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Kinship in Britain and beyond from the early modern to the present: postscript

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The articles in this special issue of *Continuity and Change* illustrate the ongoing appeal of well-known approaches to the history of the family and they also highlight renewed interest in kinship in interpersonal relations in the past, and indeed as a system of protection for the individual. The collection displays all the diversity that has characterized the field of family history for a generation, including microhistories and household studies, the history of kinship and family law, and historiographical and interpretive essays about critical links between past and present. It is no accident that the revival of interest in kinship in Europe should come in the context of fears about a declining welfare state, since one of the key questions in studies of kinship has long been 'What role did kin play in people's survival and their success in the past?'

Lloyd Bonfield's contribution invites us to contemplate the impact of the law on these matters while warning readers that legal institutions and legal history can offer only limited insight into the actual functioning of kinship relations – at least for England. To understand the actual workings of kinship ties in coming to the assistance of people in the past, we must usually look elsewhere – to the classic sources of the social historian, which include parish registers, memoirs, letters and also the records of public institutions that people often called upon to help when kin could or would not.

The articles in this issue reveal once again the usefulness of Peter Laslett's checklist of the vital factors that determined whether people could count on kin who lived outside their household for assistance.

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Among the most important factors, he noted first that people needed to have kin who were alive: demography counts. They needed to have kin who were available geographically to help in an emergency. Kin – on their side – had to have the social and financial capital to spare. Finally, people needed to have kin who felt an obligation to help.[1]

The terms of the checklist suggest why we have so much more evidence of the functioning of kin networks among social elites than among the poor: among the family dynasties of the nobility or the business dynasties of the bourgeoisie. Beyond problems of documenting the circulation of small amounts of assistance among the poor, it is clear that *ceteris paribus*, people from the upper ranks of society were likelier to have kin alive than the poor, and to have kin who were more able to move through space to bring assistance. Whether they felt more obligation to their kin is perhaps a more debatable point. We can interpret Laslett's work as a template for exploring what Pierre Bourdieu termed 'practical kin'. These are the people who actually help their relatives in substantive ways, in contrast to 'official kin', whose principal role is to show up at ceremonial events.[2] However useful Laslett's checklist is for understanding ties of solidarity among the wealthy and powerful, the fact remains that he developed it mainly to understand the kin relations of the middling and lower ranks of society – the sort of people who might well require assistance from their extended kin, not to invest in a large dowry or a business venture or to sail to a foreign land, but to negotiate a modest marriage portion, pull strings in the labour market, intervene in cases of marital breakdown, or sometimes offer help merely to survive.

The question of physical proximity that Laslett raised seems less important today than it was in early modern Europe, of course, when a matter of a few kilometres could mean the ability (or not) of kin to come to the aid of a relative in need, on foot, in an emergency. Nonetheless, as Pier Paolo Viazzo suggests here, citing studies of contemporary Italy, the choice to live in close proximity to aging parents implies that people still consider face-to-face contact to be a unique foundation for forming or reaffirming bonds of kinship solidarity. At the same time Naomi Tadmor's contribution highlights the importance of kin in geographical mobility. However significant geographical proximity was, patterns of migration from the early modern period to modernity often reflect the utilization kinship ties to facilitate both short- and long-distance migration.

Beyond the demographic and geographic dimensions of the supply of kin, there remains the question of the sense of obligation. Who among a group of kin is or was likely to feel obligated to help a kinsman in need? Here, research on historic Europe suggests that the answer to the question depended enormously on the kind of assistance needed – from social

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exchange and the provision of occasional patronage to small loans of cash or food and on to perhaps the greatest request that one kin member could make of another – to be allowed to enter his or her household on a permanent or semi-permanent basis. As research on patterns of poor relief in the European past has found, geographical propinquity was often the most important consideration in acquiring small loans, leading to the great importance of 'friends' as well as 'family'. For men and women of the poor and the middling ranks, one's neighbours or co-workers might well have come first as sources of help as the poor, in particular, sought to cobble together as many sources of assistance as possible.[3] At the other end of the spectrum, it appears that an invitation to co-reside under the same roof has long been reserved almost exclusively for one's closest kin relations, and often in settings in which those invited to co-reside were willing and able to provide labour or other resources to the household. The English legislation for the relief of the poor, as Bonfield and Tadmor emphasize, could indeed even be implemented to prevent the harbouring of needy relations beyond lineal kin.

Through the use of computer simulation, Laslett showed how in the European past the supply of kin, and the sorts of kin one had, varied widely according to demographic conditions. We find strong echoes of this sort of approach in Michael Murphy's paper in this issue. Although sociologists and ethnographers of the present have census data and questionnaires to measure the existence of kin and kinship ties, demographic modelling through computer simulation still provides an interesting baseline accounting of the sorts of relatives that Europeans are likely to have in the future, given current patterns of fertility, mortality, and nuptiality. As Tadmor suggests, the post-modern world of European kinship today has evolved not only in statistical terms but in cultural and ideological ones as well, creating new terms to express new realities of kinship relations. Several of Murphy's results are sobering. They suggest that the supply of the most important sources of kinship support in the past is eroding while newer kinds of kin remain untested. Studies of kinship assistance in Europe's past suggest that bonds between parents and children and among siblings have been the most important in providing practical assistance. Continuing declines in fertility since the First Demographic Transition have cut into the supply of children (and therefore of siblings) in European society. Newer forms of kinship emerging from Murphy's interesting simulation – such as 'ex-partners' and 'supplanted children' – do not inspire confidence that they will be adequate substitutes for these older bonds of solidarity and sources of aid.

Beyond the usefulness of his 'checklist', Laslett also offered an intriguing set of hypotheses about the presence in European society of a

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host of public institutions and organizations – which he termed the 'collectivity' – that individuals could appeal to if and when kin were not present or able to help them. Laslett and his colleagues focused upon the parish, but the repertoire of collective organizations that Europeans founded over the centuries to bring assistance is nearly endless, ranging from hospitals to civic almshouses to orphanages to charitable confraternities and organizations that provided dowries to poor women, as Frans Ciappara's article on the Maltese parish of St Mary's (Qrendi) illustrates here.

The omnipresence of these sorts of organizations in the European past stemmed, it has been argued, from just the sort of fragile state of family and kinship bonds that Laslett and others associated mainly with the nuclear household form.[4] Yet we also know that all parts of Europe – north and south, east and west – had these kinds of institutions, no matter what their household and kinship systems were like. This suggests that, in the past as in the present, all European systems of household and kinship relations – no matter how extended were the household forms or elaborate the kin networks – depended greatly upon collective institutions to care for those whose kin could or would not. We can therefore interpret the modern welfare state as only the latest re-invention of a form of collective institution familiar to Europeans since the Middle Ages.

Although observers rightly view the transition from systems of charity to welfare-state systems as a watershed in the histories of family and society, the long-term history of the relative places of kin and community in bringing assistance to the individual abounds in other continuous features. My own research has taught that family or kinship and 'collectivity' usually tried to work together to protect the vulnerable. There were times and places where cynical officials applied the notion of a zero-sum game to the division between the responsibilities of 'collectivity' and kin for the poor. In many parishes, towns, and cities of early modern Europe, however, local authorities, both civic and religious, thought it good social policy to offer incentives to kin, neighbours, or friends of the dependent poor to care for them, by subsidizing their efforts. Indeed, the first generation of French revolutionaries, who envisaged a nation-wide system of state public welfare, shared the belief that it was good civic policy to encourage and assist family members of the poor in aiding their relatives. Civic bonds of solidarity were not antithetical to kinship ties; indeed, good social policy, it was believed, would reinforce both.

A growing interest in continuities across the *longue durée* of European kinship history has led to a number of revisions in thinking. It has moved scholarship beyond some of the important questions that informed an earlier generation of research. With regard to England in particular, past

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debates between those who saw kinship relations there as weak or non-existent much beyond the household and those who found good empirical evidence of their strength have finally emerged through long-standing debates to a new and productive 'post-revisionist' state, as Tadmor suggests in this issue. The enmeshed patterns of connectedness in early modern society – and indeed the very nature of the changing historical boundaries of kinship – are now increasingly appreciated by scholars. Moreover, as several authors in this special issue note, master narratives, especially those involving models of linear change, have fallen by the wayside. The discovery, or re-discovery, of region-specific (particularly north–south) differences in the strength of kinship ties within Europe today seems to lend greater credibility to these studies.

The idea of 'path-dependency' seems quite helpful in sorting out the sources of certain regional differences. It avoids the extremes of complete determinism and the equally improbable idea that household and family systems vary randomly in the short term without regard to the social systems in which they are enmeshed. Yet Pier Paolo Viazzo's insistence that long-term continuities are not necessarily the result of ancient traditions is also quite persuasive. It suggests that the intensity of kinship relations in the European past may have varied in phasic rather than linear trends in economic, social, and even cultural conditions.

Under this hypothesis, the apparently growing convergence of European kinship systems in the mid-twentieth century may be attributable to the dual impacts of high industrialization and the First Demographic Transition – social phenomena whose depth and persistence over decades could in some sense have swamped older cultural differences without ever completely erasing them. With the slowing down of economic growth in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries, however, older cultural beliefs and practices have apparently re-emerged in response to current conditions, probably because they had never completely disappeared from people's lives and memories.

In his contribution to this issue, Richard Wall draws examples of strong kinship relations in periods of the English past when several of Laslett's key factors appear to have converged to facilitate them. Beginning in the late-nineteenth century and culminating in the mid-twentieth, one might posit a kind of 'golden age' of working-class kinship that was sustained by falling rates of mortality, fertility that was still relatively high, divorce and separation that were rare and rising standards of living. Cities of this period had often been formed by the sort of 'chain migration' that facilitated denser networks of kin relations. The consequences of these demographic and economic factors included kin interdependency among increasing proportions of the lower classes. It is less likely that large

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numbers of medieval or early modern Europeans could have experienced these same kinds of durable ties. In that era, migrants to urban areas often came as single people and found in urban settings mortality regimes that made it more difficult for multi-generational kin bonds to survive. Thus, certain *phases* of industrialization or economic growth may well have favoured kin interaction and inter-dependency. However, this trend was not linear or homogeneous in character.

As the articles in this special issue illustrate, the loss of master narratives in the history of European kinship does not necessarily signal a loss of vigour in the field. As in previous generations of research, current scholars will bring their concerns about kin relations in the present to enrich investigations into the past.

ENDNOTES

1 Peter Laslett, 'Family, kinship and collectivity as systems of support in pre-industrial Europe: a consideration of the 'nuclear-hardship' hypothesis', *Continuity and Change* **3**, 2 (1988), 153–75, p. 157.

2 Pierre Bourdieu, trans. by Richard Nice, *Outline of a theory of practice* (Cambridge, 1977), 32–8. Depending upon the rank and status of the persons involved, the appearance of kin at ceremonial events could, of course, bring benefits.

3 See Robert Jütte, *Poverty and deviance in early modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1994), 83–99.

4 Katherine A. Lynch, *Individuals, families and communities in Europe, 1200–1800: the urban foundations of Western society* (Cambridge, 2003).

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