

THE NUCLEAR FAMILY AND POSTMODERN THEORY

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Abstract

The paper addresses the question of whether postmodernist theory of the family reflects the emergence of a crisis for the family itself or a crisis in theoretical discourse about it. While family life is undergoing widespread change, this is not a recent phenomenon. If it is claimed that the family has changed to such a degree that it no longer corresponds to what has been identified as the modern form, the argument that it has moved into a postmodern phase should be related to the extent that modernisation has been achieved in the wider society. Material from three contrasted societies, Great Britain, Korea and Guyana, suggests there is no universal and systematic relationship between family change and the degree of modernisation. The characterisation of family life in the late twentieth century as postmodern reflects rather the problem theorists have in presenting an account of continuing change affecting an unstable and cyclical set of relationships. Postmodernism is essentially an issue in the sociology of knowledge rather than a matter of a radical discontinuity in social process. The readiness of postmodernist theory to abandon binary oppositions or over rationalised theorisations generally however is a possibly hopeful development in furthering our understanding of change.

Postmodernity and Family Life

Social and cultural change has increasingly come to be seen as discontinuous, as involving not just a speeding up but a transformation of society, the replacement of the modern by the postmodern. There are differences in emphasis amongst these accounts. On the one hand postmodernism is described as an essentially cultural phenomenon characterised by alternative perceptions, conflicting modes of thought and relativised values. On the other hand postmodernity is identified as a structural condition in which the ordered procedures, organisations and institutions of modern society are displaced by more precarious or provisional arrangements where shifting and contingent patterns of conduct predominate.

For Touraine (1988) the ceaseless change, the constant revolutionising of the means of production and social forms have become increasingly difficult to reconcile with the central principles of rational progress which have defined modern society. The consequent dislocation of social life brought about by this crisis of modernity amounts to the transition from

one culture to another, from the modern to the postmodern. The process of postmodernisation not only breaks down existing structures and relationships but also our ready made explanations of cause and effect in social and cultural affairs. "Postmodernisation is characterised by an unprecedented level of unpredictability and apparent chaos. Action is divorced from underlying material constraints ... and enters the voluntaristic realm of taste, choice and preference. As it does so the boundaries between determined social groups disappear". (Crook, Pakulski and Waters 1992, p.35). The postmodern world, as Bauman says, is "irreducibly and irrevocably pluralistic, split into a multitude of sovereign units and sites of authority, with no horizontal or vertical order, either in actuality or potency." (1988, p.799). The absence of relationships, even potential order, results, not only in a society where behaviour is idiosyncratic and unpredictable, but in the vertiginous situation for theorists where no explanation and no account the social has any claim to superiority over any other. In relation to family life it is argued, in this vein, that established values break down and that individuals are no longer content, or even discontentedly willing, to follow established customs relating to marriage, conjugal role patterns, filial or parental mores, or confine themselves within the institutionalised frameworks of conventional nuclear or extended family obligations and residential continuities. Unmarried cohabitation, lone parenting, step relationships, dual income or single person households, enduring co-residential non-heterosexual relationships and parenting have all become familiar patterns of domestic life. Denzin (1987) claimed that in America the nuclear family in which children are cared for by two parents in a protective and emotionally secure environment is no longer the norm.

Cheal has argued that though "the family" is a term used in ordinary everyday speech to refer to ties which people believe involve enduring intimate relations, there is no universal form or pattern that these relationships or the beliefs about them adhere to (1988 a). Bernardes has gone further in arguing that "... family situations in contemporary society are so varied and diverse that it simply makes no sociological sense to speak of a single ideal-type model of "the family" at all" (Bernardes in Close and Collins (ed,) 1985, p.209). Scanzoni and his colleagues indeed regard the term "family" to be so infused with the values and emotions of ordinary people that for the purposes of scientific discussion they propose to dispense with the word altogether (1989, p.44). Cheal believes that the recognition of diversity" ... so easy as a matter of empirical observation, poses a real challenge for social theory ... " (1991, p.125). Thus not only has it become increasingly difficult to identify one pattern as typical of family life today but it has, as a result, necessarily become increasingly difficult to talk about what is happening in an unambiguous and generally intelligible way.

Postmodernism in family theory presents us with a number of ambiguities it will be as well to address at the outset. To begin with there is this ambiguity, indeed perhaps some ambivalence, about whether we are concerned with a postmodern theory of family life or with an attempt to theorise the postmodern family. In the cultural and social sciences, in criticism and literary theory there is a well established, in some areas virtually hegemonic, commitment to postmodernist theory, and it is natural that writers and theorists concerned with family life should seek to apply whatever new perspectives postmodernism might have to offer to their own pursuits. On the other hand there is the less ambitious but equally fashionable claim that as a matter of fact family life in present-day societies has changed and no longer corresponds to what was described as the "modern" pattern (Janet Stacey 1990).

Unfortunately for the ambivalence these two projects are incompatible. Postmodernist

theory encompasses a multitude of interpretations but if there is a common ground it is that it is no longer possible to argue for one objective account of the world "out there". Accounts of the world are structured each within a discourse, no doubt historically conditioned, but inaccessible to word for word translation or mapping onto one eclectic truth. For a postmodernist theory even the argument that family life in the 1990s has become more culturally diverse, less structured and so forth, is only a way of looking at it, as is the belief that the family as an institution is dying or the contrary view that nothing has fundamentally changed only the way we talk or think about things. So we first of all have to decide whether we are looking for a postmodern theory of the family or looking at something new, the post-modern family. Clearly most of the postmodern literature on family studies is of the latter kind rather than the former. Foucault (1978) is a notable exception and there are hints of postmodernist theoretical relativism in some otherwise more conventional discussion (Cheal 1993, p.125).

The argument that we have entered a new era and must confront a new phenomenon: the postmodern family itself has two possible meanings. The first of these runs something like this. The traditional family, based on the principle of lineage and manifest in the dominance of the stem or extended family household was displaced, as modernisation theory tells us (eg. Moore, Burgess and Locke, Parsons, Smelser etc.) by the modern family based on the principle of conjugal pairing and manifested in the predominance of the nuclear or elementary family household. In an analogous way, with the displacement of modern society by its post-modern successor, the nuclear family pattern has been or is currently being displaced by the postmodern family based on some yet undetermined principle (an atomistic individualism perhaps) and manifest in some new sort of pattern yet to be finally characterised. Alternatively, another and possibly more persuasive argument might simply be that the nuclear pattern has been displaced but not to be replaced by another dominant form but by an absence of any predominant pattern or principle but only by diversity (Janet Stacey 1990, p.18, Rapoport 1989). The evidence for this seems to be better according to the criteria of pre-postmodernist evaluation.

It is the argument of this paper however that this view is overstated. Though it has some plausibility grounded in real changes taking place in many societies, not just the advanced industrialised economies, it distorts the lived experience of the great majority of people and confuses secular with what is often only cyclical change. Furthermore in overreacting to historical change the apparent discovery of postmodern family life reflects a crisis in social theory rather than in the wider society.

Instability and Diversity in Family Life

In no complex society has every household corresponded to a single pattern nor could it be so. The diversity of family relationships is not a recent or even postmodernist observation. Tolstoy's observation that "All happy families resemble one another but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" (1878) reflected his view that happiness required a degree of conformity to well recognised social values. Unhappiness in family life was at least in part the outcome of a failure to meet moral and behavioural expectations established in common cultural mores. The paradoxical subjective ordinariness and uniqueness of each family which

Tolstoy captured in his novel is framed within a strong and unquestioned if not unchallenged set of conventions relating to marriage and familial obligations. Other nineteenth century literature bears witness to a wider diversity of family ties and household composition. Two random examples from different societies may illustrate this. Huckleberry Finn's one-parent upbringing, though certainly not normative may not have been so uncommon (Twain 1885), and it is instructive to consider the variety of family household groups in Dickens' *Great Expectations*, for example, with the hero Pip brought up by his childless married sister and her husband, Miss Havisham and her niece Stella or Wemmick and his Aged Parent (1861).

These fictional examples are evidence only of an awareness of the diversity of family life amongst nineteenth century authors. What was true only of unhappy families according to Tolstoy, according to postmodernists theorists is however increasingly true for all families. Has that diversity in reality increased or only the sensitivity of theorists to it?

Even within a single complex society family life varies a great deal. Quite apart from the apparent randomness of the encounters and interactions of unique individuals there are diverse patterns of social relationships and cultural beliefs varying across regional traditions, different generations, classes and status groups, ethnic and religious communities within a highly differentiated social structure. And these patterns are continually changing. Family life is subject to both secular and cyclical change. Secular changes within a society as a result of demographic, economic, political, cultural and other developments may all have repercussions upon the family life of individuals and through them on general trends in the society as a whole.

In some instances the impact of secular historical change may be dramatic and obvious. The disruption of war (Marwick), the distress of economic upheaval (eg. Brown and Scase) may be immediately apparent but personal adaptation to the changing circumstances may have equally momentous and long lasting consequences without those directly affected always realising how far they have gone.

Cyclical changes are for all of us more readily recognisable within our own personal experience. But though our most profound and earliest social experience is that of family change, and although the crises of our family life are the occasions of our most intimately satisfying, most joyful and most painful hours, the essential transience of family life is something we too easily, perhaps in some kind of self-protection, forget. Children are born, grow up and leave home, spouses may part, parents die (Lansing and Kish). There are many paths through the cycle of foundation, growth, change and dissolution but every family passes through by one route or another (Hill, Turner p. 82, Trost, Murphy, Eichler).

Families are very disparate then even in any one society. No one specification is likely to comprehend this inevitable diversity, Harris has proposed that we should address "the family" as a class of groups which are formed by extension from the elementary relationships between spouses, between parents and children and between siblings (1988). It is not therefore the diversity or the impermanence of family groups that requires explanation but either relative changes in the frequencies and duration of particular phases in this transitory pattern (Stapleton 1980, Mattessich and Hill 1987) or changes in our sensitivity to them.

Elder's argument (1984) that since we cannot identify a single sequence of stages through which families pass then we should focus instead on the individual life-course rather than on the family group is an unsatisfactory solution to the problem. Individual life-courses are no less diverse than family life-cycles (Rindfuss et al. 1987), indeed they must necessarily be at

least as varied, and the change of focus offers no gain in conceptual simplicity. In any case it is not just individuals that have a history but relationships too and the properties of those relationships is a proper object of sociological inquiry. Indeed it might be argued from several theoretical perspectives, they are *the* proper object of sociological inquiry.

Some of the argument for diversity relates to changes in attitudes to *marriage* rather than the family itself. If you define the normal nuclear family as a household comprising a *married* couple and their children then this merely confuses marriage as a cultural institution with the family unit as an element of structure. There have been changes in attitudes to marriage in recent years with the average age at entry, the relationship of marriage to enduring sexual relationships, the religious character, the indissolubility of the contract, the indispensability of the married state for adult status, all undergoing change.

The statistical trends toward current diversity of patterns are not evidence of the disappearance of the nuclear family and its replacement with a post-modern family — whatever that might be. The increasing number of families at different stages of the family life cycle reflect changes in attitude to marriage and childbearing, and the increased divorce rate. They mostly reflect an increase in individualism — associated in the modernisation theory literature as a classic trait of modernisation and the move from traditional stem-family patterns to the nuclear pattern.

If the definition of the nuclear family excludes families that have not yet entered the child rearing stage of their cycle or have already passed out of it, then it is one which ignores the essentially transient character of family life. “Of its nature,” Margaret Stacey writes, “the immediate family is a short-lived unit, which lasts for only a part of the life of its members” (1960, p. 133).

A nuclear family consists of a stable, mating heterosexual pair with any children they may have had who are still resident with them. This pattern obviously must include childless couples in earlier or later phases of the life-cycle and should also include those where one of the original partners is missing through death, divorce or separation.

The nuclear family label could then never account for 100 percent of all family households if it is defined as *currently* including two biological parents together with their children even in societies where the nuclear family is the norm. Children do not (usually) arrive instantaneously with the couple coming to live together (so there must be childless couple households). Children grow up and leave home eventually (ditto). Then the partners do not usually die simultaneously so there will either be a number of residual (usually lone widow) households or, if she goes to live with her grown up children, some extended family households — even if the nuclear family pattern were universal. Chester made the point very forcibly in 1985, “Even with universal marriage and parenthood, and no divorce and early death, there would always be many non-nuclear-family households because the parents-plus-children unit is a developmental phase. But it is one which is normal and is experienced by the great majority” (1985, p. 186).

Evidence of Changing Patterns

If modernisation was associated with the growing predominance of the nuclear family type, the current decline of nuclear family households might plausibly seem to indicate a

transition from the modern to some new condition, the postmodern. There are a number of components of this argument which need to be examined more closely however. Firstly perhaps, there is the truth of the claim that nuclear family households are declining. Secondly there is the assumption that the nuclear family type is, or at least was, historically associated with modernisation. Thirdly, if it can be established that major changes are in fact taking place in family life, how far can we reasonably interpret recent trends as the arrival of something so different from what has gone before so as to warrant the proclamation of a new post-modern age?

Before considering the historical claim about the modernity of the nuclear family, it is worth while looking at the dimensions of current changes and some of their implications. As we can already show the statistical evidence unquestionably demonstrates that changes in the pattern of family life are taking place in most present-day societies. What these changes mean and whether they constitute a break with the past however is not wholly self-evident. To begin with, the emergence of post modern patterns of family might be expected to occur where modernisation was well established rather than in countries not yet or perhaps only recently modernised. To be brief, if similar changes are apparent regardless of the modernity of the context in which they occur, then to categorise them as part of the processes of postmodernisation is not merely unilluminating, it is misleading. Comparative evidence is of course notoriously problematic but the counter-indicative argument, that is, that in significantly different cultures, at different stages of economic development one should expect contrasting patterns even if the character or quantity of these differences should be difficult or impossible to measure, seems a reasonable one given any presumption of a causal connection between structural change and family patterns. This of course is to assume that the elusive nature of causal relationships for postmodernist theory (see eg. Bauman 1988a) is confined to readings of postmodern culture and society. If on the contrary it is held to be no longer possible to offer such explanations for any type of society, then anyone can with equal confidence propose any view and preference for one historical assertion or another could not be anything but arbitrary.

With all that in mind, it may still be interesting to look at changing patterns of family composition in societies at different stages of development. To illustrate this argument, rather than seeking to establish any large-scale sociological generalisation, I want to consider some readily accessible data from three contrasted societies, one in Western Europe, one in East Asia and one in South America. The first, an old developed economy is Great Britain. The second is a newly developing economy industrialised over the past forty years, the Republic of Korea and the third a low income third world country with a small and predominantly rural population, the Republic of Guyana. In all three countries the nuclear family household is still the commonest residential pattern but in all three there have been clear signs of change in recent years.

In Britain as in other European countries, especially in Scandinavia, attitudes towards formal marriage have been changing in recent years. The rising popularity of marriage especially amongst the young in the years after the Second World War peaked in the 1960s and from the 1970s marriage has been increasingly deferred and preceded by unmarried cohabitation (Noble 1981) the proportion of women aged 18 to 49 who were married declined from 74 percent in 1979 to 59 percent in 1992 while co-habitation of non-married women increased from 11 percent to 21 percent of the non-married or 9 percent of all women in the age-range

over the same period (**General Household Survey 1992**). The belief in formal marriage as a precondition for an enduring sexual relationship seems to have become less widespread amongst single women. Amongst the separated, however, cohabitation has been declining since 1985 and amongst the divorced since 1989 (GHS). Thus all the trends do not run in the same direction.

However in Tables 1 and 2 the label "married couples" includes co-habiting couples, in other words refers to all those living as man and wife whether formally married or not. Thus this material refers only to changes in family household groupings rather than to change in marriage customs or preferences as such. In looking at the changing distribution of household types a number of tendencies are strongly marked. It is clear that the proportion of households consisting of people living alone has grown. In 1991 27 percent of all households contained only one person, an increase from 11 percent in 1961 and from about 5 percent in 1911 (Halsey 1988, p.118) the proportion of lone-parent households increased even

TABLE 1. HOUSEHOLDS BY TYPE IN GREAT BRITAIN 1961 - 91

	(Percentages)			
	1961	1971	1981	1991
One person households				
under pensionable age	4	6	8	11
over pensionable age	7	12	14	16
Two or more unrelated adults	5	4	5	3
One family households				
Married couples with				
no children	26	27	26	28
1-2 dependent children	30	26	25	20
3 or more dependent children	8	9	6	5
non-dependent children only	10	8	8	8
Lone parents with				
dependent children	2	3	5	6
non-dependent children only	4	4	4	4
Two or more families	3	1	1	1

Source: Adapted from *Social Trends 23 1993*

TABLE 2. PEOPLE IN HOUSEHOLDS BY TYPE OF HOUSEHOLD IN GREAT BRITAIN

	(Percentages of the Population)			
	1961	1971	1981	1991
Living alone	4	6	8	11
Married couples with				
no children	18	19	20	23
dependent children	52	52	47	41
non-dependent children only	12	10	10	11
Lone parents with				
Dependant children	3	4	6	10
In other Households	12	9	9	4

Source : Adapted from *Social Trends 23 1993*

more dramatically by a factor of four between 1961 and 1991. The proportion of households consisting of couples without children also grew while the proportion with dependant children fell from 38 percent to 25 percent. If the nuclear family is defined as two parents plus dependent children, then here is evidence of its decline over the thirty years described in the table.

At the same time, however, families with only older children at home, that is those over 16 years of age, at first decreased but through the years from 1971 remained a steady proportion of the growing number of households. Also the proportion of households of non-nuclear types, including those where people lived with other relatives, decreased as a proportion by nearly two thirds in the ten years from 1961 and has remained at that low level ever since. Thus as the diversity of family household patterns in one respect increased at the same time it also diminished in others. As evidence of postmodernist trends this is not very substantial.

Turning from the distribution of households in Table 1 to the distribution of individuals in Table 2, however, the apparent trend, though following the same direction from the same underlying factors, is much less strongly marked. Although increasing numbers lived alone, they only accounted for 11 percent of people in 1991. More than half of them are old people, most of them widowed, and, therefore, former members of nuclear families. Similarly about 60 percent of lone parents are divorced and therefore survivors from former nuclear families. On a slightly wider definition of the nuclear family, though the numbers living in such a setting was down from 82 percent in 1961 it was still the case in 1991 that 75 percent of people in Britain were living in households consisting of a married couple with or without children. The decline in nuclear family households is primarily the result of the decline in marital stability on the one hand and the increasing expectation of life, especially amongst women, on the other. Most of those living alone would in due course live, or until the loss of a spouse had lived, within a nuclear family household. To these might be added the divorced and separated and their children. Thus, even in the 1990s, the overwhelming majority of people were living in a nuclear family setting at any one time. For most of the remainder it also remains a significant part of their lives.

If the statistical evidence for the disappearance or even the unpopularity, of the nuclear family is not strong, the argument that family life has entered a postmodern phase needs to be sustained in terms perhaps of qualitative changes in the relationships between people who regard one another as members of their family. The evidence that many people do not live in nuclear family households is not an indication that it has ceased to be the normal pattern both statistically and culturally in late twentieth century Britain.

The decisions to marry or cohabit, to defer childbearing, to part or stay together are made within families and trends in fertility and nuptiality reflect changes in people's ideas about family life, about the relationships between husbands and wives, about life-styles, about the desirability of outside careers for wives and mothers. But without seeking to deny that changes in attitude towards marriage and fertility, to the employment of women, survival rates, expectations about living standards and the nature of the sexual and emotional content of conjugal relationships continue to affect family life as they have done since the industrial revolution at least, is it useful to regard these as having reached a new and postmodern stage? The Rapoport's emphasis on the diversity of family relationships dates from the 1960s (Rapoport and Rapoport) and Bott drew attention to the absence of norms of common consent and the idiosyncrasy of conjugal relationships, at least amongst those detached from

the close-knit social networks of traditional communities, in the 1950s (Bott 1957). Was the post modern then already emerging forty years ago? If so, when was the heyday of the modern?

In the more recently industrialised economy of Korea the transition from traditional to modern society must be dated well within the past half century. This is partly reflected in the changing pattern of family life. In Korea households with seven or more people declined from 33 percent of all households to only 3.7 percent between 1960 and 1990. Over the same period one-person households increased from 2.3 percent to 8.4 percent. Leaving one person households aside, nuclear families with or without children increased from 59.5 percent of all family households in 1966 to 67.5 percent in 1990. Extended family households declined from 32 percent of family households in 1966 to 24 percent in 1990. It is true that lone-parent families increased from 8.2 percent of family households in 1966 to 10.7 percent in 1970 but they have since declined steadily to 8.7 percent in 1990 (Noble and Chang).

In general then in Korea, during the period of rapid industrialisation, family patterns have tended toward greater homogeneity rather than increased heterogeneity and are more consistent with the expectations of modernisation theory rather than those of postmodernism. The comparison with Great Britain is also compatible with the argument that modernisation in Korea is reflected in the growth of nuclear families and the decline in extended family households while Britain has passed beyond that era.

As we have seen cohabitation has increased rapidly in Britain between the 1970s and the early 1990s. In Guyana similar trends have been even more marked. Half the proportion of Guyanese women under twenty-five years of age were married in 1986 as compared with 1970 and the proportion declined, though to a lesser extent, in every age group up to forty-five. The proportion in common-law partnerships increased over the same period especially amongst younger women and the percentage in "visiting relationships" that is to say continuing sexual but not co-residential relationships, more than doubled amongst women aged 15 to 19 and, though most common amongst women in their twenties, multiplied by an increasing amount in each higher age-group up to an eight-fold increase amongst women in their early forties. The proportion of separated and divorced women increased substantially in every age group through the period covered by the Table while the proportion who never had a partner declined amongst those over thirty but rose for each age group under thirty.

What are we to make of these Guyanese statistical trends? Steady sexual relationships were becoming more widespread but are increasingly deferred to later in life and increasingly not regularised in formal marriage as common-law partnerships and visiting relationships became more common and more women experienced a break-up of formal or common-law marriage relationships. From 72 percent in 1970, only 53 percent of Guyanese women in their early thirties were married in 1986. Non-married relationships increased from 13 percent to 26 percent in the same age-group and the proportion whose marriage or common-law partnership had ended had increased from 8 to 15 percent. Attitudes towards marriage were clearly undergoing significant change in the period described in the table and more women, about half of those in their early thirties were living outside the conventions of formal marriage by the mid 1980s. Yet marriage still remained the most common experience, with 60 percent of women over 35 still married.

In all three societies the trends indicate an increase in single parent families, an increasing resort to divorce and dwindling numbers of extended family households.

TABLE 3. UNION STATUS OF WOMEN AGED 15 - 44 IN GUYANA 1970-1986

(Percentages)							
Age Group	Year	Married	Common-law partner	Visiting Relation -ship	No longer with common -law partner or husband*	Never had a partner	Not stated
15-19	1970	18.8	3.8	2.6	0.9	73.8	0.1
	1980	15.1	5.1	3.4	1.2	66.6	8.6
	1986	7.1	5.7	5.4	2.2	79.8	
20-24	1970	50.5	8.3	3.3	3.6	34.2	0.1
	1980	40.7	9.8	5.2	3.7	35.6	4.9
	1986	27.2	14.9	9.9	8.2	39.8	
25-29	1970	69.0	10.6	2.1	5.6	12.6	0.2
	1980	58.5	11.6	4.0	6.8	15.7	3.4
	1986	47.5	15.4	10.4	12.0	14.7	
30-34	1970	71.6	11.7	1.4	8.0	7.1	0.2
	1980	64.6	12.5	2.6	9.2	8.4	2.7
	1986	52.8	17.3	8.5	14.5	6.9	
35-39	1970	71.4	11.9	1.0	10.1	5.5	0.1
	1980	68.1	12.0	1.9	10.6	5.0	2.4
	1986	60.5	14.4	5.8	16.4	2.9	
40-44	1970	66.8	11.9	0.4	14.8	5.9	0.2
	1980	65.9	10.6	1.3	15.4	4.3	2.6
	1986	59.2	12.4	3.1	22.6	2.7	

*includes widowed, divorced and separated.

Sources: Daly-Hill and Zaba 1981, Table E6 and ECLAC 1987, Table 5

The comparison between Korea and Britain lends some support for the postmodernisation thesis notwithstanding the doubts expressed about its applicability when discussing the British case alone. Paradoxically, however, the most rapid growth in family diversity seems to be occurring not in the long time industrialised Britain but in the least economically developed economy Guyana. Unlike the others Guyana saw living standards fall through the 1960s to the late 1980s. On the whole, then, it would appear that changes towards greater diversity and away from the dominance of the nuclear family type are not related in a consistent way to more general changes in economy and social structure but instead follow a dynamic of their own.

The Modernisation of Society and The Modern Family

It has long been held a sociological truism that one of the key processes in the development of modern urban industrial society from predominantly peasant or feudal structures was the replacement of the stem family by the more mobile and residentially separate nuclear family. Vogel however argued that, in the case of Japan at least, industrialisation has tended to *strengthen* the solidarity of the extended family (1967) and Wong in his study of economic development and kinship links in Hong Kong concluded that strong extended family

connections are often highly adaptive in the process of industrial and economic development (1988). Stinner in the Philippines (1979), Chang in Korea (1993) and Turowski in Poland (1977) all found that extended families played an important and strengthened role in the urbanisation process.

If however the disappearance of the extended family is in fact not a universal characteristic of the modernisation process, it is equally misguided to assume the insignificance of the nuclear family unit in pre-industrial societies. Nimkoff and Middleton (1960), Greenfield (1961), Laslett (1969, 1977) and Macfarlane (1978, 1987) have all shown that the nuclear family unit is not uniquely a product of industrialisation but was found in many pre-industrial societies in many parts of the world. Hunters and gatherers mostly lived in elementary family groups and in northern Europe there appears never to have been a pre-industrial prevalence of stem-family households. Nuclear families were the usual pattern of residence as far back as direct and indirect evidence will sustain investigation. Laslett, for instance, found only ten percent of households in England from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries contained kin outside the nuclear family. There is of course, once again an ambiguity here between statistical and cultural norms. The statistical prevalence of nuclear family households is not in itself evidence of nuclear family values. Though Macfarlane has convincingly argued that, in England at least, individualism in family, legal and cultural values was well established in medieval times, in other cultures a preponderance of nuclear family households co-existed with a Confucian emphasis on the lineage as a primary cultural value. In Korea in the nineteenth century Choson period the traditional stem-family pattern was the cultural ideal but stem-family households were a small minority of all households. The traditional Korean family closely followed the rule of patrilineal primogeniture. Eldest sons married and remained in their fathers' households while, on marriage, younger brothers established households of their own. These formed the majority of all households though, ideally, each in turn would become the stem of a new stem-family. This ideal played a powerful role in the culture of Choson society, wider than its key place in the family value system. However as a majority of households at any one time had not reached this ideal state, even in the nineteenth century two-thirds of all households consisted of nuclear families only and less than 27 percent contained stem-families (Ch'oe, Lee). Thus, although the traditional Korean family system was based on the stem family, the demographic data shows the nuclear family household was the commonest type. But this evidence is quite misleading as to the character of the family system prevailing in Choson society since it presents only a snapshot, static picture and omits the dynamic element of cyclical change within each family and the evolution of each household.

This is not to argue that Laslett was wrong but only to point out that the proportion of households of a given type at any one time need not directly reflect the culturally dominant pattern. The periodisation of the history of the family in terms of a traditional or pre-industrial era, when the extended family and its obligations to kin embraced almost everyone throughout their lives, giving way to the modern period, when most people lived in a nuclear family, is so deeply oversimplified a view as to be quite misleading. Kinship networks are still important to people in industrialised societies and nuclear family residential units seem always to have been the prevalent type in many societies. Over time, sometimes more rapidly, sometimes more slowly perhaps, peoples' attitudes and beliefs changed along with their life chances and their life expectancies. In the present day most people continue to spend most of

their lifetimes within the setting of nuclear family relationships though undergoing continuing changes in their aspirations and expectations as the structural and demographic circumstances of their lives change (Marsh and Arber). The erosion of the boundaries of class and community cultures has been part of the experience of every generation since industrialisation and population growth began in seventeenth or eighteenth century Europe (see eg. Anderson pp. 176-179). Change, even rapid and far reaching change, is not new. The social sciences were born in the attempt to understand the increasing pace of social change associated with the political and economic revolutions of the eighteenth century (Kumar). Their perennial turmoil and instability reflects the perennial challenge they face in addressing the continuity of change.

The attempts by social theorists to contrast the society of their times with what had gone before, industrial and preindustrial, capitalist and feudal, contract and status, *gesellschaft* and *gemeinschaft*, modern and traditional etc. are all flawed by this freeze-frame exclusion of the fluid. Modernity versus postmodernity is the latest attempt to capture the dynamic flux of social process within the categories of a (fairly) neat typology.

The implications of the substantive argument that the nuclear family has been superseded by postmodern diversity are ambiguous. Modernisation theorists, both Functionalist and Marxist, argued that the nuclear family represented an adaptive response functionally related to the needs of industrial capitalism (Parsons, Moore and Zaretsky). Postmodern diversity must therefore signify the failure of the industrial order to provide for its own reproduction and pattern maintenance or even a collapse of the capitalist cultural hegemony. Another less widespread view of the nuclear family, one also with its radical and conservative wings, held that the nuclear family represented an institutionalised defence of the private realm against the encroachments of church and state upon the rights and liberties of the individual (Mount, Humphries). Postmodern de-institutionalisation on this view is a cause for dismay for libertarians as the defence of privacy, the bastion of individual freedoms, decays in the face of large scale social processes. In either case the postmodernisation of the family signifies that the relevant model of a particular kind of society has been undermined. Given the replacement of the nuclear family by a postmodern diversity of relationships, it follows either that the capitalist state has triumphed over individual autonomy, or else that disorganised capitalism has collapsed in the face of a radically individualistic cultural anarchy. For Functionalist and Marxist theorists then, the institutionalisation of social reproduction through the nuclear family has become both less possible and less functionally necessary as capitalist industrial society is progressively more disorganised in the process of postmodernisation. The alternative view, which held the nuclear family household to be a bastion against the power of the state and/or the demands of the capitalist system, might find cause for regret in its decay rendering the individual more susceptible to external pressure. In so far as the state, through the system of welfare benefits and fiscal measures has eroded the material advantages of marriage and the nuclear family household whilst, in the interests of protecting vulnerable wives and children, the state has increasingly assumed rights of intervention in family life, then the postmodernisation of the family might be regarded as reflecting a simultaneous growth of individualism and of collectivist control at the expense of the family household.

These sober if paradoxical conclusions do not however require the adoption of postmodernist and postmodernising terminology. Our scepticism regarding the value of

discussing change, even the rapid and widespread changes in present day family life in terms of the binary contrast of modern versus postmodern need not be abandoned. The mutability, the protean complexity of family life, even the sense of long-term general change is not, however, new. The preoccupation of earlier writers, Durkheim, Burgess or Parsons for instance, with the normal was a concern to reveal underlying patterns within the contingency and particularity of family life. In the late twentieth century we have become more concerned with the pace of change but whether as a response to accelerating changes in the external world or as a dialectical critique within theoretical discourse is arguable, though the former alternative may present insuperable difficulties for postmodernist theorists. Nevertheless the apparent pace of change has made it increasingly difficult to identify any still surviving remnants of the traditional patterns with which the new can be contrasted. For pre-postmodernists this presents an essentially empirical problem. In social network theory for example we can find an at least potential sociological accounts of the sorts of changes which postmodernist theorist find inaccessible to social-structural analysis. Thus Bott argued that the absence of clearly defined conjugal-role relationships and the absence of norms of common consent which rendered them unpredictable and fragile was structurally rooted in low density social networks (Bott).

Lifelong heterosexual pairings, formalised by marriage ceremonial with sharply differentiated obligations for husbands as economic providers, authority figures and external family representatives and wives confined to domestic activities and childbearing have been typified as traditional family life. It appears that such segregated role divisions were confined to elementary families embedded in high density kinship and community networks. Marital instability and idiosyncratic division of role, with women active economically and otherwise outside the boundaries of kin and community, seems to be associated with societies undergoing rapid social change and personal geographical mobility often but not exclusively associated with economic growth. Postmodernist theory in contrast has emphasised the cultural rather than the structural and the concern with the new and emergent has led to a greater focus upon change and the future. The preoccupation of earlier writers with the discovery of general patterns is no longer felt to be relevant (Cheal 1991, p.160). Thus postmodernist theory must be different from everything that has gone before. "The diversity model cannot easily be fitted into established theories of social change" (Cheal 1993, p.9). Postmodernist theory therefore is not simply a theory of the postmodern but is itself postmodernist in abandoning the rationalist paradigms of existing theory. As Crook and his colleagues put it, "The sociology of postmodernisation must be a sociology which is itself in transition" (Crook et al. p.236).

As with the simplification of the history of the family which the contrast of the modern and the postmodern entails, so this contrast of postmodernist and modernist theory itself over-simplifies and over-dramatises the theoretical disjuncture. There never was a single version of modern (pre-postmodern) sociology. Any introductory text will confront the reader with the competing perspectives of differently orientated theorists, Marxists and Functionalists, interactionists, conflict and consensus theorists and so forth. What many of them have in common, the rationalised analyses of capitalism, modern industrial society etc, is the tendency to generate apocalyptic visions of social discontinuity when addressing the evidence of change (Noble 1982). The complexity, diversity and persistence of the processes of social change are not well represented as a transition from A to B, from, for example,

feudalism to capitalism, Fordist to Post Fordist, traditional to modern society etc. The changes do not stop once the defining conditions of the B state are fulfilled and historical inquiry tends to cast increasing doubt on the purity and coherence of the A state. Binary contrasts have a heuristic value only as pointers. They are misleading when ideal-typifications are taken for reality. The problem with postmodernism, therefore, is essentially one of the overly-static conceptualizations upon which its arguments hinge. The idea that, if we are adequately to confront change, sociological theory ought to be tentative, provisional, possibly eclectic (eg. Crook et al. p.236) is hardly new but very welcome. But then sociology should always have been like that. The discovery of the need for theory more responsive to the processes of change is a kind of intellectual return of the prodigal. It proves no more than the barrenness of existing theory. It does not by itself demonstrate the occurrence of any historical transition in the real world. Postmodernist theorists may believe that what passes for reality is, or has become, only a figment. In present day postmodern society, "The image masks the absence of a basic reality" (Baudrillard 1988, p.170). Thus the argument that the modern nuclear family has given way to a postmodernist diversity of family relations is the only reality. However those who believe that demographic evidence indicates the continuing importance of material and structural constraints, are likely to share Gellner's scepticism about the notion that only concepts constrain actions and belief (Gellner).

The problem with postmodernist theories of the family, in spite of all their shortcomings in that respect, is not so much substantive as methodological. Like the Arkansas Traveller they should have started somewhere else. Thus the need to distinguish a new post-modern phase in the history of the family, derives from the rigidities of their characterisation of an earlier, modern phase. This exaggerated the predominance and stability of some features of the nuclear family household which were neither universal or unchanging. Attention has now shifted to other features of the continuing flux of family life which may have become more common but have not replaced those formerly the focus of sociological attention. This shift is at most only partly the result of objective changes in the attitudes and behaviour of those ascriptively involved in or entering into the intimate reciprocities of conjugal and parent-child relationships. At least as much it reflects the worth while discovery of inadequacies in earlier theory and the perennial need of theorists to come up with something new.

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