

H-Net Reviews

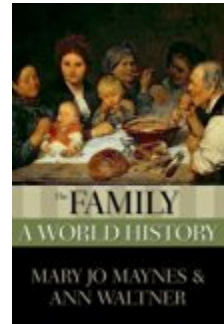
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mary Jo Maynes, Ann Beth Waltner, eds. *The Family: A World History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. xi + 147 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-533814-0; \$74.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-530476-3.

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Mary Jo Maynes and Ann Waltner have authored a tightly written and succinct, yet admirably comprehensive, survey of family as a theme in world history. *The Family in World History* is one volume in the New Oxford World History series, edited by Bonnie G. Smith and Anand Yang, and, if this volume is characteristic of the quality of others in the series, both the editors and Oxford University Press are to be thanked for providing teachers and students with concise and effective treatments of themes in world history that represent the best current scholarship.

Although specialists themselves in European (Maynes) and Chinese (Waltner) history, the authors have read deeply and widely in the histories of other world regions, demonstrated by their broad-ranging treatment of Africa, the Americas, and West, South, and Southeast Asia. In addition to geographical breadth, the book's chronological coverage spans the very earliest archaeological evidences of family to contemporary debates about conceptions of the family. This is a tough assignment and I believe the authors have done a superb job of showing how and why family matters in world history without oversimplification or overgeneralization. They deftly use personal narratives where possible or, when there are no such sources available, make use of archaeological evidence in ways that bring out the human experience of family in the past.

Organized into seven chapters, roughly corresponding to standard world history periodization, the book begins with human origins and early domestic life (to 5000 BCE), captured through everything from fecund-looking female images to skeletal DNA analysis. There

are student-friendly touches in this chapter, fleshing out sketches of archaeological remains with descriptions of how children would have observed their surroundings and understood their place in the community. The second chapter, "The Birth of the Gods: Family in the Emergence of Religions (to 1000 CE)," takes on the relationship between family and religion in the very earliest conceptions of spirituality as well as in the spread of what are commonly known as the "world religions" of Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. In the third chapter, "Ruling Families: Kinship at the Dawn of Politics (ca. 3000 BCE to 1450 CE)," Maynes and Waltner stress the role of families in the rise of dynastic polities, and the chronology they adopt here appropriately spans a very broad sweep of time, necessarily overlapping with earlier chapters. One of the strengths of their book comes out sharply in this chapter: their skill in weaving together sufficient information of a standard historical sort (such as the rise of early polities from Mesopotamia to the Maya) with information on family and gender. Students with little or no background should be able to follow their arguments easily, neither inundated by facts nor lacking sufficient context to grasp the significance of what is being said about family.

Chapter 4, "Early Modern Families (1400-1750)," sweeps us rapidly into an era of both dramatic change and comparatively rich documentation. One of the most persistent and familiar problems in world history is how to make periodization work globally. Periodization is problematic enough within the relatively limited scope of regional histories; it becomes even more difficult when used on a global scale. Nonetheless, there are obviously ways in which the conception of an "early mod-

ern period” works reasonably well in world history and the authors demonstrate that here. As the “New” and “Old” worlds were increasingly knit together, encounters between peoples and cultures transformed families, but families also influenced the ways in which these interactions shaped political, economic, and social formations. In particular, this chapter treats marriage as its central theme in the era of early modern colonization, and rich examples provide color and interest for the reader to better appreciate the role played by family in larger historical processes. Chapter 5, “Families in Global Markets (1600-1850),” also uses a wide variety of different settings to explore the impact of expanding global trade on families. As in all the chapters the authors introduce the chapter theme with a personal vignette, in this case the Christmas dinner menu from Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*, leading to a discussion of how global connections are reflected in the foods consumed. This adeptly sets the stage for the chapter’s focus while highlighting the importance of changing diets. The chapter also includes case studies of Armenian, Sephardic Jewish, and Chinese Malaysian merchant networks and the family histories embedded in them, providing a vivid sense of diversity within the commonality of global patterns. Chapter 6, “Families in Revolutionary Times (1750-1920),” effectively portrays the impact on families of the twin revolutions of industrialization and the emergence of the nation-state. The focus of this chapter is heavily on Europe and China, likely reflecting the primary research fields of the two authors. Perhaps this is hard to avoid, given the themes of industrialization and national revolutions, but I wonder still if it would not have been possible to broaden the scope of coverage here. Even though the chronological context and thematic focus of the chapter is “revolutionary times,” was there not also change in the Islamic world, Africa, Latin America, or even other parts of Asia during this relatively long and crucial era? This chapter would have provided a good opportunity to make use of scholarship on the Japanese family, for example, during the transition from Tokugawa to Meiji times in response to

industrialization, war, and Westernization.

Chapter 7, “Powers of Life and Death: Families in the Era of State Population Management (1880 to the Present),” similarly adopts a largely European and Chinese focus for the treatment of the theme. Again, perhaps this is inevitable, but the only mentions of African or other Asian examples are through the lens of colonialism. Finally, a brief epilogue on “The Future of the Family” sketches contemporary debates surrounding definitions of marriage and the family, as well as the ethical, political, and social dilemmas created by the introduction of new reproductive technologies. In the last two chapters, in particular, but to some extent elsewhere in the book, treatment of the Islamic world is a weakness. Having taken part in projects that aim to be similarly comprehensive, yet concise, I am well aware of the pitfalls of omission and the delicate balance between coverage and limitations on length. Still, I believe better balance could be achieved through the incorporation of more on the Islamic world, especially post-1500.

Throughout the book, Maynes and Waltner emphasize the approach they outline in their preface: families change over time in relation to larger historical processes but they are also agents of historical change. That a student with little knowledge could read this book and learn enough social, political, economic, and cultural history to realize that family truly is a significant world historical theme is a sign of the authors’ success in accomplishing their goal of placing family at the center of history. This book could almost stand as a basic text in world history—one that just happens to be organized around the theme of family. It could work well as a supplemental text in a survey course, but it could work equally well in a more advanced course in comparative world history to illustrate a thematic approach that invites and demonstrates the value of comparative studies. Student-friendly additions include a chronology, a list of suggested readings, and a list of websites appended to the book.

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