

Looking East

What can historical studies of Eastern countries contribute to current debates on commonalities and divergences in family, kinship and welfare provision in Europe, past and present?*

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1. Pendulum swings in family history. Half a century ago any scholar venturing into the still unfashionable topic of the history of family and kinship would have confidently asserted that since the sixteenth century Europe had witnessed a gradual rise of the nuclear family under the influence of social and economic transformations. Common to most sociological theories, rather passively accepted by historians, was a belief in the passage of the traditional extended family, large and structurally complex, into the modern conjugal family. It was assumed that in the past the size and composition of domestic groups had been very much the same all over Europe and that the differences which could be observed in the twentieth century were to be explained by economic or cultural lags caused by differential rates of modernization; but a time would soon come, it was predicted, when national and regional differences would dissolve and uniformity would reign again with European families responding to common policies. It was also generally assumed that the moral and practical significance of kinship was bound to decline and eventually fade away. As has been recently noticed (Ruggles 2009, 249-250; Tadmor 2010, 17-18), this powerful 'master narrative', whose origins can be traced to key nineteenth-century social theorists such as Henry Sumner Maine, Ferdinand Tönnies, Lewis Henry Morgan, Frédéric Le Play and Émile Durkheim, held sway in the accounts of leading family sociologists in the 1960s and, indeed, of historians like Lawrence Stone still in the 1970s.

This master narrative began to be challenged in the late 1960s, as part of a general retreat from the rigid evolutionary framework which had long prevailed in the social sciences. In the field of family studies, however, further and specific reasons to question the received wisdom were provided by the surprising results of the first forays into the past made by pioneers of historical demography like John Hajnal

* This is, with some modifications, the text of the keynote lecture delivered at a conference on «The History of the Family and Households: Comparative European Dimensions» held in London at the Institute of Historical Research, 24-26 June 2010: the aim of the conference, as explicitly stated by the organizers in the poster advertising the meeting, was «to place Balkan family history in its wider European context», and more generally to promote the historical study of household and family in Eastern Europe. The first two sections of this article partly draw on evidence and arguments presented more extensively elsewhere (Viazzo 2010a; 2010b).

(1965) and by the equally unexpected results of Peter Laslett's analyses of listings of inhabitants containing previously untapped information on household composition and spatial mobility in pre-industrial England (Laslett 1968; 1969). These findings, and those of the many subsequent investigations they stimulated, suggested among other things that new maps of family forms and marriage and kinship patterns in historic Europe had to be drawn. One of the first scholars to take stock of the new evidence was Alan Macfarlane in an article published in 1980 and significantly entitled *Demographic structures and cultural regions in Europe*, whose immediate purpose was to inform social anthropologists and historical geographers about some recent achievements of historical research on marriage and the family in Europe. Pride of place was given to Hajnal's discovery that for at least four hundred years, between the sixteenth and the nineteenth century, there had been, in Macfarlane's words (1980, 4), «one huge 'fault' line, running down from north to south», roughly from St Petersburg to Trieste: to the east of this line a pattern of early and universal marriage had dominated; the countries to the west had, by contrast, been characterized by a pattern of delayed marriage for both men and women, with high proportions of both sexes never marrying. A few years later, spurred by Peter Laslett and the Cambridge Group (Laslett, Wall 1972), other studies had then located in Western Europe «a second demographic fault line», running across from west to east: to the north of this line, households in the past were small in size and 'simple' in structure, consisting of parents, some unmarried young children and possibly servants; to the south, they were larger and often 'extended' in structure. «We thus have», Macfarlane (1980, 5) concluded, «three demographic regions, the eastern, the western (north) and the western (south)».

This article inaugurated a series of influential attempts by historians and historical demographers to map the European family, all put forward in rapid succession in the early 1980s: Richard Smith's suggestion that a 'Mediterranean' marriage and family pattern was detectable before the sixteenth century (Smith 1981); Hajnal's distinction between a north-west European 'simple household' system of household formation and a 'joint household' system ultimately to be found in both southern and eastern Europe (Hajnal 1982; 1983); and, finally, Laslett's partition of Europe into four macro-regions: 'Western', 'West-central', 'Mediterranean' and 'Eastern' (Laslett 1983). It is important to notice that all these attempts shared at least two significant features. The first one was their emphasis on long-term continuity, as shown most explicitly by Smith's argument that the characteristics of marriage and the family encountered by David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber (1978) in fifteenth-century Tuscany were not to be seen as indicators of a transition from a uniformly medieval pattern spread all over Europe to a more varied early modern scenario, but rather as evidence of a contrast between southern and northern European patterns already visible in the Middle Ages. A second common feature was their emphasis on culture. As explicitly argued by Macfarlane, the demographic structures uncovered by historians were conterminous with broad cultural regions: «is it a pure coincidence», he had wondered (Macfarlane 1980, 14), that «the extended household region is that of dominant Roman culture» and –

especially relevant to us – «that Hajnal’s line seems to follow the Slav/non-Slav division»?

This is a story which has been told over and over again in the past two decades. A less familiar aspect of the whole enterprise, but certainly an increasingly important issue especially in the agenda set by Peter Laslett, was to investigate marriage and family patterns in the various parts of Europe in order to shed light on how, and to what extent, domestic groups had taken care of vulnerable categories such as orphaned children, widows, the elderly, and other needy people. The discovery that in pre-industrial times England and more generally north-western Europe displayed a marked prevalence of neolocal simple-family households implied that living in nuclear families inevitably left many individuals without familial support, in a condition of actual or potential hardship. Far from being self-sufficient (as some scholars had argued), the small and structurally simple households of England and north-western Europe were therefore vitally dependent on external support. But where did this support come from? The existence in England of a deep-rooted and highly developed state system of poor relief led Laslett (1979) tentatively to suggest, in the late 1970s, that external support had come essentially from what he liked to call «the collectivity». The clearest formulation of this claim was provided by Laslett himself some ten years later in the form of his «nuclear-hardship hypothesis», which maintains that in England and north-western Europe, where simple-family households were dominant, transfers from the collectivity were of the highest importance, whereas transfers from the kin were of little significance (Laslett 1988).

Once again, it is relevant to observe that these and other similar claims were largely based on cultural grounds: according to Laslett, in England and north-western Europe moral obligations to reside with one’s kin in order to provide support when needed were either absent or weak. In fact, the nuclear-hardship hypothesis entailed a set of opposite predictions for those European regions where the role of kinship was believed to have been of much greater importance because of primarily cultural reasons, namely southern Europe and most likely eastern Europe. It is relevant to note that Laslett’s hypothesis proposed that the macro-regional family and marriage patterns tended to correspond – geographically as well as typologically – to contrasting systems of welfare provision: the role of kinship and family, it was contended, had been far greater in the southern and eastern parts of Europe than in the north-western countries, where the long-term prevalence of intrinsically vulnerable nuclear families had been made possible by support provided by the state, or had perhaps urged the creation of a system of state or otherwise public welfare. This argument was encouraged by the geographical contrast habitually drawn by historians between a ‘northern’ welfare system (best exemplified by England, and characterized by comprehensive, parish-based outdoor relief) and a ‘southern’ or ‘continental’ system, «supposedly haphazard and limited in its finances and scope, and based on the ‘indoor’ assistance provided in large hospitals» (Horden 2004, 260).

A favourite way of testing this hypothesis was, in the 1980s and early 1990s, the investigation of the living arrangements of the elderly. The evidence yielded by

research on southern Europe appeared to provide convincing corroboration as it showed that in the areas characterised by joint or stem family systems the great majority of old people lived in large complex households: no one had been left alone, and virtually no widows or widowers lived in households without at least one of their children (Kertzer 1984, 95-97; Bourdelais 1985; Fauve-Chamoux 1996; Pérez-Fuentes Hernández, Pareja Alonso 1997). Roughly in the same years similar findings were reported for eastern Europe by Andrejs Plakans (1989).

However, already in the 1980s both the major statements which were at the core of the 'revisionist' approach and the corollaries which followed from these statements were subjected to a severe critique. It is worth noting that the attack was mainly launched either by anthropologists or by historians influenced by anthropology, who denied the legitimacy of macro-regional approaches for several reasons. One major objection was that the alleged cultural regions were hardly homogeneous, and that supposedly distinctive traits were detectable on both sides of boundaries which looked far more blurred than originally envisaged by the proponents of the macro-regional theses. A lot of criticism was attracted, in particular, by the so-called 'Mediterranean family model' outlined by Smith and Laslett (Viazzo 2003; 2005), but an array of studies also affirmed – *contra* Laslett – the salience of alliances of blood and marriage in England and other north-western countries in early modern times and beyond (Tadmor 2010, 19-28). As early as 1991 such a hail of criticisms entitled David Kertzer to contend, in a much-quoted sentence, that «the whole enterprise of branding major areas of Europe as having a particular type of household system» was ultimately misleading. Instead of looking for broad regional uniformities, he argued, the task of family historians was to develop a theoretically more comprehensive and sophisticated approach where economic, demographic, ecological and cultural factors were all taken into account in order to properly address the unexpected degree of variability (Kertzer 1991, 156). This was tantamount to proclaiming the superiority of micro-approaches over macro-approaches, indeed their triumph. By the middle of the 1990s what had come to be known as the 'Hajnal/Laslett model' had been seriously questioned, and a further blow was inflicted a few years later by historical studies of assistance and poor relief strongly suggesting that the contrast between a 'northern' and a 'southern' model of welfare provision either did not exist or its importance had been greatly exaggerated (Cavallo 1998; Horden 1998).

Thus it was that the 'revisionist approach', which had ousted the 'master narrative', was itself supplanted by what Tadmor (2010, 16) calls a 'neo-revisionist approach'. As we have briefly noticed, neo-revisionist stances had already acquired a dominant position in the literature on households and families in southern Europe in the early 1990s, and a few years later similar views were clearly detectable in the literature on north-western Europe. Their progress has apparently been slower for eastern Europe, owing to persistent assumptions about the distinguishing features, the alleged antiquity and the basic homogeneity of marriage patterns and household formation systems east of the Hajnal line. This explains why only in the past few years articles on eastern Europe challenging the 'Hajnal/Laslett model'

have started to be published in significant numbers. It is no accident that a recent issue of «Continuity and Change» contained two neo-revisionist pieces dealing respectively with eastern Europe and the Balkans. In a paper entitled *Rethinking Eastern Europe: household-formation patterns in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and European family systems*, Mikołaj Szoltysek (2008, 389-90) echoes Kertzer in contending that the 'revisionist' attempt to «brand major areas of Europe» eventually «turned out to be itself ill-informed and led to a dead end in the construction of sociological theory». He then proceeds to demonstrate, on the basis of a substantial new body of data, that in the late eighteenth century we can actually identify in the historical Polish territories three quite different regional household and family patterns. In the same issue of «Continuity and Change» we find another article by Vasilis Gavalas on marriage patterns in Greece during the twentieth century, where he canonically starts from Hajnal and Laslett only to conclude that both demographic and anthropological studies have shown that marriage patterns in the Balkan area have exhibited such a great variability that it is difficult or utterly impossible to classify them in any of the «narrow typologies proposed by Laslett»: taken as a whole, the Greek marriage pattern looks neither East European/Balkan nor Mediterranean, and «within the Greek state there were areas that exhibited a totally different marriage pattern from the national average» (Gavalas 2008, 526).

Both the conclusions reached by these two studies and, to cite just one further example, the arguments put forward by the even more recent article by Tadmor (2010) on English kinship are testimony to the vitality of the neo-revisionist approach. It would be wrong, however, to infer that macro-regional approaches reminiscent in more than one respect of the 'Hajnal/Laslett model' have completely disappeared from the scene. Quite to the contrary, over the past twelve years or so they have been given new life by the ambitious attempts to map past and present family systems made by political scientists like Gunnar Grenstad (1999), geographers like Virginie Mamadouh (1999), sociologists like Göran Therborn (2004) and, not least, historical demographers like David Reher (1998). Needless to say, the case of David Reher is especially interesting and relevant to us. It is worth remembering that in the late 1980s and early 1990s he was one of the most vigorous neo-revisionist critics of the 'Mediterranean model' (Reher 1991). It came therefore as a surprise when, in 1998, he rekindled the debate by publishing an article where he contended that contrasts between macro-regions in Europe – and particularly between the northern and southern halves of western Europe – non only had existed in the past but persisted in the present, as demonstrated by the continuing much greater strength of family ties in the Mediterranean countries.

What is most surprising in this article is of course that Reher abandons the usual path trodden by most specialists of the area. Whereas scholars like Rowland (1987; 1988), Benigno (1989), Barbagli (1990; 1991), Kertzer (1991) and many others (including Reher himself) had emphasized the regional and sub-regional diversity of southern Europe, he was now proposing again a stark north/south boundary separating two fundamentally homogeneous culture areas. For Reher, too, the care of

the elderly provides a critical test. He has no doubt that in Mediterranean Europe the family was far more essential for the well-being of its more vulnerable members than in northern latitudes and that especially the care of the elderly fell almost exclusively on the family – as shown still today by the much higher proportion of old people living in institutions in northern Europe than in Italy, Spain and Portugal. It should be noticed, however, that Reher stresses that co-residence was not the only means of taking care of the elderly: alternative means were, he says, «the circulation of the elderly among the households of their offspring, or the spatial proximity between the homes of the elderly and those of their children» (1998, 209). Indeed, in view of Reher's own inclination to maintain that also in southern Europe nuclear arrangements have been historically much more frequent than complex households¹, it is plain that he regards these two latter ways of providing welfare to have been definitely more important than co-residence. It is interesting, in this connection, to note that several historians and sociologists (Macfarlane 1987, 145-146, 151; Barbagli, Castiglioni, Dalla Zuanna 2003, 43-44) believe that a visitor from southern Europe would have been struck by the weakness of kinship in pre-industrial or early industrial England, a weakness that showed itself in the household structure, which was overwhelmingly nuclear with only few, if any, extended families. Reher agrees wholeheartedly that a visitor from southern Europe would have been struck. However, he contends that such a visitor would have been surprised not so much by the lack of joint or extended families – for we have just seen that Reher holds that they were actually rare also in southern Europe – as by the divergent ethics almost palpable in northern and southern Europe, and most evident in the markedly greater propensity of the English to invest the collectivity with the ultimate responsibility of taking care of the elderly and other needy people. As Ida Fazio (2005, 12) has fittingly remarked, Reher's model is therefore characterized by a «shift of the analytical focus primarily towards culture and values, as made evident by his emphasis on 'ties', whose geography is divorced from the geography of co-residential structures». This is an important point to keep in mind when evaluating the implications of some recent major historical analyses of the residential arrangements of the elderly in northwest Europe and in the United States (Ruggles 2007; 2009), whose findings are far more damaging for the 'Hajnal/Laslett model', where coresidence is singled out as the crucial way to provide support to the elderly, than for Reher's significantly different formulation.

Reher's arguments and his reliance on the contrast between 'weak' and 'strong' ties were at first spurned or utterly rejected by many or possibly most historians and anthropologists as crude, simplistic and prone to dichotomous contrapositions (Fazio 2005, 10-11), but in the past few years some distinguished historians like Katherine Lynch (2003, 11-12) and Paul Ginsborg (2010, 30-31) have taken sides with Reher, and even those who remain critical are now conceding that they cannot avoid to come to grips with his theses (Cavallo 2006, 68-72; Fazio, Lombardi 2006, 8-9). What is really impressive, however, is the huge success these theses are enjoying outside family history, historical demography and historical anthropology. A quick search with the help of Google Scholar reveals that Reher's article dwarfs, in

terms of quotations, most of the famous and influential works that have been mentioned in the initial part of this article, and also that Reher has been quoted overwhelmingly by sociologists and social demographers. This shows, first of all, that in the past decades there has been no simple progression away from the ‘master narrative’ and then from the ‘revisionist approach’, ending in a clear victory of a ‘post-revisionist’ approach and in a parallel final demise of macro-regional approaches. Rather, the pendulum has been swinging and keeps swinging today, although in hardly linear or regular ways: if at least some of Reher’s arguments look similar to those advanced by the proponents of the ‘revisionist approach’, other scholars are urged by the remarkable results of recent wide-ranging investigations to plead in favour of a return to the ‘master narrative’ (Ruggles 2009). Second, the sheer number of quotations Reher’s article can boast suggests that he has been able to link the historical work on families and households to the sociological and demographic literature on twentieth-century welfare systems far more effectively than Laslett himself. This is, I believe, a literature that should not be overlooked by family historians for more than one reason, as I will try to argue in the next two sections.

2. Family and kinship in Europe: recent cross-national comparative research.

The last decade has been marked by intense macro-regional comparative research bearing, directly or indirectly, on the relationships between kinship, social security and the welfare state. Several major cross-national studies followed in the footsteps of such efforts as the pioneering survey on *Social networks and support systems* launched in 1986 by the International Social Survey Programme², or Frank Castles’ (1993) attempt to cluster European countries into ‘families of nations’ characterized by different patterns of kinship recognition, family obligations, formal legislation and policy-making: they include among others the *Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe* (best known as SHARE³) and the *Kinship and Social Security* international project (KASS), an interdisciplinary endeavour supported by the European Union whose main distinctive features are the adoption of ethnographic strategies combined with unconventional survey techniques and the conviction that «current trends need to be understood in their historical context»⁴. In addition, a number of comparative studies displaying a variety of macro-regional approaches have been published, ranging from works specifically focused on the relationships between family and welfare in Europe (Pfenning, Bahle 2000; Naldini 2003) to Therborn’s book *Between sex and power* (2004), a world-wide history of the family in the twentieth century.

Although space inhibits any detailed analysis, it seems fair to state that by and large these studies agree that by the beginning of the twenty-first century there is little evidence that the process of convergence foretold by modernization theorists has been completed or, indeed, that it has proceeded very far. Within Europe, in particular, pronounced differences between countries and ‘families of nations’ continue to be detected. The results of SHARE are especially worth considering. Survey data on such classic variables as household structure, residential proximity and frequency of contacts indicate, to quote the authors of the final report, that «there are

important differences among the ‘strong family countries’ in the South and the ‘weak family countries’ in the North» (Kohli, Künemund, Ludicke 2006, 170): the spatial pattern of proximity between elderly parents and their adult children ‘exhibits a very clear North-South divide’ (Hank 2005, 9), and a clear North-South gradient is equally noticeable with respect to rates of co-residence and especially frequency of contacts among adult family generations. If it is true that living arrangements shape patterns of care-giving, then these differences should be mirrored in the crucial field of family support. Predictably, SHARE data reveal, in this respect too, «a strong North/South European divide» (Attias-Donfut, Ogg, Wolff 2006a, 177). Interestingly, SHARE also paid considerable attention to financial transfers between generations, and again significant differences have emerged between northern and southern countries (Attias-Donfut, Ogg, Wolff 2006b, 184).

This emphasis on a divide between northern and southern Europe is obviously due to the fact that all the countries in the SHARE sample belong to western Europe, but similar conclusions concerning the differing strength of family ties across nations have most recently been suggested by the analysis of the evidence produced by the ICE survey, which includes countries from both western and eastern Europe (Dalla Zuanna, Michielin, Bordignon 2008)⁵, or indeed by KASS. There seems, therefore, to exist a broad consensus that cross-national and macro-regional differences are not just a figment of classificatory imagination. This, however, raises in an especially acute form the perennial question of the relative importance of ‘structural’ and ‘cultural’ factors in accounting for these differences (Viazzo 2007). On the one hand, it would seem reasonable to surmise that the differences pinpointed in the direction of transfers reflect differences in the levels of welfare systems: for instance, older needy people are more frequently dependent on their children in the southern (or eastern) countries, where welfare regimes are weaker, than in northern Europe. On the other hand, as I have tried to show elsewhere (Viazzo 2010a, 146-154), cultural factors cannot be easily ruled out. There is once again no space to get into rather delicate evidence and equally intricate arguments. The only point I would like to stress here is that crucial help to tip the balance in favour of cultural explanations would seem to come from history. At the end of his wide-ranging inspection of family history in the twentieth century, Therborn (2004, 297) emphasizes that a striking and not altogether expected finding to come out from census data and recent surveys has been to show that «all family systems, throughout their changes, have tended to preserve specific characteristics». European family systems, in particular, appear to be separated from one another by boundaries which do not coincide with present-day national borders (as hypotheses stressing the role of institutional factors would lead one to expect), but rather with the ‘fault lines’ identified by historical demographers in the 1960s and early 1970s. Therborn concedes that ex-Communist Europe may be moving closer to some Western patterns, but he is quick to add that «the classical European family divide, running from Trieste to St Petersburg, going back for more than a thousand years to the early Middle Ages, is still visible in 2000» (Therborn 2004, 305); also, the map of contemporary European family systems he draws (2004, 220-222) is not too different

from the one sketched out for historic Europe by Laslett. Reher's contention that macro-regional contrasts not only existed in the past but persist in the present would seem to be vindicated, and the case for cultural explanations made much stronger. But is it really so?

3. Looking East. Let us reconsider Therborn's confident assertion that «the classical European family divide, running from Trieste to St Petersburg, going back for more than a thousand years to the early Middle Ages, is still visible in 2000». Made by an eminent sociologist in an altogether admirable book, such a brisk statement sounds authoritative, reassuring, and gratifying to historical demography and especially to one of its founding fathers. All the more so since other scholars have little hesitation in tracing the beginnings of Hajnal's 'European marriage pattern' back to «more than a millennium ago» (Hartman 2004, 250) and Reher himself intimates that the basic geography of present-day family forms has «uncertain but distant origins», possibly rooted in an 'Occidental' family system that became manifest in the Late Antique period and «over the next millennium» gradually formed the basis of a distinctive family marriage and household pattern (1998, 212-213). Yet, Hajnal had never been so bold when talking about the antiquity of the line he had identified. Indeed, Szoltysek (2008, 417) now alerts us that «a substantial body of research indicat[es] that at least until the late sixteenth century there was no reason to draw a sharp distinction between household structures in Western and Eastern Europe, since in both cases simple families were predominant». Therborn's evocation of the Hajnal line offers a further demonstration of the «totemic quality», to use Andrejs Plakans and Charles Whetherell's phrase, this line has achieved as «a symbol of various attempts to demarcate [...] large areas of differences and similarities in various socio-demographic behaviors» (Plakans, Whetherell 2005, 106).

Even if we question the existence of Hajnal's line already in the early Middle Age, however, and even if we also take into account the much more contemporary political and ideological circumstances that might have influenced Hajnal (as has been frequently noted, his line bears an uncanny resemblance to the 'iron curtain'), it still remains to be seen whether, or to what extent, it may be justified to draw one or more imaginary lines between western and eastern Europe since the early modern age. In a survey of the literature on the Hajnal line and Eastern Europe, Plakans and Whetherell (2005, 111) assess that «little in the post-1983 research results about the territories under and around the Hajnal line speaks overwhelmingly against the line as drawn in the 1965 and 1983 essays». They rightly add that the Princeton European Fertility Project actually «came close to being a test of the line», and that especially the maps produced in the summary volume (Coale, Watkins 1986) provide a «visually striking demonstration of a continental divide» (Plakans, Whetherell 2005, 117). Nevertheless, they are keen to qualify their assessment by remarking that all this remains true «only as long as we are willing to remain at the same level of generalization as Hajnal used. When we inquire about place-specific results, on the other hand, the picture becomes much less clear»: in

particular, «at the community level the Hajnal line ceases to be a useful predictor» (Plakans, Whetherell 2005, 111-112).

These remarks are unmistakably reminiscent of the ‘neo-revisionist’ (or ‘counter-revisionist’) arguments advanced some fifteen years earlier by historical demographers and historical anthropologists working on southern Europe. Although their legitimacy and their force is beyond dispute, I feel that what is found at the micro-level does not always and necessarily invalidate what emerges at the macro-level, and that the thorny questions we encounter when we move up and down different orders of magnitude of size, numbers and complexity – in a word: different scales (Barth 1978; Revel 1996) – should not be overlooked and unduly simplified through quick refutation and easy dismissal.

Another set of questions we can hardly avoid to reconsider has to do with the relative weight of structural and cultural factors. While refraining from any generalization to Eastern Europe, Plakans and Whetherell can’t help noticing that no neolocal imperative comparable to the residence rule which is seen by many as the essence of the north-western European model can be found in the Baltic area before 1850: however, they write, «the question, of course, is why? Whether complex households, a high incidence of co-resident kin, universal marriage, and low ages at marriage stemmed largely from cultural values, or whether these behaviors resulted from social and economic conditions remains a basic question» (2005, 122-123). While admitting that they cannot answer the question with finality, they are strongly inclined to believe that the crucial causal factors were ‘structural’, namely the constraints on independent household formation imposed by the estate agrarian regime, which existed in the Baltic area from the sixteenth century until the early twentieth century. The same ‘structuralist’ orientation is shared by scholars who have studied changes in household composition roughly in the same period but at the other end of the Hajnal line. In an article whose title is worth being cited in full (*The dissolution of the large complex households in the Balkans: was the ultimate reason structural or cultural?*), Hannes Grandits and Sigfried Gruber (1996, 492) concede that cultural factors «formed an important part of the causal chain leading to the abandonment of large complex families» in the two communities they studied (one Croatian, the other Serbian), but they conclude that these factors were not decisive to trigger a process of transformation whose ultimate causes were instead rooted in economic change. A firm conviction that «in Slovenia socio-economic factors played a much more significant role in accounting for the variation of family and household structures than the alleged cultural aspects» has also been recently expressed by Sovič (2008, 147). This is not to say, however, that culture is always less important – in different circumstances or for different scholars: Gavalas argues, for instance, that the reasons for the variability he finds in Greek marriage patterns «were cultural rather than macro-economic or demographic» (2008, 526). As a general point, I would also suggest that we cannot rule out the possibility, as hinted by Lynch (2010, 189) on the basis of recent research on family and kinship as sources of welfare in contemporary Europe, that ‘older’ cultural beliefs and practices can re-emerge in response

to changed situations, «probably because they had never completely disappeared from people's lives and memories».

In this connection, I would like to advance some final thoughts on the relationships between the study of the past and the study of the present, and to explain why I think that historical studies of Eastern countries can make an important, possibly crucial contribution to current debates on commonalities and divergences in family, kinship and welfare provisions in Europe. The very title of this conference, «The History of Families and Households», indicates that our task is to document and hopefully understand the past. Yet we are only too aware of how powerfully the present can impinge on the past. I have briefly mentioned the uncanny resemblance between the imaginary line drawn by John Hajnal in 1965 and the one adumbrated by Winston Churchill in his lecture at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, on 5 March 1946, when he famously complained that: «A shadow has fallen upon the scenes so lately lighted by the Allied victory. [...] From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic an *iron curtain* has descended across the Continent»⁶. Today, we are increasingly realizing that the fall of the iron curtain has failed to dissolve the 'spectre of Orientalism'⁷: Eastern Europe and the Balkans have long represented the nearest uncivilized and exotic 'Other' for Western Europe, and although this 'exotic Other' may nowadays sometimes turn, as pointed out by Polish anthropologist Michał Buchowski (2006), into the 'stigmatised Brother' through the edification of new forms of internal Orientalism separating groups and classes in the former socialist states, there are more generally signs that the eastern European 'otherness' is now being paradoxically reinforced and that this can lead to a parallel reinforcement of East-West paradigms in several disciplines, including family history, thereby affecting our representations of the past (Sovič 2008, 141; Szołtysek 2008, 417). However, recognition of the role of present circumstances in 'creating the past' should not totally obliterate the more traditional idea that the past can impinge on the present, old-fashioned and simplistic as it may sound.

As Lynch (2010, 185) has rightly pointed out, the last decade has witnessed «a renewed interest in kinship in interpersonal relations in the past, and indeed as a system of protection for the individual»; and it is no accident, she has added, that such a revival of interest in the history of kinship and the family in Europe «should come in the context of fears about a declining welfare state». Moreover, the surprising persistence within Europe of pronounced differences between countries and 'families of nations' has led many an observer to suspect that, after all, 'history matters' or, in more sophisticated terms, that recent evolutions have been, and are likely to be in the future, path-dependent. These are certainly two of the principal ingredients that have made Reher's theses and concepts so appealing to sociologists and social demographers. It should be appreciated, however, that 'persistent' differences between household and marriage patterns in various parts of Europe have been documented by sociologists for relatively short and recent periods of time: a few decades for southern European family systems by Manuela Naldini and Teresa Jurado (2008), possibly a century for the whole continent by Therborn (2004). What about more distant times? The historian's task is to verify, as carefully as pos-

sible, whether we are really dealing with differences of long standing, as assumed by many, or we are instead projecting back into historical maps of family forms some differences that have perhaps come into being fairly recently. Surely there is a serious risk of developing a short circuit between 'past' and 'present', or between history and the social sciences, each spuriously reinforcing each other through a sort of positive feedback loop.

The importance of this task, and the need for further research on such topical issues as intergenerational relations and the family as a source of social security, have been emphasized by Fazio (2005, 27-39) with special reference to Italy and the rest of Mediterranean Europe. The task is no less important for the historians who work on eastern Europe, and the stakes are possibly even higher in view of what has just been said about the danger that East-West dichotomous paradigms rigidify instead of falling like the iron curtain. We should not forget, in this respect, that eastern Europe was absent from the picture outlined by Reher and is either neglected or taken for granted by most other scholars who have put forward similar models⁸. Although Reher (1998, 204) acknowledged that in eastern Europe «forms of familial organization are sufficiently different to warrant their own specific study», their absence from the initial big picture has encouraged rapid equations between southern and eastern Europe as family-dominated societies, thus resurrecting the bipartite model proposed by Hajnal in 1983, and favoured sweeping generalizations that might prove difficult to qualify or, when necessary, to eradicate.

The demanding challenge facing the historian of households and families in eastern Europe is, therefore, to sift the evidence in order to bring to light differences and commonalities and properly assess them. There is a trap to be avoided, though. We have seen at the beginning that a neo-revisionist approach has been quicker to develop in the West than in the East. We should add that its proponents have largely limited their efforts to the West. For, as Sovič (2008, 145) has correctly observed, «the same 'Western' scholars who dispute the validity of the model for their country are happy to talk about the traditional 'Eastern European pattern' and measure themselves against it». A less predictable phenomenon, also detected by Sovič, is a tendency among scholars of the 'East' to circumscribe their comparative analysis to the portion of Europe east of the Hajnal line, or to compare the results of their detailed studies with rather coarse and stylised 'Western patterns' in order to enhance either similarities or differences, or even to engage in east-of-Hajnal comparative exercises where either 'Eastern Europe' or 'the Balkans' are taken to be homogeneous socio-cultural units. This is reminiscent of the «restricted comparativism» denounced in a famous article by João de Pina-Cabral (1989) as one of the capital sins of Mediterraneanist anthropologists, who had confined their comparative efforts to localities lying within the presumed boundaries of the Mediterranean culture area and had consequently neglected other directions for comparison and other possible units of analysis. As an antidote against this widespread proclivity, Sovič argues that comparisons should transgress, or actually destroy, the boundaries that have been drawn by family historians to demarcate Europe's macro-regions, and recommends an alternative approach «based on a

search for parallels and common features, and a focus on socio-economic, institutional, administrative and legal contexts rather than cultural and geopolitical ones» (2008, 151). In my view, one should be open-minded about the role and weight of cultural factors, and I suspect that it would be a mistake to abandon and damn the notion of ‘culture area’ as a matter of principle, as most anthropologists have done in recent decades (Viazzo 2010c). The essential precaution is that this notion does not impose iron curtains on comparisons, or pre-packaged generalizations and lazy explanations.

It is, thus, high time for family historians to look East: not only to broaden their shared cumulative knowledge of household structure and marriage patterns, but above all to test a whole array of models, concepts and assumptions that have moulded, for better or worse, comparative analysis and theoretical interpretation over the past fifty years. The wealth of papers presented at a previous conference on social behaviour and family strategies in the Balkans held in Bucharest in 2006 (Bălută, Vintilă-Ghițulescu, Ungureanu 2008) and now at this meeting, which is intended to follow in the footsteps of its predecessor, demonstrates that research is growing at a quick pace. This suggests that the days of attractive but often misleading generalizations, based on a small number of studies possibly coloured by stereotyped representations and inviting hasty comparisons, are counted.

¹ This is of course quite debatable in view of extensive evidence demonstrating that in central and northern Italy, but also in northern Iberia, regional and sub-regional systems of stem or joint household formation were far from exceptional (Viazzo 2003, 123). The relevant point here is, however, that Reher turns Laslett’s assertions about southern Europe upside down.

² This path-breaking investigation covered seven countries: Australia, Austria, Great Britain, Hungary, Italy, United States and West Germany. A classic discussion is provided by Höllinger and Haller (1990), whereas basic information is available at <http://www.icpsr.unimich.edu/ecpsrweb/ICPSR/studies/09205>.

³ Eleven countries have contributed data to the 2004 SHARE baseline study: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland. Further data have been collected at later stages and new waves are announced. Cf. Börsch-Supan, Hank, Jürges 2005, and the information available at <http://www.share-project.org/t3/share>.

⁴ Funded by the European Union’s Sixth

Framework Programme, this project has been coordinated by the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology (Halle, Germany) and has covered eight European countries: Austria, Croatia, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Russia and Sweden. Details are available at <http://www.eth.mpg.de/kass/>. My quotation comes from the homepage.

⁵ The six countries investigated by ICE (*Immigrazione e Cittadinanza in Europa / Migration and Citizenship Rights in Europe*) are France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland and the Czech Republic. Details are available at <http://www.fondazione Nordest.net/Immigrazione.31.0.html>.

⁶ W. Churchill, *Sinews of Peace* (the *Iron Curtain Speech*). I am quoting from p. 5 of the text of this lecture available at <http://www.historyguide.org/europe/churchill.html>.

⁷ It may be worth recalling that the notion of ‘Orientalism’, originally proposed by Said (1978), has entered historical and anthropological debates on Eastern Europe and the Balkans, past and present, through the work of such scholars as Wolff (1994), Bakić-Hayden (1995) and Todorova (1997). Useful evaluations of the strengths and weaknesses of this

notion when applied to Eastern Europe are provided by Fleming (2000) and Franzinetti (2008).

⁸ A partial exception is represented by Todd (1990), whose main thesis is that family structures are an «anthropological variables» playing a crucial role in ensuring the success of specific political ideologies in specific countries. Blending Le Play with Hajnal and the

Cambridge Group, he argues that the 'communitarian' family prevailed in Finland, Slovakia, Hungary, Russia, the Balkans and almost everywhere east of the Hajnal line in what used to be socialist Europe, but also in central and southern France and in central Italy. Todd's influence is patent in Mamadouh (1999, 480-81) and Lalenis, De Jong, Mamadouh (2002, 40-41).

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Summary

Looking East. What can historical studies of Eastern countries contribute to current debates on commonalities and divergences in family, kinship and welfare provision in Europe, past and present?

Both Hajnal's hypothesis about the existence of an imaginary line historically bisecting European marriage patterns and Laslett's subsequent quadripartite typology of European forms of domestic organisation were widely criticized in the late 1980s and then in the 1990s. Over the past ten years, macro-regional hypotheses either reminiscent of or directly indebted to Hajnal's and Laslett's arguments have been rather surprisingly revived by the realization that in Europe both family forms and reproductive patterns are currently failing to converge as predicted by modernization theorists. However, most recent work has emphasized the divide between the northern and southern countries of western Europe, whereas eastern Europe has been mostly left out of the picture or assumed to have been in the past basically similar to south-western Europe. The aim of this article is briefly to examine some results of recent investigations in history, sociology, anthropology and demography touching on issues of continuity, change and divergence, and suggest that more thorough and accurate studies of family history (broadly understood) in Eastern Europe are of critical importance to assess these issues, both theoretically and practically.

Riassunto

Guardare ad est. Come possono contribuire gli studi storici sui paesi dell'Est agli attuali dibattiti riguardo agli aspetti comuni e le divergenze sui temi della famiglia, della parentela e del welfare nell'Europa di oggi e del passato?

Tanto l'ipotesi di Hajnal sull'esistenza di una linea immaginaria che avrebbe storicamente diviso in due parti i modelli matrimoniali europei, quanto la successiva tipologia quadripartita di forme di organizzazione domestica delineata da Laslett, sono state criticate nel corso degli anni Ottanta e poi ancora ampiamente negli anni Novanta. Nell'ultimo decennio, tuttavia, ipotesi macroregionali che ricordano da vicino quelle di Hajnal e Laslett, o sono in taluni casi direttamente loro debitorie, sono state sorprendentemente portate alla ribalta dalla constatazione che sia le forme di famiglia, sia i modelli riproduttivi non stanno convergendo nella misura prevista dai teorici della modernizzazione. La maggior parte di questi nuovi lavori ha però sottolineato il contrasto tra i paesi settentrionali e meridionali dell'Europa occidentale, mentre l'Europa orientale è stata in larga misura ignorata e si è spesso data come scontata una sostanziale somiglianza tra le strutture familiari tradizionali dei paesi dell'Est e quelle dell'Europa sud-occidentale. L'articolo si propone di esaminare brevemente i risultati di recenti indagini storiche, sociologiche, antropologiche e demografiche che hanno toccato questi temi e di suggerire che uno studio più accurato e articolato della storia della famiglia (in senso lato) nell'Europa orientale è di importanza vitale per giungere a una valutazione più corretta e a una migliore comprensione comparativa di tali questioni.