UNIT 13 FAMILY

Structure

13.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading the unit you should be able to:

- understand why an analysis of household structure rather than membership is a better way of understanding the European family,
- understand the debate raging in historical scholarship over whether there was a continuity or not between the pre-industrial and the industrial family, and
- understand the variables used to test response of the family to the changing social and economic context.

13.1 INTRODUCTION

Historians have emphasised the study of the institutional frameworks that support society, as it allows for the description and explanation of change in social structures. It was in this context that various institutions such as the manor, the guild, the legislature, the business firm and the military come under the historian's scrutiny. However, the family as an institution came to be studied rigorously by the historians relatively late . Its late recognition as a subject worthy of historical inquiry is rather surprising as other disciplines such as sociology and social anthropology have laid great emphasis on the family while studying societies ranging from primitive hunting-gathering societies to modern ones.

The history of the family in past times began to receive more attention since the 1960s with a number of publications on related themes such as historical demography, illegitimacy, orphange, childhood, adolescence and the problem of ageing. The family is a social institution with an exceptionally long historical life span. The protean nature of family activities, functions, and composition has made both a very interesting as well as difficult subject of study. The variability of the family has made it difficult to ascribe any one framework for its analysis across time and geographical space. The very gradual character of change in family structure and functions necessitates the use of long-term analysis to discover significant continuities and changes.

13.2 TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING THE EUROPEAN FAMILY

The pre-industrial family was an important unit of reproduction, production, consumption, socialisation, education and in some contexts, political action. It also acted as a safety net in times of old age, sickness and incapacity. Given the extensive range of family functions it

becomes difficult to provide a clear, unambiguous, general definition of what constituted a family unit. Therefore, to adopt any one definition to limit the definition of the family, say by reference to commensuality would risk simplification and artificially introduce rigidity.

13.2.1 Membership

The membership of a family has been a source of frequent confusion and controversy in the family history of Western Europe. For instance, does the membership of one family preclude membership of another? Marriage brings into existence a new family unit but it often does not mean that it completely severs the ties of the spouses with their original families. Even in a rigidly agnatic system, the husband retains close ties with his parents' family. In Western Europe a significant proportion of young people spent some time in a family other than the family of orientation or procreation, working as apprentices. The life cycle of many people often included membership of more than one family. The concept of family should therefore be capable of including simultaneous membership of more than one family.

The family then may be seen not as a unit with one single criterion of membership for all its members but as a nesting of units with the conjugal unit of reproduction at its core in the case of Western Europe, with a range of related ties around it, that were connected to different functions. The character of a family unit meant for reproduction was very often very different from what constituted a family unit for production. Thus to give a very generalised definition of what constituted a family based on say an index such as commensuality would be rather arbitary. In Western Europe, a temporary membership of a family that was not the family of procreation was quite frequent as a large proportion of young men and women spent some years in service or apprenticeship. Thus a person might have been the member of not only many families but also of more than one type of family such as conjugal, stem, extended etc.

Given the changing family membership in the course of person's life the nature of sources used for studying changing family membership become crucial. We have broadly two kinds of sources available. Listings give details of family membership at one point of time, such as the list of inhabitants at a given point in time. These however do not tell us if the listed adult inhabitants were members of a different family at an earlier point in time. To capture this aspect of families we need to adopt cohort based studies. Here individuals are followed through life cycles rather than being identified at single points of time. As in demography, these two methods- current and cohort are complementary. If current listings studied after cohort based investigations indicate the stem-family to be common, it may be deduced that younger sons may have retained the membership of a stem family even after their marriage and the setting up of new conjugal unit because the death of an older brother can lead to immediate re-entry into the stem family household.

13.2.2 Household Structures

Unlike the more complex issue of family membership, household structure lends itself to much easier quantification because a number of contemporary sources generated by the state and the church used the household as the basic unit for information gathering. Social historians and demographers continue to debate whether the household is an independent feature of social organisation or whether it was simply an extension of the family.

As historians tell us that our subjects of study are restricted by the sources that are available to us. Certain aspects of family life can be more easily and precisely studied whereas others have to be more speculative. The method of family reconstitution from birth, marriage and burial records of the parish allows a fairly accurate observation of the family as a reproduction unit through time. The age difference between spouses, birth spacing, the practice or otherwise of family limitation, bastardy, the relationship between parental death and the marriage of children, variations in demographic behaviour between classes or occupational groups and the differences in size between the demographic family size (the number of children ever born) and existential family size (number of surviving children at a given point in time) are some of the issues that can be studied in fine detail using the technique of family reconstitution.

On the other hand, nominal listings of inhabitants usually given the names of the members of a family, its family head, and his or her relationship to the other members of the family along with details of sex, marital status and birthplace. Where family registers and nominal listings are available for the same community they complement and supplement each other.

Many other aspects of the family are difficult to study using the usual sources. These include social networks and behavioural attitudes. Indirect evidence from the proceedings of manorial courts and later from sessional records given an indication of the frequency and nature of contact between different members of kin groups. Studying the choice of a particular person for the discharge of some ceremonial function such as the choice of a godparent has paid rich dividends in terms of discovering the relations between an individual, his immediate co-resident family and his kin in other places.

The psychological structure resulting from the internalisation of rules of conduct of family and social life is yet another important area of study in family history. This study of mentality is as crucial as the investigation of quantifiable aspects of family structure and change.

13.3 HISTORICAL CHANGE

Earlier, it was generally held that the transition from a pre-industrial to an industrial society destroyed an older family type that was marked by early ages of marriage, a complex large co-resident group, and close ties between kin and households. It was supposed to have been replaced with a small family based on conjugal units formed after late marriage with much less ties with kin. This assumption was questioned and found untenable by the research of scholars such as Peter Laslett and John Hajnal in the 1960s.

13.3.1 Continuity

At a conference in September 1969, held in Cambridge, England and organised by the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, Peter Laslett summarised and analysed the size and structure of families in past times. Laslett's primary belief was that the modern nuclear family was not born out of industrialisation, and that in England and other nations, the nuclear family was the dominant form for several centuries prior to industrialisation. It has been pointed out that one of the reasons that Laslett did not find more three-generation stem families in England may be because the data used by the Cambridge Group did not, for the most part, take the family life cycle into consideration. Research on nineteenth-century British and American cities has revealed that boarders, roomers, and lodgers, some of whom may have been extended kin, were present in homes to a much greater degree than today. Yet, Laslett's basic argument goes unchallenged: there is definitely more continuity than discontinuity in the structure of preindustrial and industrial familiies.

In Laslett's survey, The World We Have Lost, he concludes that in England the nuclear family has always predominated and that there is so little evidence of extended or stem families in the past that theories claiming a shift to a nuclear pattern in modern times cannot be empirically validated. It was the form in which most people were socialised as children and which they were thereby led to reproduce as adults. Laslett saw the continuing prevalence of the nuclear family household as a result of learned behaviour on the part of its members.

Unlike Lawrence Stone, who set forth historical family types such as "open lineage family", "restricted partriarchal nuclear family", and the "closed, domesticated nuclear family" of the modern era, the Cambridge Group divided households in the early modern era into three categories: simple (nuclear or conjugal), extended (a conjugal unit plus widowed parent, or other relatives) and multiple (two or more related conjugal units).

13.3.2 Comparing Families Across Time and Space

In the early 1970s, Laslett's Cambridge Group published a book, *Household and Family in Past Time*, containing a series of articles announcing their results of a comparative study of the family and household from the sixteenth century to the present. Two other important cassays by Laslett are : "Family Life and Illicit Love in Earlier Generations" and "Bastardy and Its Comparative History" which study the history of illegitimacy over time and between cultures and marital non-conformism in Britain, France, Germany, Sweden, North America, Jamaica, and Japan.

The four distinguishing features of north-western household formation were the nuclear family, the late age at childbearing, spouses of similar age and the presence of a significant propor-

tion of unrelated persons in the household. The pre-industrial household in western Europe was characterised by the existence of a dominant nuclear pattern and the institution of pre-marital servitude. In terms of household composition, Laslett notes the greater generational depth of household composition, Though nuclear families were also found in parts of Poland and Hungary, suggesting that this form was not unique to western Europe, the fact remains that north-western Europe was predominated by the nuclear household. Though the nuclear family dominated household formation in preindustrial Western Europe the average household size varied little between North-Western and other parts of Europe. This was because of the large number of servants who lived with their employers and were therefore counted as members of the household. Though the average household size suggests no unique system of household formation in this region of Europe the appearance of similiarity is superficial when household composition is taken into account. Servants have been estimated by Hajnal to constitute six to ten percent of the populations in this region in preindustrial times, with husbandry representing a major source of employment for both young men and women. Agrarian servitude prepared men and women for the rigours of future independent marriage and parenthood. Marriages between servants was not welcome as it interfered with work and this led an increase in the proportion of single and childless young individuals and further postponed the age of entry into marriage household formation and allowed the accumulation of savings. Marriage was also delayed by the availability of public assistance and the practice of contractual retirement. Scope for institutionalised charity for the poor appears to have been in widespread throughout northwestern Europe. This appears to have devalued the dependence on children as a hedge against poverty in old age.

This new view of the western European family in the past at once raised a number of questions. If as argued earlier it was not the Industrial Revolution that produced the modern small family then it was asked whether the small family pattern did not help produce the revolutionary economic change, that accompanied the Industrial Revolution.

However, even if it is held that the Industrial Revolution did not result in any radical changes in the family and the household, we cannot maintain that these institutions continued without changes through history. For instance the Elizabethan Poor Law in England which shifted to the parish, responsibility that fell earlier on the conjugal family and extended kin appear to have accelerated the dilution of personal and family ties outside the conjugal family.

Let us now briefly trace the history of the family in England and on the Continent incorporating the findings of new research. In England, the Elizabethan co-resident group consisted of the basic conjugal unit supplemented by servants in better off families and occasionally a grandparent. Both lateral and vertical extension of the basic reproductive group was uncommon. Late marriage was the norm for both men and women with a mean age at first marriage in the middle or late twenties. Research based on the 1377 and 1381 Poll Taxes suggest that late age at marriage and small separate households were features in the late fourteenth century. While household size did not change substantially between Tudor (1485-1603) and Victorian (1837-1901) periods, important changes did occur in the intervening years. The significance of live-in servants declined, the age at first marriage especially for women increased reaching its peak in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Average family size declined and there was an increase in infant and child mortality. However in the eighteenth century nuptiality and fertility patterns again came close to that for the Elizabethan period.

Continental Europe showed much greater variations than England. While variations could be found even within a small country such as Holland, at the level of Europe we can divide the continent into two broad zones. Western Europe was marked by the small conjugal household but stem families were quite common in Austria, France and Germany. In eastern Europe we find large complex households extending substantially both laterally and vertically. This "eastern" pattern reached its extreme in the large serf households in muscovite Russia. In terms of nuptiality also eastern Europe differed from the west. The age of marriage was much lower and the proportions never married was also relatively much smaller. Hajnal drew an imaginary line from Leningrad to Trieste to distinguish the western and eastern European nuptiality patterns. Given the marked differences in the western and eastern forms of family and nuptiality the east consequently underwent a much more severe change at the time of the transition to industrial society. The countries of central Europe formed a kind of intermediate zone in terms of family type between the extremes of western and eastern Europe.

Check Your Progress 1

1) Why is analysis of household structure a better method of understanding the family ?

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2) What were the limitations of Laslett's study of the European family ?

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3) What were the main features of the pre-industrial household in Western Europe ?

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13.4 ECONOMIC CHANGE AND THE FAMILY

The family was closely linked to changes taking place in other areas of social and economic life. As in the case of other social institutions, it would be very difficult to argue for either a mechanistic link between economic change and corresponding changes in the family or to assert that the family was insulated from developments taking place around it. Some writers such as Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie have reconstructed past social life to show that family behaviour continued unchanged over centuries without any fundamental change. Others such as R.Braun have showed how the demographic and familial institutions in central and north-western Europe were transformed in periods of rapid economic change.

13.4.1 Variables Used to Understand Marriage Pattern

The research of Wrigley and Schofield for England has proved fairly conclusively that the age at first marriage and the incidence of marriage determined fertility levels, not mortality. The lack of association between mortality and fertility has also been noted by other researchers or north-western Europe also. If these preindustrial populations used economic calculations in making decisions about marriage then one would expect a close association between real wages and nuptiality with real wages leading and nuptiality following. Studies on England have found such a correlation to exist both for first marriages and the proportions marrying. Later studies have suggested some modifications to this formulation. Before 1750 celibacy was more responsive to real wages whereas after 1750 it was age at first marriage that was the key variable. Scholars using a different proxy series for wages have not suggested a 15 to 20 year lag in place of the 40 year lag between real wages and nuptiality as proposed initially by Wrigley and Schofield. Similar relationships have also been discovered for the Netherlands. Given the northwestern European rules of household formation that we have mentioned earlier, the association of wages with relatively higher ages at marriage and greater celibacy seem logical. In England after 1750; age at first marriage fell with the incidence of marriage remaining stable. Some writers have stressed the changes in occupational structure, the relationship between employers and employees and the opportunity structures in industry and agriculture to explain this phenomenon. Occupations which presented absolute barriers to married women such as agrarian and domestic servitude usually produced low stable nuptiality. In high-wage industries such as coal mining it was possible for men to marry without financial contributions from women. In the textile industry we find moderate nuptiality among the

workers. Here married women were not prevented from getting jobs, but unmarried women were preferred and wage levels were low and required some contribution by the women too. In this case marriage was deferred but to an extent in the traditional sector. Nuptiality was thus related to wage levels and the structural constraints of female employment.

13.4.2 Family and the Industrial Revolution

Coming to the period of the Industrial Revolution many scholars assumed that the momentous changes that were taking place would automatically have its impact on the family forcing it to change dramatically. Subsequent research has found this view untenable. The most important demographic change that did occur with industrialisation was deliberate family limitation or the control of marital fertility. This however took place only after a long time lag well after economic growth had accelerated. Other major changes such as the separation of home and the place of work did take place but such changes had also occurred in the past; for instance at the time when husbandsmen became wage labourers. One reason why the momentous changes witnessed during the period of industrialisation did not get reflected in comparable changes in the form and content of family life was because many of these transformations were not linear in character. To elaborate, development such as the pursuit of self-interest, rationality, the displacement of custom by achievement, and the functional specialisation have been associated with modernisation that accompanied industrialisation. In this context, it has been assumed that as modernisation advanced it had its impact on the family making it more "modern". However, on closer inspection one finds that the relationship between modernisation and industralisation is contingent rather than necessary. Empirical examination of the social conditions accompanying early industrialisation suggest an influx of people from the countryside into overcrowded urban centres, the absence of state welfare institutions, the necessary dependence on kinship networks, overcrowding and large household units and so on. These conditions were closer to the earlier forms of family and the household and thus under such conditions one cannot expect the "modern" small family to suddenly emerge. It was only when industrialisation was well under way and the benefits of the increased economic productivity of industrial capitalism started percolating down into society that one can start discovering some shifts (not always new, however) in family life and household structure.

In the above discussion of the characteristics and changes in the European family and household structure what clearly stands out is that the there was a fairly homogeneous demographic regime across a large area of pre-industrial Europe that had many parallels with modern industrial systems. The differences between modern and premodern demographic regimes lay not in the willingness to contracept but in the means used to do so. Changes in industrial productivity, innovations, occupational shifts and wage levels interacted with an older demographic regime altering the patterns of traditional nuptiality and family forms.

Check Your Progress 2

1) Was there a close association between real wages and nuptiality in Europe ?

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2) Can we say that the industrial revolution had an automatic impact on the family ?

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13.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit you saw,

- How the analysis of household structures gave us important insights in to the nature of family and its web of interactive cycles
- How historical scholarship has been able to demonstrate various continuties and discontinuities between pre-industrial and industrial family structure
- How the association of variables like nuptiality and real wages etc has enabled us to test important theses on the relationships between economic change and nature of the family.

13.6 KEY WORDS

Agrarian Servitude: This refers to various forms of bondage prevalent in European rural societies

Real Wages: This refers to money paid to a worker calculated on a cost of living index

Celibacy: The state of being not married

Husbandsmen: A generic term for a rural agricultural worker engaged in looking after cattle and sheep.

Kin groups: Groups formed mostly by ties of blood or marriage

Commensuality: Systems of interdining between various social groups. These rules may be formed by these groups to include certain groups and also to exclude certain social groups.

13.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

1) See sub-section 13.2.2. You may point out the existence of sources generated by the state and parish offices.

2) See sub-section 13.3.1. You may point out as to how he did not take the family life cycle in to consideration.

3) See sub-section 13.3.2

Check Your Progress 2

1) See sub-section 13.4.1

2) See sub-section 13.4.2