

Mikolaj Szołtysek, *Rethinking East-Central Europe: Family Systems and Co-Residence in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2015, two volumes, XXX, 1062 pp. (Population, Family and Society).

The existence of an imaginary line which ran down from St Petersburg to Trieste and neatly separated western and eastern European marriage and family patterns has been one of the basic tenets of historical demography and family history for half a century. Over the past ten years a number of articles published in major journals and based on novel findings on marriage and the family in several parts of east-central Europe have established Mikolaj Szołtysek as the most vigorous proponent of the necessity to question this tenet stemming from Hajnal's seminal 1965 study. In addition, he has been crucially involved in the creation of Mosaic, one the largest data infrastructure projects for research on family patterns in historic Europe. This has given him further prominence among family historians, and it is no accident that he has been asked to contribute the chapter on household and family systems for *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern European History, 1350-1750* (volume I: *Peoples and Place*, Oxford University Press, 2015). This monumental book on family systems in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth will no doubt strengthen his reputation.

The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth originated in 1569 from the political union of the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and throughout the early modern age was one of the largest and most populous countries in Europe, as it comprised at its maximum extent not only Poland and Lithuania, but also present-day Latvia, Belarus and Ukraine. In addition, it included a wide range of linguistic and confessional groups: not just Poles, Lithuanians, Latvians, Belarusians and Ukrainians, but also Jews, Germans, Armenians and Tatars; and not only Roman Catholics, but also Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran and Calvinist churches as well as the Jewish and Muslim faiths. If we further consider that the regions of the Commonwealth differed ecologically and did not follow the same path of agrarian development, we can easily see why Szołtysek claims (p. 772) that early modern Poland-Lithuania makes «a perfect laboratory» for the exploration of inter- and intraregional family systems.

To be sure, because of this unusual heterogeneity Szołtysek must rely on a variety of sources ranging from Catholic *libri status animarum* and Protestant *Seelenregistern* to the listings of houses or huts (Polish *dom* or *chalupa*) compiled by the Polish Civil-Military Order Commissions and the well-known Russian 'soul revisions', periodic tax censuses available for the eastern part of the area in the late eighteenth century. Each of these sources has strong and weak points (e.g. the Protestant registers have better age registration but omit servants), and a whole series of reasons force Szołtysek to confine his study to a narrow period covering the 1760s through 1800. Nevertheless, he has been able to build up a vast database storing information on more than 25,000 rural households belonging to over 230 parishes. Sources, constraints and methods are meticulously described in the second volume of the book, which provides a thorough data quality assessment and ends with a huge bibliography running to well over 100 pages.

The bulk of the book consists of extended analyses of what Szołtysek considers to be the main components of family systems, namely household formation patterns, family forms, the nature of the family life course, and marriage behaviour. Preceded by an introductory section where the Author deftly alerts his readers to the dangers entailed by a long history of contrapositions in which eastern Europe and the Balkans have been represented as the nearest uncivilized and exotic 'Other' for western Europe, the chapters devoted to each of these topics in the first volume of the book (*Context and Analyses*, pp. 792) provide a wealth of evidence and discussion to which a review cannot adequately do justice. However, it is probably not unfair to summarize the main findings and conclusions of Szołtysek's study by saying that in the vast territory of eighteenth-century Poland-Lithuania, entirely located east of the Hajnal line, he is able to identify three quite different regional family systems. Consistently with what one should expect from the subdivision of historic Europe proposed by Hajnal and Laslett, the easternmost parts of the Commonwealth display very much the same distinctive features as Russia, namely early and universal marriage and a dominance of large joint families. In what is today southern Belarus one actually finds an extreme version of the 'eastern European pattern': 50 percent of women were married by the age of 16, and 10 per cent by the age of 12. By contrast, the western regions which make up Poland proper unexpectedly exhibit the set of characteristics that are deemed to be distinctive of north-western Europe: a prevalence of nuclear households, substantial numbers of servants and lodgers, and a timing and sequencing of the transition to adulthood quite close to the north-western European pattern, the only significant departure from this pattern being a stronger trend towards universal marriage. Interestingly, these 'western' features can be detected more prominently in these Polish territories, lying east of the Hajnal line, than in the neighbouring German lands: as Szołtysek is keen to emphasize repeatedly in his book, when moving from Germany towards Poland one encounters a reduction in family complexity rather than the reverse.

Szołtysek goes to great lengths to prove his case (for example, a chapter of more than 80 pages is devoted to life-cycle service alone), and one of the book's leitmotifs is its meticulous assessment – mostly by using CAMSIM microsimulations as a measurement yardstick – of the extent to which empirical estimates might be attributable to chance, random variation or demographic constraints. Another leitmotiv is, predictably, the attention Szołtysek pays to the possibility that the family patterns of early modern Poland-Lithuania may have been shaped by demesne lordship: his conclusion is that in the western regions the role of the manorial system was in fact decisive, whereas in the eastern regions cultural and ecological explanations are to be preferred.

Some of these findings will already be familiar to some readers, since they have been previously presented in journal articles, but here they are given a definitive systematisation and a more extensive contextualisation. Szołtysek is not shy about the achievements of a book which, he trusts, «puts the history of European family forms on an entirely new footing» (p. 778). Indeed, it provides an excellent opportunity to rethink not only east-central Europe but also the state of the art in family history and

historical family demography. It should be stressed that Szołtysek's gigantic endeavour is a single-handed exercise in historical-demographic craftsmanship. Its research strategy is therefore very different from the one pursued by Mosaic and other large-scale projects like IPUMS or NAPP. It comes closer, at least in some respects, to the EurAsian Project, of which Szołtysek is subtly critical mainly because of its proneness to generalize on the basis of detailed and demographically 'thick' studies of only a few dispersed local populations from Europe and Asia, whereas his own generalizations rest on analyses that are demographically 'thinner' but cover a very large number of localities in the same area. Although he draws heavily from ethnographic accounts of 'traditional' Poland-Lithuania and makes frequent theoretical forays into socio-cultural anthropology, Szołtysek is even more critical of the anti-comparative stance – resulting in a sort of «spatial nihilism» (p. 787) – taken in the late 1980s by an influential generation of social anthropologists and anthropologically-oriented micro-historians.

Szołtysek's real *bêtes noires* are, however, those historians who, like Burguière and Lebrun (pp. 82, 780), have too easily declared in works intended for a broad readership that the nuclear family never crossed the western boundary of Poland, thus contributing to popularize the Hajnal line as indisputable truth. Szołtysek is definitely successful in demonstrating that Hajnal's dichotomous partition of Europe was not only too rigid, but in many ways unjustified. Since the Hajnal line is increasingly used as a convenient starting-point to test any sort of hypothesis, from the relationships between paternal age and children's IQs to explanations of contemporary differential propensities to childlessness, this is no mean achievement.

Curiously, Szołtysek seems at times to fall into a symmetrical trap, and all places lying west of the Hajnal line (as is the case of Casalguidi, Tuscany, on p. 314) may be taken as representative of a 'western' pattern whose homogeneity is no less dubious than that of the alleged 'eastern' pattern. Even more paradoxically, a book whose iconoclastic goal is to demolish Hajnal's simplistic dualism and Laslett's shortcomings ultimately manages to do so very effectively by following the classic template established by these founding fathers of the discipline. Compelled by his sources to conduct his analysis mostly at the household level, Szołtysek opts for a slightly reworked version of the Hammel-Laslett classification scheme. More importantly, he constantly returns to the discussions originally started by Hajnal and Laslett. This is of course largely due to the fact that his primary aim is to rebut their arguments. Yet, one cannot help receiving the impression that the questions raised by the pioneers of historical demography and family history are still worth addressing.

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