Family change and social uses of kinship networks in France
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FAMILY CHANGE AND SOCIAL USES OF KINSHIP
NETWORKS IN FRANCE

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Abstract: The importance of kinship networks has been
ignored by social and demographic historians at their
peril. Through case studies of rural Brittany and urban
Nanterre, the paper traces the development of kin rela-
tionships in three periods: the traditional wider family,
the high-industrial restricted family and the reactivation
of kinship networks in recent years. Its anthropological
methodology demonstrates how one can build upon quantita-
tive foundations and gain qualitative insights into the
societal meanings of population patterns.

Evaluating family changes is not easy. Of course, we have to start with
quantitative data. They deal with the formation and evolution of the couple,
with birth, marriage, and death. Variations in demographic figures do not
explain everything, they only signal changes. Other types of quantitative
data related to family, however, point to transformations in behaviors, such
as those related to co-residence patterns. They are derived from patrimonial
archival material, from marriage contracts, wills, and inventories after
death. These quantitative data are indispensable for many anthropological
questions dealing with family changes. We cannot ignore ages at marriage if
we want to understand marriage patterns, or fertility rates if we are to
analyze inheritance patterns.

But not all family changes are encapsulated inside numerically measurable
data. This is especially true of kinship networks whose importance is star-
ting to be slowly rediscovered by social historians. What was their impor-
tance in former times? What is their importance nowadays? is a first set of
questions to ask. Another question would consider the uses, times, places,
intensity, structure of these extended family groups and how they change. Of
course, the fundamental problem concerns the possibility of numerically
evaluating such changes, and we have to ask whether it is possible and even
necessary to do so.

The anthropological approach leads us rather to a qualitative analysis of a
small number of fully investigated cases whose representativity has to be
established. The simpler the society, the smaller the number of cases which
needs to be studied. This is why a limited number of family histories and
genealogies can account for whole villages where social differentiation is
rather limited; but when one comes to study a city with various strata of
people that can be classified according to place of residence, occupation,
time of arrival or degree of mobility, it is more difficult to delineate the
number of cases that can account for the whole of the city.

This rural and urban distinction points also to different historical periods
of time, and hence to differences in research material that raise another
methodological difficulty. Reconstructing kin networks of the past is
possible if one uses the correct socio-demographical date (life records

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compared with census lists); this tiresome task enables one to establish the number of kin through blood and affinal links of an individual along his own life course, but it does not indicate what actually goes on within that network. From the structure one cannot infer the contents. On the other hand, because urban areas are densely populated, exhaustive demographic studies based on life records and census lists are time consuming and more complex than in rural areas. Hence kinship relationships are studied through interviews, which are difficult to control. Some kin might not be mentioned, some types of relationships overstressed, the situation of interviewing might bias the whole research etc. ... However, the accuracy of the data can be checked through cross-interviewing other members of the family, and by accumulating data which help delineate how much stems from the norm or how much is the result of an individual pattern.

Much research needs to be done on these topics to yield comparative data. Until recently, scholars have refrained from studying wider kin groups outside the co-residing unit, because it was generally thought that in European societies they had more or less vanished and had no social uses compared to societies studied by anthropologists where, by contrast, kinship was the core of all economic, social and political activites, and served as religious and symbolic reference. Historians also tended to ignore kin relationships because they are generally absent from their data. Official records represent only the formal side of activities, whereas kinship inter-course covers rather their informal side.

The following summaries of two studies thus lack comparative data. They are rather presented to show methods of evaluating past and present family changes beyond those observed within the couple, and to help shift social historians' and anthropologists' interests to the wider kin groups.

Kinship networks in rural society

In a limited area of Brittany, I have analyzed the social uses of kinship, and their changes through time. Briefly summarizing the results (Segalen, forthcoming), one can identify three periods. During a long time period, dating back perhaps to the XVth century, but that can be actually described for the XVIIIth to the XXth centuries, kinship was embedded in a wider cate-gory of relationships that can be dubbed economic; and kinship networks provided for many aspects of economic and social intercourse. Many traits described by Marshall Sahlins (1972) as characterizing primitive societies appear to be present in our area. We do not pretend to say that the larger economic market or outside economic constraints such as the price of grain or land did not exist, but emphasize only those aspects of kinship and economy that overlap.

We are in an economy where, as Polanyi (1983) has shown, local markets cohere with regional ones, and make possible the existence of a domestic economy where the co-residential group is a production unit. Interviews with farmers show that much work was carried out on a collective basis such as smoothing threshing floors, hay and corn harvesting. The group gathered on this occasion was half composed of neighbors, half of kin. Even when they did not live close to another, related people would come on the roads with their agricultural implements to help. Kinship and economic activities belong to the same realm where productivity in the sense we use it today is meaningless. The economic activity is as much a social as a festive one. Floors were smoothed through ritual dancing, the cutting of hay was a sort of competition between men to show their skills, and so on.

As they are widely scattered over the five communities of our area, kinship networks provide excellent information for instance on farms to let and girls to marry. Through computerized procedures, we were able to show that leases were circulating among kindreds, alternating with marriages, so that it was even useless to ask which of the economic or matrimonial transactions initiated the process. Also it was possible to uncover the importance of being kin when looking at the mayors of these villages who, at some time of the XIXth century, were nearly all close kin; besides within each community, the members of the municipal councils also were always members of the same kindreds. Marriages happened also to take place within the same kindreds according to social hierarchies. During the XVIIIth century and beginning of the XIXth, the richer kindreds scattered all over the area exchanged their children: these were not consanguineous marriages but affinal ones, escaping the church prohibitions.

These patterns of behavior were prolonged until the 1950s when social and economic relationships were deeply altered. Mechanization made hands super-fluous on farms; inheritance patterns dismembered farmsteads into small patches of land; migration emptied villages of nearly half of their popula-tion. Migrants leaving in the wake of industrialization and urbanization that took place very late in France more or less severed their links with the villages where they were born. Cars and telephones were scarce, holidays shorter than at present and salaries rather low. All these reasons explain why during the 1950s to 1970s there was a period of time when kinship relationships between migrants and kin left at birthplaces were not as active as they are to-day. Inside the villages, kinship networks lost the roles attached to agricultural farming since machines replaced human labor.

At the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s, a reversal in trends happened to make social and economic relationships once again cross kinship networks, though on a different basis from the one that prevailed during earlier centuries. Only 1/4 of household heads is now employed in agricul-ture; the others work in small plants or in administrative services in the nearby area. Since 1972 population is increasing again, and instead of being scattered through residential hamlets, resides in towns where two new housing estates have been developed. These new young couples, often children or grand-children of farmers sometimes inherit a plot of land where they decide to build their own houses, because of a strong emphasis on residen-tial independence. This does not necessarily point to the severance of kinship ties.

An example of familial interaction is given by the construction of houses themselves. As many people work in the building industries, it is relatively easy to develop a family team of skills with a carpenter, a plumber, a mason, etc. ... who will come and lend a hand on weekends. This procedure makes it possible to build a less costly house, and activates kinship net-works, making these work occasions similar to collective agricultural work of the past. Family help inaugurates a cycle of exchanges as other kin expect that, when necessary, they will be helped on a similar occasion. Finding jobs, especially first jobs, is always facilitated by kinship net-works, inside which information circulates. This is true for people without university degrees who in that case cannot find employment locally.

Once settled, a young couple receives much help from older parents, regar-ding children's care. Grand-mothers are all the more necessary when mothers have to work in order to help repay the loan required to buy the plot and the house. On the other hand, older parents who are still in agriculture

also find a lot of help from their children during heavy farm work. The wider family team of former times has been replaced by a much smaller one.

Through these descriptions run the new links between countryside and city. They have never been severed in the past, not as much as historians or anthropologists sometimes tend to make us believe. At present they are tightly associated through family networks. The young couple works in the city of Quimper for instance, but lives in the village. They have not forgotten their agricultural origin since they keep close contacts with their elders who are still farming.

Links between migrants and kin in the village of origin are also much more active than they were 20 years ago. Higher salaries have made it possible to acquire second houses, cars have been bought, highways have extended throughout the country, and holidays are numerous, without speaking of telephone contacts. Thus relations between migrants and their kin of origin are very active. Services are exchanged; children of the younger generation experience the contact with their cousins of the city or village. Gardens are tilled carefully by parents who load their children's car trunk to go back to the city with fresh produce, poultry and eggs, and this is certainly a help to young family budgets.

Here we do not want to develop other aspects of kinship relationships, such as symbolic ones, and only emphasize the material importance of kinship networks. Sometimes these practices are referred to as "underground economy", pointing to the fact that kinship and economy have still something in common. Anthropological research shows that, contrary to common sense, family is not limited to psychological and emotive relationships. Of course, not all residents of our area belong to the original kindreds, and some do lead a family life severed from wider kinship ties. They are new migrants who often somehow compensate for their loneliness by joining local associations which provide them with local integration.

Kinship networks of city dwellers

If our description of the Breton fieldwork looks like a quick survey, what can be said then about the information gathered on families residing in the city of Nanterre with nearly 100.000 inhabitants?

Various strata of population can be encountered in Nanterre: there are descendants of the XIXth century peasants; there are workers who were attracted by the development of industrialization in the 1920s; and there are new white collar residents. Length of residence in the town, work conditions, the fact that one does or does not own a house, the way the future is considered, are among some of the social and economic conditions that explain the various levels of interaction among kindreds that have been observed.

Since our original topic was to study the effect of urban and industrial changes on family structures, and because we intentionally chose a town close to Paris with an agricultural origin but which had grown into an industrial suburb, we only collected oral genealogies which were selected according to the social strata of the population derived from census lists at various periods of time (1841, 1931, today).

Among descendants of the former agricultural population, who were owners of their land which became valuable because of housing development, one still observes a strong residential proximity between kin. Surprisingly, the

center of the town and the lay-out of the old streets of the XIXth century agricultural village have remained untouched. There one finds XIXth century suburban houses occupied mostly by close kin. Until the 1960s, three genera-- tions were not only sharing residential propinquity but also worked in the same family enterprise. Today university diplomas have detached work from family and residence, but a strong interaction persists between generations and collaterals through help and exchange of services.

Studying the genealogies of the workers of the largest and oldest plant of Nanterre (Les Papeteries de la Seine), shows the varying uses of kinship, according to changing economic and social conditions. During the 1930s, kindreds were quite efficient in helping migrants into a job, and through family lines we can read the various migrations. Then workers were highly mobile and would not hesitate to leave a plant for another giving better salaries, even if that meant moving. Some recruits of the 1910s and 1920s were paper-industry workers coming from other areas of France who learned of the high salaries in the Papeteries de Nanterre. From then on, they always tried to find jobs for their relatives coming from the countryside, just as was the case in the 1950s for people from Brittany leaving their over- populated farms. Because the firm provided housing, residential propinquity was also insured through work. But in those times, the family interaction was not as strong as today. Family gatherings were quite scarce among indus- trial workers, because their lodgings were small; sometimes, family gather- ings would take place at a cafe, outside the home. For those workers, during the 1930s until 1960s, residence, work, family all interacted even though the family unit was no longer a production unit. Between 15 % to 20 % of all workers (at a plant which employed up to 2000 workers) were recruited along family lines.

Nowadays, Nanterre, like all suburbs outside Paris, experiences a deindus- trialization, and family interaction takes another shape, producing a variety of patterns:

(a) In town we can observe the reverse case of the migrant who has left his home village and returns regularly to his birth place where he has left a part of his kindred. He has built a house where he plans to retire, and his children learn from their cousins the rural aspects of life, whereas the cousins from the village come and visit them at Nanterre.

(b) Even when there is no family origin clearly embodied by a family house where all cousins can gather, and the young generation leaves Nanterre, family interaction can still be strong but in a different way. Children have left the family apartment and parents will tend to come closer to the children's new location. Interaction will then rather be limited genera- tionally and tend to lose contact with collaterals. In one example, we have a family who has been living in Nanterre for three generations, where all men worked for the Papeteries. The older couple is now living in a HLM (moderate price high rise housing); as the children did not like Nanterre with its apartment towers, high proportions of North African immigrants, safety problems, etc., they found a job in the Vendee close to the house where the parents were spending the summer holidays. The project of the old couple is to retire there to remain close to their children.

(c) A third case is provided by the example of a vast kindred who voluntari- ly stay in the town of Nanterre, though no one owns a house, in order to remain close to one another. It openly declares its strong will to keep the family together and develops strategies accordingly. Parents put down their children's name when they are born on waiting lists to gain access to the

council houses where they will reside when they come of age. The kinship network works as a recruitment agency for many civil servants in town hall. Here again, we observe the active roles of kinship among these middle-class people, where kinship makes up for the lack of diplomas. These relatively superficial observations should be multiplied, but they all merge to under-line the importance of kinship in contemporary society. They help us revise the accepted interpretations regarding family changes in Western Europe.

Reactivation or rediscovery of kinship networks?

Since 1970, in all European countries, one can observe changes which are relatively similar, even though they originate from various demographic, social and political contexts: There is a fall of nuptiality rates and fertility rates; but there are increases in the number of illegitimate births, of unmarried couples, and of divorce rates. All these indexes seem to define a new type of family model, in which the couple seems to be more and more often questioned; besides, contrary to the time period where the norm left place for only one type of family, regularly married couples, it now admits juvenile cohabitation, and rather transitory matri-centered fami-ly structures. These new figures explain the recurrence of "the family crisis" image, whereas we believe it is wiser to look beyond the couple and its fortunes to the whole kinship network. This will help us correct the pessimistic view and exemplify the idea that family and kinship are universl structures, taking on various forms, according to historical and cultural conditions. For instance the matri-centered family is not a European inven-tion but is quite common throughout various human groups generally studied by anthropolgists.

Outside the two cases analyzed above, recent studies have now shown the frequent interaction between generations. In France Louis Roussel (1976), Agnes Pitrou (1977), and Francoise Cribier (1982) have demonstrated it on national samples. These findings raise the question why there seems to be a recent emphasis on kin networks and their social uses. Is it simply that the networks are being reactivated, or is it that they are suddenly being rediscovered?

During the XIXth century, we know that internal migrations were sometimes organized through kinship networks. For instance, when Auvergnats or Bretons left their homeland to be employed in Paris during the XIXth or early XXth century, kinship networks would provide moral and material assistance. But there is some contrary evidence regarding the first migrant groups settled in towns, according to the various patterns of industrialization throughout European countries. On the one hand we have the famous study of Young and Willmot (1957) showing a worker's suburb of London where kin relationships were active and socially important. On the other hand, the people we inter-viewed in Nanterre refer to the 1930s as a period of time where lodgings were very small, and family gatherings inside the home quite impossible. The recent improvement of economic conditions seems to authorize more interac-tion.

If kin relationships have once again become more active, they are also being rediscovered by a shift in ideologies that will in turn reinforce this reactivation. After World War II, precisely at the time when Talcott Parsons' theories (1943) stirred so much interest, the prevailing ideology emphasized the freedom of the individual within a state that was taking charge of many of the fields that formerly belonged to the family domain: the socialization of children, health, care of the elderly, etc. Paradox-ically the state of the cities also contributed to the economic conditions

of the so-called crisis of the family by building apartments too small, subsidizing high rise low cost housing with juvenile delinquency, etc. Today, the trend is reversed, the Welfare State is being criticized and local initiative is rising. Hence it is not surprising that the social uses of kinship start to be acknowledged at the very time when their intensity is increasing. Whereas the symbolic importance of kin was stressed only a few years ago, its social uses are presently recognized by sociologists, conducting national surveys. For instance, 22 % of all young French men had found their first job through familial relationships (Gokalp, 1981: p. 70). Thus we can answer our initial question by saying that kinship networks are more active, and they are suddenly being rediscovered because they fit the new political and ideological trends of the 1980s.

Various European patterns

This paper has so far considered kinship networks from French examples and even within this country the above descriptions should certainly be refined according to social class, region and time period. When considering the transformations of Europe and North America, one should not adopt an ethno-centric point of view and extend the conclusions regarding France to other European countries, denying their cultural, economic and social differences. Though we lack comparative studies, it would seem that in countries with a late industrialization pattern, high percentage of population in agriculture, recent migration to cities, one should observe active kinship networks. This could apply to Spain, Italy (Sgritta, 1983), and also to Scandinavian countries (Gaunt and Gaunt, forthcoming). On the other hand, in countries which experienced earlier industrialization, earlier migration of people to cities, one could expect to find less active kinship networks, at least those of the type that run between countryside and town, through the ownership of family homes in rural areas. For instance, in England the likelihood to have a grand-father who was a farmer is much smaller than in France. Some authors like Alan Macfarlane (1978) go as far as to say that England has had no peasants since the XIIIth century, in the sense that people were not tied to a village, were not owners of the land they tilled, and were highly mobile, with all these characteristics running contrary to those supposedly attributed to peasant communities. He points to the English tradition where rights and duties of the individual are highly emphasized, and where the scattering of the sibling group has been the norm for generations. These socio-economic conditions and cultural traditions do not facilitate the activation of kin relationships. Much the same can probably also be said of the U.S., if we simply use the world "family". Whereas famille in French can, according to the conditions of the address, refer to father, mother and children but also to consanguineal and affinal kin, it seems that in the U.S. the word seems to be restricted to that of parents plus children. An American will show a picture of his kids and say when they have left home "my family is gone", which refers to independence of generations. But of course, one should also be aware that norms and behaviors do not always coincide, and that, though individualism may be proclaimed, actual kin relationships may still be socially important.

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