ideology of earlier scholars. Frédéric Le Play and his school are rapidly disposed of, for example, through the remark that Le Play based his conclusions on too small figures or figures not accounted for, that he was unaware of sampling arithmetic, "which would have put him on his guard against typical examples" (p. 19) and that he disregarded the developmental cycle of families. Laslett himself, however, does not hesitate to infer from the English parish of Ealing in 1599 with 427 individuals that the conditions there were "typical of succeeding generations of children in the said community over the whole period of traditional time" and that this surely must have been true for all of the English communities "cited here or in chapter 4" (p. 66). The conditions in question were the quantitative presence of the nuclear family. Laslett's later argumentation refers to the whole of England.

Le Play, however, presents a historical sequence of the different types of families, the patriarchal family (extended laterally as well as vertically), the stem family (extended only vertically), and the unstable or nuclear family. He also offers an ecological interpretation of the different types of families, the steppes being related to the patriarchal type, the coastal areas to the stem family type and the forests to the unstable type, agriculture also mainly giving rise to a stem family type. Laslett does not try any such explanation and his a-historical inclination becomes very pronounced in such expressions as the one cited where the conditions for Ealing in 1599 are supposed to have been the same over the whole period of traditional time. The time he has in mind seems to be the three hundred years from the late 16th to the late 19th century, corresponding to his material for 100 parishes 1574—1821 plus census material from 1801 onwards. As a matter of fact, Laslett does not make any effort to study the historical process from his chosen sample, "the English standard", and he regards the whole sample as being within the parameters of a closed social system, covering and including "all of the country in all the years which preceded industrialization". Since the main result of the study is embodied in the statement that the mean household size (MHS) remained constant at 4.75 during the whole time from the 16th century until 1901, Laslett's position can only be understood as a reaction against the conventional conception of a development from large to small families in connection with industrialization. His interpretation of the material and his methods must, however, be called in question, and the refutation of any historical change as to household composition during the said time does not seem to be in agreement with the facts as known from other areas.

LASLETT SOMETIMES INDULGES in contradictory statements, such as when he argues against the usefulness of mean household size on the whole. I totally agree with him, but the book we have got is exactly about mean household (or family) size! It is indeed possible that the crucial point for the apparent impression that the households in England were small is embodied in the definition of household by the researcher.

Thus every inmate is treated as a separate household, distinct from the landlord's or host's household and regarded as having a dwelling of his own (p. 38). No attention is paid to the possible differences as to the position of inmates in purely rural areas compared with the towns. Laslett presupposes that the putting together of groups of persons into blocks by the registrar was always made in accordance with the three following facts: (1) that they habitually slept under the same roof; (2) that they shared a number of activities; and (3) that they were related to each other by blood or by marriage (p. 25). Evidently, the inmates according to Laslett's apprehension were not put together with the host's household in the same block. But it has been noticed that married sons or daughters or aged persons were sometimes treated as inmates by the registrar.

In such cases — and we never know their numbers — the extended family will be marked as one or two small families and perhaps one household made up by a solitary in Laslett's English standard. The extended families disappear by definition!

However, Laslett does not seem to have scrutinized the original registers in the archives himself but has left this part of the work to his research students. He will thus lack the insight for proper criticism of the sources and relies on the changing customs of the registrars of different times as well as on the faculty for understanding the old records by people without the education of historians. As it was forbidden to house inmates in England we must also doubt that they were registered very faithfully. The material evidently includes a large proportion of towns and urban parishes (9 from London), and Laslett's assertion, that the English peasantry is unlikely to be underrepresented in the 100 parishes (in a note, p. 150) remains without evidence. It is very probable that the many lodgers in the towns were of completely different status in relation to the host than the rural inmates. The urban areas must have been very different in size at the end of the 16th century as compared with the beginning of the 19th century but here they have been mixed together unscrupulously.

THE PRESENTATION OF A MEAN HOUSEHOLD SIZE of 4.75 which includes paupers, cottagers, farmers and gentry is unsatisfactory. The presentation of the figures for different social classes in table 4.15 and 4.16 (p. 154) is then rewarding, but here, in the size of household table, we notice that the number of parishes with yeomen represented was only 21, whereas 40 parishes were reported as housing tradesmen and craftsmen. From this one is tempted to conclude that, after all, the rural parishes were not adequately represented. The mean household size must include a time with a smaller number of tradesmen, labourers and paupers as well as a time when the numbers had risen considerably. Labourers might typically have formed the smaller, nuclear family type. The lumping together of such a heterogeneous material from different times and different as well as changing social strata makes every mean misleading and is unfair to the reputation of statistical methods.

Laslett states that the distribution of households of different size in England over the centuries according to the table below was probably characteristic of preindustrial England and that the remainder of Northern and Western Europe may have been similar. I have tried a corresponding distribution for peasants and cottagers, respectively, in the parish of Sörbymagle, Zealand, in 1645. Here are the figures; the differences are striking.

It is remarkable that a majority of persons in England are said to have lived in the larger households, "those over six persons in size", in spite of the repeated arguments about the smaller household as the focus of attention. Laslett also belittles the importance of kin other than members of the nuclear family in the traditional English household. His figures and proportions (kin noticed in 626 of

Household size (persons)	England over three centuries	Zealand 1645	
		Cottagers	Peasants
1	6 %	—	—
2	14 %	22 %	—
3	17 %	15 %	3 %
4	16 %	22 %	10 %
5	15 %	19 %	12 %
6	12 %	11 %	18 %
7	8 %	7 %	19 %
8	5 %	—	7 %
9	3 %	—	13 %
10	2 %	4 %	9 %
11	1 %	—	—
12	1 %	—	4 %
13 and over	1 %	—	6 %
	100 %	100 % (= 120 persons)	100 % (= 335 persons)

5843 households) are said to dispose of any supposition that there was usually or even often, resident kin in England. But shortly afterwards the reader is warned against drawing strong inferences about the kin structure of pre-industrial English households from his data.

The surprising thing with Laslett's bold one hundred parishes — in analysis shrinking to 61 or 46 or even 6 — is that he starts criticizing the evolutionary mistakes of 19th century scholars, intimating that the English standard, "the first historical figures for the size and structure of the household to become available for any collection of communities in a country which has become industrialized", would disprove any evolutionary ideas. But finally we learn that no parish in chronological group 1 (before 1650) is represented in group 1 (before 1650) and number 2 (1651—1749) and number 3 (1750—1821) and that no single parish in group 2 is represented in group 3. The possibility of studying historical process is thus nullified by the sample itself and it is then no wonder that the author prefers to treat the material from a supposedly situational point of view.

In spite of what was stressed in the quotation above it is also later admitted that structural evidence is frequently absent from both past and present data, and this may explain why 'mean household size' became the main theme of some of the authors writing on household and family in the past. If I understand Laslett right, he argues that *household* was the fundamental unit in preindustrial European society. I agree with this. But he continues: "A reasonably regular distribution of household sizes in each community may well have been a consequence of this architectonic feature of the social structure, and an important means of maintaining this distribution must surely have been the servants. This exchange of persons in considerable numbers between households, it is suggested, is one reason why the traditional social structure of England and Wales, and perhaps of other Western countries, was slow to respond to the effect of demographic change in the period of demographic transition" (p. 156).

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I do not see how the household being the fundamental unit in a society could cause the distribution of household sizes to be regular, that is identical, in a great number of different communities, nor that such a fact should work as an architectonic principle — why not as a celestial force? As far as I have understood the processes as studied in Scandinavia, it may well be that the peasants kept less servants if they had more adult children. But in a long time perspective, if the output of agriculture and cattlebreeding rose there was also more input in the form of labourers totally, adult children and servants included. And if the mean household size should have remained constant in spite of its growth among the farmers, then this was certainly the result of the growth of the landless proletariat with their small households. Structures cannot be explained by structural principles alone, but should be related, for instance, to the economic and ecological factors!

To a certain extent the whole battle about mean household size is a sham fight. It becomes evident that the households were considerably bigger during the 19th century and earlier than after 1891. The argument is against complex households of very large size and against the early industrialization in England as a cause of any noticeable change in mean household size. It turns out that "large households" is a relative concept and that one can as well state that the large households disappeared with the effective industrialization of England during the 20th century.

THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION of the late 18th century and the early 19th century was perhaps after all no social revolution at all? And the untenable, old-fashioned idea is perhaps the one of the early English industrialization as a deepgoing process or of the reference to England as "the oldest *industrial society* in the world" (italics mine), where "the immemorial tendency of English people to live in households of a particular range of sizes" did not change until this present generation.

Laslett uses the census materials from 1801 onwards for comparisons with his English standard 1564—1821. It is a frustrating fact that such censuses, be it in England or Sweden, have turned out to be sufficiently inconsistent with the principles of classification of household, family or occupation to make them of very questionable usefulness for the study of historical processes. Is it not possible to go to the original sources for the censuses? The enthusiasm with which the alleged absence of patriarchal extended families in England from 1564 onwards is announced and generalized seems to forestall an equal analysis of the conditions during the Middle Ages and still more ancient times.

The criticism of Laslett's and his co-operators' book does not necessarily imply that their position is regarded as being against large families. We must be allowed to observe that after all the argument mostly stresses the presence of nuclear families for Japan as well as for Hungary. But why not turn the pancake upside down? Is it not plausible that most nuclear families in a given situation

should be extended in another phase of the family cycle, provided that the psychological climate of the epoch and social stratum was permissive to such intimate social contacts between people outside the matrimonial union and its young offspring? A time when such extended or complex households cannot exist because of psychological barriers represents the great change from the locally integrated society of sheer industrialism. It is the presence of complex households which proves the case of pre-industrial society, not the presence of nuclear families. Besides, the integration between people and between households and kin groups does not become understandable only through such sources as the population registers and the blocks in the columns made up by the parish priest or the local clerk.

Peter Laslett is no doubt a pioneer of English demography and the contributions to the book are as manifold as instructive. My impression is, however, that the chapter on English household over three centuries illustrates the importance of thorough penetration of the source material before any codification, punched card operations, construction of correlation tables or stepwise regression programme is undertaken. The quantitative potentiality of a computer is often greater than the qualitative value of the results, not because of an incapacity of the machine but because it has been fed too many nonsense variables.