



What happened to the nuclear family in the 20th century? Empirical and epistemological findings in comparative perspective. Seminar für Volkskunde/Europäische Ethnologie, Emmy Noether Gruppe “Familienwerte und Gesellschaftlicher Wandel”, Historisches Seminar, Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster, 31.01.2013-02.02.2013.

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What happened to the nuclear family in the 20th century? Empirical and epistemological findings in comparative perspective

What happened to the nuclear family in the 20th century? This question was raised by the interdisciplinary conference of the Münster Institute of European Ethnology in cooperation with the historical research group “Family Values and Social Change: The US American Family in the 20th Century”. In the conference, funded by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation and the University of Münster, senior and junior scholars from various countries and disciplines debated normative and empirical changes in concepts of kinship in discourse and practice. The role of scientific experts, media representations, international comparisons and normative change formed the framework of the presentations.

In her introduction, ELISABETH TIMM (Münster) conceptualized family as an epistemic object of knowing rather than an endemic object of research, since notions of “what makes a family?” and “whom do we classify as a family?” have undergone major shifts. Tracing the origins of the nuclear family concept to Hegel’s vision of a two-generational family based on moral love in contrast to aristocratic families based in dynasty, she argued that the nuclear family as cornerstone of the state has been evoked by conservatives and critics of bourgeois society alike. She proposed analyzing how social, political, and medical experts as well as popular practices and desires have brought a specific type of family into being. ISABEL HEINEMANN (Münster) commented on the normative power of Talcott Parsons’ isolated nuclear family ideal

in shaping social reform and nation building. Citing the 1965 Moynihan Report on African American families as an example of both the scientization and socialization of families, she identified a triangular relationship between experts, normative concepts and political applications.

Panel A asked how critics of the traditional male-breadwinner ideal imagined family. KRISTINA SCHULZ (Bern) regarded criticism of the bourgeois family as constitutive to the second wave feminist movement. Looking for alternative family concepts, she traced the feminist critique from the Frankfurt School of Sociology’s work on the authoritarian character and Simone de Beauvoir’s conceptualization of marriage as a repressive institution to Shulamith Firestone’s utopian ideas of separating reproduction from sexuality. The paper by CHRISTIANE KANZ (Gent) -read in her absence- looked at concepts of “male maternalism” in three contemporary German novels. In the novels late fatherhood made possible through new reproductive technology meant a new form of male domesticity. In contrast, early 20th century vanguard art envisioned male birth as a form of hyper-masculinity, symbolically demonstrating male omnipotence by excluding women from the birth process. The debate raised critical questions on the representation of the novels as a seismograph of society and questioned the contrast between new fathers and ideals of their parental generation.

In the keynote address DAVID SABEAN (Los Ange-

les) presented a convincingly broad sweep on Western incest discourses since the 19th century. He highlighted discursive changes by relating the types of incest negotiated in public debates with contemporary scientific paradigms. Debates on cousin marriages around 1800 were related to changes in the industrial, economic order. Late 19th/early 20th century pathologizations of mother-son relations rose parallel to a biologization of the maternal body. In the postwar era, typologies of father-daughter incest were tied to the rise of psychoanalytical notions of repressed and recovered memory, while current media representations of brother-sister incest can be associated with popular evolutionary-biology assumptions of “genetic sexual attraction” and new forms of kinship through adoption and in-vitro fertilization. In the related discussion the following morning, participants debated whether such long-term developments can be traced without contradictions, whether incest discourse is always on a heterosexual matrix, and what might have triggered the changes Sabeen had identified.

Panel B conceptualized the 20th century as the century of scientization of the social, asking about the normative role of experts. MIRIAM GEBHARDT (Konstanz) compared German parent diaries of the 1910s, 1930s, 1940s and 1960s, demonstrating how normative change can be traced by the way expert advice influenced parental reflections of the development of their own children: While parents in the 1910s followed fixed paradigms of development, in the 1930s normative pressure on parents to discipline very young children increased. Gebhardt refuted the contrasting theses that during the National Socialism children either were dissolved from their parents or that Nazi ideology did not enter the family at all. In early postwar West Germany parents clung to older advice literature while dissonance between their emotions and expert advice first became apparent, but only started to be critically analyzed in the 1970s. Legal scholar FRIEDERIKE WAPLER (Göttingen) postulated instances of change regarding the legal position of the child in German constitutional and family law in the 20th century. She convincingly argued that a paradigm shift turned the child from being an object of law to a subject with own rights. Both presentations followed a similar, classical periodization of the German 20th century (Kaiserreich, Weimar Republic, Nazi era, Federal Republic, 1968) when tracing social and legal change. On the level of practical implementation, sociologist MAYA HALATCHEVA-TRAPP (Munich/Fulda) demonstrated that family counselors today follow two concepts of parenthood (one being based in companion-

ship overcoming inequalities between parents, the other being based in the care-taking of children) and a more hidden concept of gendered parenthood.

Panel C presented the current historical research on family as a source of political intervention. JÜRGEN MARTSCHUKAT (Erfurt) applied Foucault’s governmentality theory to explain why family values have been omnipresent in the discourse of the American nation since the Revolution. Contrasting early modern notions of patriarchal families as a small-scale model of state with revolutionary concepts of family as an instrument for governing modern society, Martschukat postulated that modern citizenship required the transmission of civic values of self-government through the family. Discourses ever since have represented the nuclear family as the savior of the nation and dysfunctional families as a danger to national well-being. SHAMIR YEGER (Jerusalem) approached the family policy of the German Nazi state by looking at conflicts between parents, schools and party officials over the dismissal of dissident teachers. Due to practical considerations, officials could not dismiss as many teachers as they had wanted and could not reach into families as much as they had intended. Instead, they concentrated on transmitting Nazi ideology in the party youth organizations, threatening parents with losing custody if they did not let their children join. THOMAS GROBBÖLTING (Münster) attempted an overview of 2000 years of Catholic positions towards the family: for most of its history the Catholic Church privileged ascetic celibacy, but discovered family as a bulwark against liberalism and individualism in the early 19th century. Attempts to protect families against state influences included postulating the sacrament of marriage as a counterinstitution to civil marriage. In postwar West Germany, the Catholic Church presented itself as protector of traditional family values, but lost its appeal to families due to its strict moral code on sexuality. In the discussion, it was pointed out that despite declining church membership the majority of social counseling in Germany is still done by church organizations, confirming a shift from churches as moral authorities towards service organizations.

In Panel D, the focus was on imaginations of ideal family structures. The first two presentations dealt with media representations of family in the United States. UTA FENSKE (Siegen) stated that while the 1950s are commonly perceived as the golden age of family, Hollywood movies allowed for ambivalent depictions of masculinity. The caring and breadwinning father was rarely at the center of filmic representation. Fatherhood was

implicitly debated in the World War II drama “Sands of Iwo Jima” (1949), where notions of military and civic masculinity were negotiated between a young soldier and a sergeant represented as his symbolic father. The comedy “The Marrying Kind” (1952) negotiated discrepancies between normative masculinity and failure by depicting a husband unable to fulfill the role of a responsible father and provider. As Hollywood movies usually centered on father-son rather than father-daughter relationships, Fenske understands the 1950s as an era of redefining white masculinity. ANDRE DECHERT (Münster) argued for a rethinking of periodization when treating the 1980s as a decade of controversial negotiations of fatherhood rather than of consent. In his analysis of public debates on fatherhood in American TV sitcoms, Dechert demonstrated that appropriations of nuclear-family ideals by marginalized groups on the basis of race class, gender and sexuality triggered controversial debates about who was fit to be a father. The institution of family as such remained uncontested, but was opened up along the axes of race and sexuality and modifications of gender roles within the family. Also, anthropologist/sociologist MICHAELA SCHIER (Munich) pointed out the normative power of the nuclear family ideal when presenting her interview and ethnographic based research on family ideals in contemporary multilocal patchwork families (where children commute between the homes of their separated parents). While children in these families envision a monolocal nuclear family ideal extended by step-parents, step-siblings and other relatives, parents in such arrangements often presented mother- or father-centered family ideals.

How advances in reproductive technology and family legislation shaped ideals and practices of family was debated in Panel E. Anthropologist MAREN KLOTZ (Berlin) presented ethnographic fieldwork on gamete donation in the context of contemporary debates on kinship as a biogenetic relationship. Looking at naming practices within families by donation (e.g. social father as daddy, biological father as generator), Klotz demonstrated that parents employ certain “knowledge-management strategies” to constitute family beyond genetics and include psychological knowledge of [k]information. In the context of the transnationalization of reproductive technology, SVEN BERGMANN (Berlin) traced reappearances and reinterpretations of racial categories by parents and doctors in order to ensure kinship resemblance. Relying on ethnographic data from Spanish and Czech fertility clinics, he understood regulating resemblance in matching gamete donors and receivers as a form of “doing kin-

ship”. JOAN BESTARD (Barcelona) and XAVIER ROIGÉ (Barcelona) analyzed how recent changes in Spanish divorce and marriage laws have created new models of family. Liberalizing family legislation caused a sudden increase in divorces and allowed same sex marriages, which catalyzed a diversification of parental arrangements and re-inventions of kinship. Contrasted to much less liberal French and Italian legislations, Bestard explained the peculiarities of Spanish family legislation by a strong and coherent anticlerical milieu since the Spanish Republic, which was strengthened after the forced re-Catholicization during the Franco regime, and its related critique of any state intervention in family life. Among others, the discussion raised the topic of how relevant competition for state funds is for negotiations on changing legal acceptance of new family forms, since Spain offers very little financial help to families.

During the final discussion, Isabel Heinemann highlighted different velocities of change: technology and legal practices advanced quicker than normative and value changes adapted to new kinship forms. Intersections between social expert cultures and scientific advances well as financial resources also need to be considered (Klotz, Fenske). Elisabeth Timm stated that, as an institution governing through families, the state seems to lag behind popular culture and changing ways of living.

In the end, all participants agreed that the interdisciplinary approach to family functioned very well and brought up fruitful discussions. The strength of the conference was its international, interdisciplinary design. Thus, similar developments in different national contexts became apparent, such as the association of nuclear families with liberalism in the 19th century, the emergence of discipline in early child education in the 1930s, the rise of psychoanalytical paradigms of family treatment in the 1960s and the current rethinking of family due to new reproductive technologies and a pluralization of family structures along the axis of sexuality. Various presentations have shown that value change did not manifest itself in a sudden upheaval around the year 1968 but shifting notions of fatherhood, motherhood and marriage started to be negotiated earlier on and remained contested afterwards. A recurring theme was the normative power of the nuclear family in its national varieties. While reproductive technologies and liberal family laws allow more varied family structures, ethnographic fieldwork has shown that both experts and family members still cling to the ideal. To answer the initial question: the nuclear family as a concept has remained strong throughout the 20th century.

Conference Overview:

Introduction:

Elisabeth Timm (Münster)

Isabel Heinemann (Münster)

Panel A) The family in scientific, political and economic criticism

Kristina Schulz (Bern): "Neuorganisation von Produktion und Reproduktion" (S. Firestone): Kritik und Utopie der Familie in der kognitiven Orientierung der neuen Frauenbewegung

Christine Kanz (Gent): Wandel und Ambivalenzen: Diskursivierung von weiblicher und männlicher Mater-
nalität im 20. und 21. Jahrhundert

Keynote:

David W. Sabean (Los Angeles): Kinship in incest dis-
course since the 19th century

*Panel B) The family of experts: norms, assistance, ad-
vice*

Miriam Gebhardt (Konstanz): Zwischen Norm und
Gefühl: Die Einbeziehung der Expertise in die Familie

Maya Halatcheva-Trapp (Munich/Fulda): Eltern-
schaftsdiskurse in der Trennungs- und Scheidungsber-
atung zwischen gesetzlichen Vorgaben und kultureller
Norm

Friederike Wapler (Göttingen): Die rechtliche Stel-
lung des Kindes im 20. Jahrhundert

*Panel C) The family of politics: from the gem of the
state to governmental resources*

Jürgen Martschukat (Erfurt): Governing through
families

Shamir Yeger (Jerusalem): Nuclear Family in the
Third Reich: Between Ideology and Daily Life

Thomas Großbölting (Münster): Die 'heilige Familie'
als Modell: Diskurs und Praxisformen

*Panel D) Popular families: desires, wishes, ideals and
forms of praxis*

Uta Fenske (Siegen): Männlichkeiten im Hollywood-
film der 1950er Jahre

Andre Dechert (Münster): 'Mocking the Importance
of Fathers'? US-amerikanische Sitcoms im Konfliktfeld
gesellschaftlicher Wertvorstellungen 1981-92

Michaela Schier (Munich): Die 'monokal lebende
Kernfamilie' als Orientierung? Praktiken des 'Do-
ing' und 'Displaying Family' in multilokalen Familienar-
rangements

*Panel E) Family as knowledge: use of reproductive tech-
nology, 'new kinship' as an analytical approach*

Maren Klotz (Berlin): [K]information: Variants of an
anthropology of knowledge in the New Kinship Studies

Sven Bergmann (Berlin): Assistierte Authentizität:
Transnationale Reproduktion und die Herstellung von
Verwandtschaft und Familie durch Ähnlichkeit

Xavier Roigé / Joan Bestard (Barcelona): New fam-
ilies, new identities: Transformation of the family in
Barcelona

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