

# A third phase in historical and anthropological research on family? Towards a regional and dynamic typology

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Some key phases can be identified in the cross-disciplinary field devoted to family and kinship history in Europe. The first phase spans from roughly 1965 to 1990 and is characterised by the emergence of quantitative approaches aiming at establishing regular patterns, by the euphoria of the grand synthesis that embraced the whole European continent, and by the attempt to seize what can be defined as « the anonymous, deep and silent history », in the words of Fernand Braudel. The quantitative research promoted by the Cambridge Group's historians and demographers has largely dominated this period.

The second phase is characterised by an increasing criticism and doubt, the return of the narrative and intrigue, the growth of localised perspectives, a focus on agency, a lack of interest in comparisons and a distrust in overall synthesis. The success of micro history has been typical of this period. While during the first stage, the attention was mainly focused on the cohabiting domestic group, in the second stage the focus of attention shifted towards the links between external relatives.

This rough chronology does not mark a watershed between two specific, individual moments but rather underlines a change of perspective in mainstream studies, in the visible tip of iceberg, so to say. Works carried out using the typical approach of the first period have been published after the symbolic 1990 turning point. Similarly, seminal work carried out before 1990 already showed signs of those orientations that came to the fore in the second stage. There has been, however, a clear transition and a turning point in the 1985-1995 decade.

There are now signs suggesting that another phase is beginning, which goes beyond the deconstruction and the focus on the individual actor and the local context. Over the past few years, an increasingly influential current of studies has developed perspectives that are characterized by a return to great spaces and the long term. Some general overviews take into consideration the whole European continent and focus on kinship dynamics. In some respects, this new historical anthropology of kinship goes back to some of the comparative ambitions of family history, as it was defined in the 1960s and 1970s.

The main periods that characterised this field of studies seem to follow one another in recurring cycles. As far as research trends are concerned, we often have the impression that we are witnessing the « *corsi e ricorsi* » (« occurrences and recurrences ») described by Giambattista Vico. Yet, as it was clearly pointed out in Vico's philosophy of history, a cyclical sequence does not mean that there are identical replicas of previous phases. In most recent studies, families and households are no longer isolated from the kinship domain and the focus is on contextual factors, particularly political ones. The focus moves away from family structures, once conceived as more or less immobile, to historical changes in kinship conception and practice. If in the 1970s and 1980s the synthesis proposed some highly contrasting regional models, the latest attempts are more focussed on the common traits of historical evolution on a European scale.

The author who undoubtedly has a crucial influence on the growing of this third phase is the historian D. W. Sabeau. He suggested several important hypotheses concerning the changes in practice and representation of kinship in Europe (Sabeau 2007). He particularly encouraged collective works which led to a book he co-directed (Sabeau, Teuscher and Mathieu 2007) - the most ambitious attempt at giving shape to a new historical anthropology of kinship at European level. This extremely important work (which covers the development of kinship over a long period, from 1300 to 1900) suggests a coherent research programme, whose lines are clearly outlined in the introduction (Sabeau and Teuscher 2007) and in the different sections' introductory texts. The definition of kinship is wide, as it includes the heritage and succession models, the alliance systems, the circulation of goods amongst relatives, terminology and cultural representations. According to the authors, on one side, one should go beyond the idea that kinship is always different, depending on specific contexts and linked to other types of relationships in an unsystematic way. On the other side, one should reject an idea solidly anchored in the unconscious of social sciences, according to which kinship has witnessed a decline in Europe, due to the growing importance of other institutions, such as the market or the State (Sabeau and Teuscher 2007: 1-3). In order to stimulate comparative research and stir a debate between different research traditions, the book suggests an historical canvassing that identifies two major historical transitions in kinship dynamics, shared by the whole continent. This scenario is distant from the comparative history of the 1970s and 1980s that privileged regional differences and permanent features.

The first transition would occur between the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the early modern period, in a period that goes approximately from 1400 to 1700 (Sabeau and Teuscher 2007: 10). This is marked by a strengthening of patrilineality through the development of agnatic or one-heir models of heritage transmission, by the imbrications of clients' relationships and marriage alliances, and by the growth of kinship networks based on vertical dynamics. Social structures take shape, which accentuate the role of descent, agnatic kinship, paternal authority, domestic discipline and exogamy. This transition is intertwined with the process of modern State formation and linked to a more precise definition of property rights, as well as the establishment of social hierarchies that become less permeable. The differences that can be observed in this timeframe would be due to local variations in the timings of State's consolidation and reconfiguration of property rights.

The second transition starts in the 18th century, approximately from 1750, and continues into the following century. If the previous period had glorified the agnatic kinship, one can now witness the development of new models based on alliance, bilateral kinship networks and social and familial endogamy. This transition is embedded in the social dynamics characterised by the rise of capitalism, the development of a class structure and the modernisation of the political machine.

This theoretical framework allows taking in account several phenomena which had not been covered by previous comparative developments. But to what extent can this general framework become operational and stimulate further research? More specifically, should the issue of difference, which was at the core of the comparative approaches in 1970s and 1980s, be completely put aside, in favour of global historical sequences on a European scale? Naturally, we should not go back to the immobile geography of the past; but would it not be important to take more into consideration the differences both between social groups and territories? From this point of view, we may envisage that a better understanding of regional processes in the long term could be a crucial step in order to better grasp the overall dynamics at European level.

Certain aspects emerging from research carried out in the Alps seem to support this perspective, by showing the existence of different regional types, which prove to be

considerably stable over time (Mathieu 1998; Lorenzetti and Merzario 2005; Albera 2011). It has been suggested (see Albera 2011) that heterogeneous processes in the Alpine belt can be observed in the long term: since the creation of local communities in the Middle Ages, when kinship was incorporated into a spatialised social structure, through the State creation in the modern era, when the spatialisation process was strengthened and widened, giving origin to territories placed under the exclusive authority of the sovereign. The dissolving of distinctive features in the Alpine blocks that started from the 19th century does not mean that differences have completely faded. Certain differences between regions are still visible towards the middle of the 20th century, and sometimes even later, as demonstrated by the anthropological surveys carried out at that time.

To what extent a differentialist perspective issued from historical data about Alpine Europe can be reconciled with the existence of a developmental path common to distinctive regions of the mountain chain, or even widespread on a continental level? Shouldn't the tendencies identified by Sabeau and Teuscher (2007) be read in their refractions in regional processes, often characterized by different logics?

Other questions emerge in relation with the timescale. If the first phase of family history was dominated by a rather immobile history, and the second phase by the short span taken into account by the approaches focussed on the agency, some authors now bestow a higher importance to the intermediate dimension of time, exploring centuries-old trends. Yet, the Alpine observatory allows us to notice changes that take place very rapidly over a few generations. How can we explain these changes? Is it possible to link these rapid transformations to the timing of Sabeau and Teuscher (2007)'s model? From which angle can we approach the mechanisms of change and how can we seize the osmotic processes through which new practices and conceptions do spread between territories and social groups?

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