PART II

Historical Changes and Family Variations

READING 5

Historical Perspectives on Family Diversity

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Variability in the European and American Historical Record

In the ancient Mediterranean world, households and kin groupings were so disparate that no single unit of measurement or definition could encompass them. By the late 14th century, however, the English word *family,* derived from the Latin word for a household including servants or slaves, had emerged to designate all those who lived under the authority of a household head. The family might include a joint patrilocal family, with several brothers and their wives residing together under the authority of the eldest, as was common in parts of Italy and France before 1550, as well as in many Eastern European communities into the 19th century. Or it might be a stem family, in which the eldest son brought his bride into his parents' home upon marriage, and they lived as an extended family until the parents' deaths. The son's family then became nuclear in form, until the eldest son reached the age of marriage. Owing to late marriages and early mortality, most such families would be nuclear at any particular census, but most of them would pass through an extended stage at some point in their life cycle (Berkner 1972; Coontz 1988; Hareven 1987).

Until the early 19th century, most middle-class Europeans and North Americans defined *family* on the basis of a common residence under the authority of a household head, rather than on blood relatedness. This definition thus frequently included boarders or servants. Samuel Pepys began his famous 17th-century English diary with the words "I lived in Axe Yard, having my wife, and servant Jane, and no more in family than us three." In 1820 the publisher Everard Peck and his wife, of Rochester, New York, childless newlyweds, wrote home: "We collected our family together which consists of seven persons and we think ourselves pleasantly situated" (Coontz 1988; Hareven 1987).

Source: Stephanie Coontz, "Historical Perspectives on Family Diversity" from *Handbook of Family Diversity,* edited by David H. Demo, et al.

Among the European nobility, an alternative definition of family referred not to the parent–child grouping, but to the larger descent group from which claims to privilege and property derived. Starting in the late 17th century, other writers used the word to refer exclusively to a man's offspring, as in the phrase *his family* and *wife*. Not until the 19th century did the word *family* commonly describe a married couple with their coresident children, distinguished from household residents or more distant kin. This definition spread widely during the 1800s. By the end of the 19th century, the restriction of the word to the immediate, coresidential family was so prevalent that the adjective *extended* had to be added when people wished to refer to kin beyond the household (Williams 1976).

Diversity in Emotional and Sexual Arrangements

. . . [Family diversity extends] not just to forms and definitions, but to the emotional meanings attached to families and the psychological dynamics within them. Whereas 17th-century Mediterranean families were organized around the principle of honor, which rested largely on the chastity of the family's women, other groups did not traditionally distinguish between "legitimate" and "illegitimate" children. When Jesuit missionaries told a Montagnais-Naskapi Indian that he should keep tighter control over his wife to ensure that the children she bore were "his," the man replied: "Thou hast no sense. You French people love only your own children; but we love all the children of our tribe" (Leacock 1980:31; see also Gutierrez 1991).

What is considered healthy parent–child bonding in our society may be seen as selfishness or pathological isolation by cultures that stress the exchange and fostering of children as ways of cementing social ties. The Zinacantecos of southern Mexico do not even have a word to distinguish the parent–child relationship from the house, suggesting that the emotional saliency of the cooperating household unit is stronger than that of blood ties per se. In Polynesia, eastern Oceania, the Caribbean, and the West Indies (and in 16th-century Europe), to offer your child to friends, neighbors, or other kin for adoption or prolonged coresidence was not considered abandonment but a mark of parental love and community reciprocity (Collier, Rosaldo, and Yanigasako 1982; Peterson 1993; Stack 1993).

Modern Americans stress the need for mother–daughter and father– son identification, but in matrilineal societies, where descent is reckoned in the female line, a man usually has much closer ties with his nephews than with his sons. Among the Trobriand Islanders, for instance, a child's biological father is considered merely a relation by marriage. The strongest legal and emotional bonds are between children and their maternal uncles. Conversely, among the patrilineal Cheyenne, mother–daughter relations were expected to be tense or even hostile, and girls tended to establish their closest relationships with their paternal aunts (Collier et al. 1982).

What counts as healthy family dynamics or relationships also varies *within* any given society. Research on contemporary families has demonstrated that parenting techniques or marital relationships that are appropriate to middle-class white families are less effective for families that must cope with economic deprivation and racial prejudice (Baumrind 1972; Boyd-Franklin and Garcia-Preto 1994; Knight, Virdin, and Roosa 1994).

Values about the proper roles and concerns of mothers and fathers differ as well. Today women tend to be in charge of family rituals, such as weddings and funerals. In colonial days, however, this was a father's responsibility, while economic activities were far more central to a colonial woman's identity (and occupied much more of her time) than was child rearing. Contemporary American thought posits an inherent conflict between mothering and paid work, but breadwinning is an integral part of the definition of mothering in

many cultural traditions. One study found that "traditional" Mexicanas in the United States experience *less* conflict or guilt in integrating the worlds of home and paid employment than do their Chicana counterparts who have internalized the notions of good mothering portrayed in the American mass media (Calvert 1992; Gillis 1996).

Even something as seemingly "natural" as sexual behavior and identity shows amazing variation across time and cultures. Categories of gender and sexuality have not always been so rigidly dichotomous as they are in modern Euro-American culture. Among many Native American societies, for instance, the *berdache* has a spiritual, social, economic, and political role that is distinct from either men's or women's roles. Neither he nor the female counterparts found in other Native American groups can be accurately described by the sexual identity we know as homosexual. Similarly, in traditional African culture, a person's sexual identity was not separable from his or her membership and social role in a family group (Herdt 1994; Jeater 1993; Schnarch 1992; Williams 1986).

Ever since the spread of Freudian psychiatric ideas at the beginning of the 20th century, Europeans and North Americans have tended to see a person's sexual behavior as the wellspring or driving force of his or her identity. The ancient Greeks, in contrast, thought that dreams about sex were "really" about politics. Until comparatively recently in history, a person's sexual acts were assumed to be separate from his or her fundamental character or identity. Indeed, the term *homosexual* did not come into use until the end of the 19th century. A person could commit a sexual act with a person of the same sex without being labeled as having a particular sexual "orientation." This lack of interest in identifying people by their sexual practices extended to heterosexual behavior as well. In mid-17th century New England, Samuel Terry was several times convicted for sexual offenses, such as masturbating, in public, but this behavior did not prevent his fellow townspeople from electing him town constable (D'Emilio and Freedman 1988; Padgug 1989).

Since the early 20th century, most American experts on the family have insisted on the importance of heterosexual intimacy between husband and wife in modeling healthy development for children, yet in the 19th century, no one saw any harm in the fact that the closest bonds of middle-class women were with other women, rather than with their husbands. Men were often secondary in women's emotional lives, to judge from the silence or nonchalance about them in women's diaries and letters, which were saturated with expressions of passion that would immediately raise eyebrows by modern standards of sexual categorization. Although the acceptability of such passionate bonds may have provided cover for sexual relations between some women, these bonds were also considered compatible with marriage. Men, too, operated in a different sexual framework than today. They talked matter-of-factly about sleeping with their best friends, embracing them, or laying a head on a male friend's bosom—all without any self-consciousness that their wives or fiancées might misinterpret their "sexual orientation" (Duberman, Vicinus, and Chauncey 1989; Faderman 1981; Rotundo 1993; Smith-Rosenberg 1985). . . .

Families in the Cauldron of Colonization

At the time of European exploration of the New World, Native American families in North America orbited around a mode of social reproduction based on kinship ties and obligations. Kinship provided Native Americans with a system of assigning rights and duties on the basis of a commonly accepted criterion—a person's blood relationship (although this relationship might have been fictive) to a particular set of relatives. Kinship rules and marital alliances regulated an individual's place in the overall production and

distribution of each group's dominant articles of subsistence and established set patterns in the individual's interactions with others.

Among groups that depended on hunting and gathering, such as those of the northern woods or Great Basin, marriage and residence rules were flexible and informal. In other Native American societies, typically those that had extensive horticulture, people were grouped into different sections, moieties or phratries, and clans, each of which was associated with different territories, resources, skills, duties, or simply personal characteristics. Exogamy, the requirement that an individual marry out of his or her natal group into a different clan or section, ensured the widest possible social cooperation by making each individual a member of intersecting kin groups, with special obligations to and rights in each category of relatives. Marriage and residence rules also organized the division of labor by age and gender (Coontz 1988; Leacock and Lurie 1971; Spicer 1962).

Unlike a state system, which makes sharp distinctions between family duties and civil duties, domestic functions and political ones, North American Native Americans had few institutions (prior to sustained contact with Europeans) that were set up on a basis other than kinship. Some groups, such as the Cherokee, might have had a special governing body for times of war, and the influence of such groups was invariably strengthened once Native Americans engaged in regular conflicts with settlers, but most of the time village elders made decisions. There was no opposition between domestic or "private" functions and political or public ones. North American Native Americans had no institutionalized courts, police, army, or other agencies to tax or coerce labor. Kin obligations organized production, distributed surplus products, and administered justice. Murder, for example, was an offense not against the state but against the kin group, and, therefore, it was the responsibility and right of kin to punish the perpetrator. To involve strangers in this punishment, as modern state judicial systems deem best, would have escalated the number of groups and individuals involved in the conflict (Anderson 1991; Coontz 1988).

The nuclear family was not a property-holding unit, since resources and land either were available to all or were held by the larger kin corporation, while subsistence tools and their products were made and owned by individuals, rather than families. Its lack of private property meant that the nuclear family had less economic autonomy vis-à-vis other families than did European households. The lack of a state, on the other hand, gave Native American families more political autonomy because people were not bound to follow a leader for any longer than they cared to do so. However, this political autonomy did not seem to create a sense of exclusive attachment to one's "own" nuclear family. The nuclear family was only one of many overlapping ties through which individuals were linked. It had almost no functions that were not shared by other social groupings (Leacock and Lurie 1971; Spicer 1962).

Native American kinship systems created their own characteristic forms of diversity. North American Indians spoke more than 200 languages and lived in some 600 different societies with a wide variety of residence, marital, and genealogical rules. Among nomadic foragers, residence rules were flexible and descent was seldom traced far back. Horizontal ties of marriage and friendship were more important in organizing daily life than were vertical ties of descent. More settled groups tended to have more extensive lineage systems, in which rights and obligations were traced through either the female or the male line of descent. Most of the Great Plains and prairie Indians were patrilineal; matrilineal descent was common among many East Coast groups; the Creeks, Choctaws, and Seminoles of the South; and the Hopi, Acoma, and Zuni groups of the Southwest (Axtell 1981, 1988; Catlin 1973; Coontz 1988; Gutierrez 1991; Leacock and Lurie 1971; Mindel, Habenstein, and Wright 1988; Peters 1995; Snipp 1989).

Native American family systems produced land-use and fertility patterns that helped maintain the abundance of game and forests that made the land so attractive to European settlers. But they also made the

Native Americans vulnerable to diseases brought by the Europeans and their animals, as well as to the Europeans' more aggressive and coordinated methods of warfare or political expansion (Axtell 1985, 1988; Cronon 1983).

The impact of European colonization on Native American family systems was devastating. Massive epidemics, sometimes killing 60%–90% of a group's members, devastated kin networks and hence disrupted social continuity. Heightened warfare elevated the role of young male leaders at the expense of elders and women. In most cases, the influence of traders, colonial political officials, and Christian missionaries fostered the nuclear family's growing independence from the extended household, kinship, and community group in which it had traditionally been embedded. In other instances, as with Handsome Lake's revival movement among the Iroquois, Native Americans attempted to adapt European family systems and religious values to their own needs. Either way, gender and age relations were often transformed, while many Native American groups were either exterminated or driven onto marginal land that did not support traditional methods of social organization and subsistence. Native American collective traditions, however, were surprisingly resilient, and Euro-Americans spent the entire 19th century trying to extinguish them (Adams 1995; Anderson 1991; Calloway 1997; Coontz 1988; Mindel et al. 1988; Peters 1995).

The European families that came to North America were products of an international mercantile system whose organizing principles of production, exchange, ownership, and land use were on a collision course with indigenous patterns of existence. Europeans also had the support of a centralized state apparatus whose claims to political authority and notion of national interests had no counterweight among Native Americans. Colonial families had far more extensive property and inheritance rights than did Native American families, but they were also subjected to far more stringent controls by state and church institutions. The redistribution duties of wealthy families, however, were much more limited than those of Native Americans, so there were substantial differences in wealth and resources among colonial families, with the partial exception of those in the New England colonies right from the beginning (Coontz 1988; Mintz and Kellogg 1988).

These features of colonial society led to a different kind of family diversity than that among Native Americans. In addition to differences connected to the national, class, and religious origins of the settlers, the sex ratio of different colonizing groups, and the type of agriculture or trade they were able to establish, the colonies were also characterized by larger disparities in the wealth and size of households. Poorer colonists tended to concentrate in propertied households as apprentices, servants, or temporary lodgers.

At the same time as European settlers were destroying the Native American kinship system, they were importing an African kinship system, which they also attempted to destroy. But because the colonists depended on African labor, they had to make some accommodations to African culture and to African American adaptations to the requirements of surviving under slavery. The slaves were at once more subject to supervision and manipulation of their families and more able than Native Americans to build new kinship networks and obligations. They adapted African cultural traditions to their new realities, using child-centered, rather than marriage-centered, family systems; fictive kin ties; ritual coparenting or godparenting; and complex naming patterns that were designed to authenticate extended kin connections, all in the service of building kin ties within the interstices of the slave trade and plantation system. But African American families also had their own characteristic forms of diversity, depending on whether they lived in settlements of free blacks, on large plantations with many fellow slaves, or on isolated small farms in the South (Franklin 1997; Gutman 1976; Stevenson 1996).

Slave families were not passive victims of the traffic in human beings nor organized in imitation of or deference to their masters' values. However, they could never be free of the constraints imposed by their white owners. They emerged out of a complex set of struggles and accommodations between both groups.

But slaveowners' families were *also* derived from the dialectic of slavery. Anxieties about social control and racial-sexual hierarchies, fears of alliances between blacks and poor whites, and attempts to legitimate slavery in the face of Northern antislavery sentiment created a high tolerance for sexual hypocrisy; pervasive patterns of violence within white society, as well as against slaves; and elaborate rituals of patriarchy, both in family life and in the community at large (Edwards 1991; Isaacs 1982; McCurry 1995; Mullings 1997; Stevenson 1996).

Families in the Early Commercial and Industrializing Economy

From about the 1820s, a new constellation of family systems emerged in the United States, corresponding to the growth of wage labor, a national market economy, and the specialization of many occupations and professions. Merchants, manufacturers, and even many farmers consolidated production and hired employees to work for a set number of hours, rather than purchased supplies or raw materials from independent producers. Such producers, along with the apprentices and journeymen whom wage workers replaced, lost older routes to self-employment or accession to family farms. At the same time, married women's traditional household production was taken over by unmarried girls working in factories.

In an attempt to avoid becoming wage laborers and to find new professions or sources of self-employment for them and their children, a growing number of middle-class families developed a more private nuclear family orientation, keeping their children at home longer instead of sending them away for training or socialization elsewhere. Meanwhile, immigrants from Europe poured into the growing towns to work in factories or tenement workshops, while westward expansion drew new Mexican and Native American groups into the economy. Such trends in the early development of American capitalism reshaped ethnic traditions and class relations and led to the emergence of "whiteness" as a category that European immigrants could use to differentiate themselves from other groups near the bottom of the economic hierarchy (Johnson 1978; Jones 1997; Roediger 1988; Ryan 1981).

The gravitational force that was pulling families into new orbits in this period was the emergence of wage labor in the context of competing older values and an inadequately developed set of formal supporting institutions for capitalist production—schools, credit associations, unions, and even a developed consumer industry. Families who sought to escape wage labor by moving west, setting up small businesses, or trying to compete with factory-made goods through household production were just as surely affected by the progress of capitalism as were families who either owned or had to work in the larger workshops and factories that increasingly supplanted apprenticeship arrangements in separate households or farms. At the same time, few families could yet free themselves from some reliance on household production or community sponsorship and social ties.

The gradual separation of work and home—market production and household reproduction—created new tensions between family activities and "economic" ones. Households could no longer get by primarily on things they made, grew, or bartered. However, they could not yet rely on readymade purchased goods. Even in middle-class homes, the labor required to make purchased goods usable by the families was immense (Strasser 1982).

These competing gravitational pulls produced a new division of labor among middle-class families and many workers. Men (and in working-class families, children as well) began to specialize in paid work outside the home. Wives took greater responsibility for child care and household labor. A new ideology of

parenting placed mothers at the emotional center of family life and romanticized the innocence of children, stressing the need to protect them within the family circle. What allowed middle-class white families to keep children at home longer and to divert the bulk of maternal attention from the production of clothes and food to child rearing was the inability of many working-class families to adopt such domestic patterns. The extension of childhood and the redefinition of motherhood among the middle class required the foreshortening of childhood among the slaves or sharecropping families who provided cotton to the new textile mills, the working-class women and children whose long hours in the factory made store-bought clothes and food affordable, and the Irish or free African American mothers and daughters who left their homes to work in what their mistresses insisted in defining as a domestic sanctuary, rather than a workplace. In addition to its class limitations, domesticity (along with its corollary, female purity) was constructed in opposition to the way that women of color were defined (Baca Zinn and Eitzen 1990; Dill 1998; Glenn 1992).

Even as many wives gave up their traditional involvement in production for sale or barter, others followed their domestic tasks out of the household and into the factories or small workshops that made up "the sweated trades." Still, as wage labor increasingly conflicted with domestic responsibilities, most families responded by trying to keep one household member near home. Although most wives of slaves and freed blacks continued to participate in the labor force, wives in most other racial and ethnic groups were increasingly likely to quit paid work outside the home after marriage. After the Civil War, freed slaves also attempted to use new norms of sexually appropriate work to resist gang labor, in a struggle with their former masters and current landlords that helped produce the sharecropping system in the South (Franklin 1997; Hareven 1976; Jones 1985; Lerner 1969; Mullings 1997). But these superficially similar family values and gender-role behaviors masked profound differences, since working-class families continued to depend on child labor and support networks of neighbors beyond the family and the work of women within the home or neighborhood varied immensely by class. For example, "unemployed" wives among the working class frequently took in boarders or lodgers, made and sold small articles or foodstuffs, and otherwise kept far too busy with household subsistence tasks to act like the leisured ladies of the upper classes or the hovering mothers of the middle classes (Boydston 1990; Hareven 1987).

Among the wealthy, fluid household membership and extended family ties remained important in mobilizing credit, pooling capital, and gaining political connections. In the working class, family forms diverged. Singleperson and single-parent households multiplied among the growing number of transient workers. But the early factory system and its flip side, the sweated trades, reinforced the notion of the family as a productive unit, with all members working under the direction of the family head or turning their wages over to him.

After the Civil War, industrialization and urbanization accelerated. As U.S. families adapted to the demands and tensions of the industrializing society, different groups behaved in distinctive ways, but some trends could be observed. It was during this period that American families took on many of the characteristics associated with "the modern family." They became smaller, with lower fertility rates; they revolved more tightly around the nuclear core, putting greater distance between themselves and servants or boarders; parents became more emotionally involved in child rearing and for a longer period; couples oriented more toward companionate marriage; and the separation between home and work, both physically and conceptually, was sharpened (Coontz 1988; Mintz and Kellogg 1988).

Yet these trends obscure tremendous differences among and within the changing ethnic groups and classes of the industrializing United States. Between 1830 and 1882, more than 10 million immigrants

arrived from Europe. After the Civil War, new professions opened up for middle-class and skilled workers, while job insecurity became more pronounced for laborers. Class distinctions in home furnishings, food, and household labor *widened* in the second half of the 19th century. There was also much more variation in family sequencing and form than was to emerge in the 20th century. Young people in the 19th century exhibited fewer uniformities in the age of leaving school and home, marrying, and setting up households than they do today. No close integration between marriage and entry into the workforce existed: Young people's status as children, rather than marriage partners, determined when and where they would start work. Family decisions were far more variable and less tightly coordinated throughout the society than they would become in the 20th century (American Social History Project 1992; Baca Zinn and Eitzen 1990; Graff 1987; Modell 1989).

In addition to this diversity in the life cycle, family forms and household arrangements diverged in new ways. The long-term trend toward nuclearity slowed between 1870 and 1890 when a number of groups experienced an increase in temporary coresidence with other kin, while others took in boarders or lodgers. American fertility fell by nearly 40% between 1855 and 1915, but this average obscures many differences connected to occupation, region, race, and ethnicity. The fertility of some unskilled and semiskilled workers actually *rose* during this period (Coontz 1988; Hareven 1987).

Another form of family and gender-role diversity in the late 19th century stemmed from mounting contradictions and conflicts over sexuality, which was increasingly divorced from fertility. In the middle class, birth control became a fact of life, despite agitated attempts of conservatives, such as Anthony Comstock, to outlaw information on contraceptives. In the working class, fertility diverged from sexuality, in another way—not only in the growth of prostitution in the cities, but with the emergence of a group of single working women who socialized with men outside a family setting. The opportunities for unsupervised sexual behavior in the cities also increased the possibilities for same-sex relationships, and even entire subcultures, to develop (D'Emilio and Freedman 1988).

The changes that helped produce more "modern" family forms, then, started in different classes, meant different things to families who occupied different positions in the industrial order, and did not proceed in a unilinear way. The "modernization" of the family was the result not of some general evolution of "the" family, as early family sociologists originally posited, but of *diverging* and *contradictory* responses that occurred in different areas and classes at various times, eventually interacting to produce the trends we now associate with industrialization. As Katz, Doucet, and Stern (1982) pointed out:

> The five great changes in family organization that have occurred are the separation of home and work place; the increased nuclearity of household structure; the decline in marital fertility; the prolonged residence of children in the home of their parents; and the lengthened period in which husbands and wives live together after their children have left home. The first two began among the working class and among the wage-earning segment of the business class (clerks and kindred workers). The third started among the business class, particularly among its least affluent, most specialized, and most mobile sectors. The fourth began at about the same time in both the working and business class, though the children of the former usually went to work and the latter to school. (P. 317)

The fifth trend did not occur until the 20th century and represented a reversal of 19th-century trends, as did the sixth major change that has cut across older differences among families: the reintegration of women into productive work, especially the entry of mothers into paid work outside the home and the immediate neighborhood.

The Family Consumer Economy

Around the beginning of the 20th century, a new constellation of family forms and arrangements took shape, as a consolidated national industrial system and mass communication network replaced the decentralized production of goods and culture that had prevailed until the 1890s. The standardization of economic production, spread of mass schooling into the teenage years, abolition of child labor, growth of a consumer economy, and gradual expansion of U.S. international entanglements created new similarities and differences in people's experience of family life.

In the 1920s, for the first time, a bare majority of children came to live in a male-breadwinner, female-homemaker family, in which the children were in school rather than at work. Numerous immigrant families, however, continued to pull their children out of school to go to work, often arousing intense generational conflicts. African American families kept their children in school longer than any immigrant group, but their wives were much more likely than other American women to work outside the home (Hernandez 1993).

A major reorientation of family life occurred in the middle classes and in the dominant ideological portrayals of family life at that time. For the 19th-century middle class, the emotional center of family life had become the mother–child link and the wife's networks of female kin and friends. Now it shifted to the husband–wife bond. Although the "companionate marriage" touted by 1920s sociologists brought new intimacy and sexual satisfaction to married life, it also introduced two trends that disturbed observers. One was increased dissatisfaction with what used to be considered adequate relationships. Great expectations, as the historian May (1980) pointed out, could also generate great disappointments. These disappointments took the form of a jump in divorce rates and a change in the acceptable grounds for divorce (Coontz 1996; May 1980; Mintz and Kellogg 1988; Smith-Rosenberg 1985).

The other was the emergence of an autonomous and increasingly sexualized youth culture, as youths from many different class backgrounds interacted in high schools. The middle-class cult of married bliss and the new romance film industry led young people increasingly to stress the importance of sexual attractiveness and romantic experimentation. At the same time, the model of independent courting activity provided by working-class youths and the newly visible African American urban culture helped spread the new institution of "dating" (Bailey 1989; D'Emilio and Freedman 1988).

Another 20th-century trend was the state's greater intervention into the economy in response to the growth of the union movement, industry's need to regulate competition, the expanding international role of the United States, and other related factors. Families became increasingly dependent on the state and decreasingly dependent on neighborhood institutions for regulating the conditions under which they worked and lived. This change created more zones of privacy for some families but more places for state intervention in others. Sometimes the new state institutions tried to impose nuclear family norms on low-income families, as when zoning and building laws were used to prohibit the coresidence of augmented or extended families or children were taken away from single parents. But in other cases, state agencies imposed a female-headed household on the poor, as when single-parent families were the only model that entitled people to receive governmental subsidies (Gordon 1988; Zaretsky 1982).

Diversity, however, continued to be a hallmark of American family life. Between 1882 and 1930, more than 22 million immigrants came to America, many of them from southern and Eastern Europe, rather than from the traditional Western European suppliers of labor to the United States. They brought a whole range of new customs, religions, and traditions that interacted with their point of entry into the U.S. economy and with the new ethnic prejudices they encountered. By 1910 close to a majority of all workers in heavy industry were foreign born (Baca Zinn and Eitzen 1990).

These immigrants enriched urban life and changed the nature of industrial struggle in the United States. They neither "assimilated" to America nor retained their old ways untouched; rather, they used their cultural resources selectively to adapt to shifting institutional constraints and opportunities. For many groups, migration to America set up patterns of life and interaction with the larger mainstream institutions that forged a new cultural identity that was quite different from their original heritage. But this identity, in turn, changed as the socioeconomic conditions under which they forged their family lives shifted (Baca Zinn and Eitzen 1990; Glenn 1983; Sanchez 1993).

Space does not permit me to develop the history of diversity in 20th-century families, but one of the backdrops to the current debate about family life is that for some years there was a seeming reduction in family diversity, especially after restrictions on immigration in the 1920s began to take effect. For the first two-thirds of the 20th century, there was a growing convergence in the age and order in which young people of all income groups and geographic regions left home, left school, found jobs, and got married. The Great Depression, World War II, and the 1950s contributed to the impression of many Americans, even those in "minority" groups, that family life would become more similar over the course of the 20th century. Most families were hurt by the Great Depression, although the impact differed greatly according to their previous economic status. Marriage and fertility rates fell during the 1930s for all segments of the population; desertion rates and domestic violence increased. World War II spurred a new patriotism that reached across class and racial lines. It also disrupted or reshuffled families from all social and ethnic groups, albeit in different ways, ranging from the removal of Japanese Americans to internment camps to the surge in divorce rates as GIs came home to wives and children they barely knew (American Social History Project 1992; Coontz 1992; Graff 1987; Mintz and Kellogg 1988).

At the end of the 1940s, for the first time in 60 years, the average age of marriage and parenthood fell, the proportion of marriages ending in divorce dropped, and the birth rate soared. The percentage of women remaining single reached a 100-year low. The percentage of children being raised by bread-winner fathers and homemaker mothers and staying in high school until graduation reached an all-time high. The impression that the United States was becoming more homogeneous was fostered by the intense patriotism and anticommunism of the period, by the decline in the percentage of foreign-born persons in the population, and by powerful new media portrayals of the "typical" American family (Coontz 1992; May 1988; Skolnick 1991).

We now know, of course, that the experience of many families was literally "whited out" in the 1950s. Problems, such as battering, alcoholism, and incest, were swept under the rug. So was the discrimination against African Americans and Hispanics, women, elders, gay men, lesbians, political dissidents, religious minorities, and the handicapped. Despite rising real wages, 30% of American children lived in poverty, a higher figure than today. African American married-couple families had a poverty rate of nearly 50%, and there was daily violence in the cities against African American migrants from the South who attempted to move into white neighborhoods or use public parks and swimming areas (Coontz 1992, 1997; May 1988).

Yet poverty rates fell during the 1950s as new jobs opened up for blue-collar workers and the government gave unprecedented subsidies for family formation, home ownership, and education of children. Forty percent of the young men who started families at the end of World War II were eligible for veterans' benefits. Combined with high rates of unionization, heavy corporate investment in manufacturing plants and equipment, and an explosion of housing construction and financing options, these subsidies gave young families a tremendous economic jump start, created predictable paths out of poverty, and led to unprecedented

increases in real wages. Sociologists heralded the end of the class society, and the popular media proclaimed that almost everyone was now "middle class." Even dissidents could feel that social and racial differences were decreasing. The heroic struggle of African Americans against Jim Crow laws, for example, finally compelled the federal government to begin to enforce the Supreme Court ruling against "separate but equal" doctrines.

Despite these perceptions, diversity continued to prevail in American families, and it became more visible during the 1960s, when the civil rights and women's liberation movements exposed the complex varieties of family experiences that lay behind the Ozzie and Harriet images of the time. In the 1970s, a new set of divisions and differences began to surface. The prolonged expansion of real wages and social benefits came to an end in the 1970s. By 1973, real wages were falling for young families in particular, and by the late 1970s, tax revolts and service cuts had eroded the effectiveness of the government's antipoverty programs that had proliferated in the late 1960s and brought child poverty to an all-time low by 1970. A new wave of immigrants began to arrive, but this time the majority were from Asian, Latin American, and Caribbean countries, rather than from Europe. By the 1980s, racial and ethnic diversity was higher than it had been since the early days of colonization, while it was obvious to most Americans that the reports of the death of class difference had been greatly exaggerated (Coontz 1992, 1997; Skolnick 1991).

Race relations were also no longer as clear-cut as in earlier times, despite the persistence of racism. They had evolved "from a strictly enforced caste system," in which there was unequivocal subordination of all blacks to whites to a more complex "system of power relations incorporating elements of social status, economics, and race" (Allen and Farley 1986:285). Although long-term residential segregation and discrimination in employment ensured that the deterioration of the country's inner cities would hit African Americans especially hard, resulting in deepening and concentrated poverty, some professional African Americans made impressive economic progress in the decades after the 1960s, leading to a shift in the coding of racism and often to the rediscovery of white ethnicity by Americans who were seeking to roll back affirmative action (Coontz, Parson, and Raley 1998; Rubin 1994; Wilson 1978, 1996).

In one important way, family life has changed in the same direction among all groups. In 1950 only a quarter of all wives were in the paid labor force, and just 16% of all children had mothers who worked outside the home. By 1991 more than 58% of all married women in the United States, and nearly two-thirds of all married women with children, were in the labor force, and 59% of children, including a majority of preschoolers, had mothers who worked outside the home. Women of color no longer have dramatically higher rates of labor force participation than white women, nor do lower-income and middle-income groups differ substantially in the labor force participation of wives and mothers. Growing numbers of women from all social and racial-ethnic groups now combine motherhood with paid employment, and fewer of them quit work for a prolonged period while their children are young (Spain and Bianchi 1996).

But the convergence in women's participation in the workforce has opened up new areas of divergence in family life. Struggles over the redivision of household labor have created new family conflicts and contributed to rising divorce rates, although they have also led to an increase in egalitarian marriages in which both spouses report they are highly satisfied. Women's new economic independence has combined with other social and cultural trends to produce unprecedented numbers of divorced and unwed parents, cohabitating couples (whether heterosexual, gay, or lesbian), and blended families. Yet each of these family types has different dynamics and consequences, depending on such factors as class, race, and ethnicity (Coontz 1997; Cowan, Cowan, and Kerig 1993; Gottfried and Gottfried 1994; Morales 1990). . . .

Implications of Historical Diversity for Contemporary Families

The amount of diversity in U.S. families today is probably no larger than in most periods of the past. But the ability of so many different family types to demand social recognition and support for their existence is truly unprecedented. Most of the contemporary debate over family forms and values is not occasioned by the *existence* of diversity but by its increasing *legitimation.*

Historical studies of family life can contribute two important points to these debates. First, they make it clear that families have always differed and that no one family form or arrangement can be understood or evaluated outside its particular socioeconomic context and relations with other families. Many different family forms and values have worked (or not worked) for various groups at different times. There is no reason to assume that family forms and practices that differ from those of the dominant ideal are necessarily destructive.

Second, however, history shows that families have always been fragile, vulnerable to rapid economic change, and needful of economic and emotional support from beyond the nuclear family. *All* families experience internal contradictions and conflicts, as well as external pressures and stresses. Celebrating diversity is no improvement over ignoring it unless we analyze the changing social conditions that affect families and figure out how to help every family draw on its potential resources and minimize its characteristic vulnerabilities.

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