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On the threshold of residential independence

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ON THE THRESHOLD OF RESIDENTIAL INDEPENDENCE

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It goes without saying that the precision of many of the results presented in this dissertation is affected by any and by all errors in the published census data, in my samples, in the different survey results and in my calculation. I will take full responsibility for any errors that may occur in the statistical analysis, in the factual presentation and in the textual interpretation.

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Introduction: The Historiographical and Sociological Context

The Debate

Before systematic historical research on the family began, various social science disciplines had generated their own theories about continuity and change in family life and family organization in America's past. The best known of all is the modernization theory which claims that in pre-industrial societies, the dominant household form was the extended family, often involving three co-residing generations. In such societies, as the theory further states, respect and veneration for the aged was the accepted norm. As industrialization accelerated, the social and technological changes accompanying it undermined the utility of the elderly within the family system by rendering their skill and knowledge obsolete. The result was that the extended family disintegrated into nuclear units which were supposedly more suitable for the geographical and economic mobility needed in an industrial society. The elderly, as a result, were often left without family support.[1]

Also related to this theory is the notion that upward mobility and long-term acculturation and assimilation into their adopted country among the foreign-born in time contributed to a decline of the functional aid system. Prior to migration, families in a pre-modern society were best known for extensive kinship support. All of these generalizations paint a picture of a nostalgic golden age for the elders. It was a time, probably typified by Philips Greven's study of the seventeenth century farming families in Andover, Massachusetts, where aging fathers perpetuated their control over landed family

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[1] Aliza Kolker and Paul I. Ahmed, *Aging*, (Elsevier Biomedical, 1982), p 23

property and thus control over their grown sons.[2] For some time, such nostalgia formed the foundation of what Steven Ruggles calls the "Old Myth" about the elderly in America and in the Western World in general.[3]

In an effort to challenge the various tenets of modernization theory, especially the two key assumptions with regard to the chronology of the deteriorating role of the elderly in the family and with regard to the changing domestic family structure from the extended to the nuclear, a generation of historians and sociologists has unearthed impressive and significant evidence. On the question of chronology of modern ageism, David H. Fisher, a historian, is the first to argue that the decline in social status of the aged occurred before "industrialization, urbanization and the growth of mass education..." According to Fisher, a "revolution in age relations" took place some time around 1770-1820.[4] W. Andrew Achenbaum's major history of old age in America has emphasized attitudinal change, a visible hostility toward the old around the turn of the twentieth century. Such a change, he argues. was independent of the "most important observable changes in their actual status" such as employment around 1900.[5] Carole Haber' research supports Achenbaum's chronology. She argues that in the late nineteenth century more and more doctors began to equate old age with sickness.[6] To this dissertation, however, the birth of modern

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[2] Philips Greven, "Family Structure in Seventeenth Century Andover, Massachusetts" in M. Gorden ed. *The American Family in Social Historical Perspective*, (St. Martin's Press, New York, 1973)

[3] Steven Ruggles, *Prolonged Connections: The Rise of the Extended Family in Nineteenth-century England and America*, (The University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), p 3

[4] David H. Fisher, *Growing Old in America*, (Oxford University Press, 1977), p 76-8

[5] W.A. Archenbaum, *Old Age in the New Land*, (Baltimore, 1978), p 86

[6] Carole Haber, *Beyong Sixty-five: The Dilemma of Old Age in America's Past*, (Cambridge University Press, 1983), p 47

ageism by itself is of little interest. What is of central relevance is the question of change in family structure and the appropriate period in which to measure such a change.

In the introduction of **Household and Family in Past Time**, Peter Laslett argues forcefully against the conclusion of modernization theorists that industrialization brought about a transformation of family structure from an extended form to a nuclear one. The various articles included in the book have also shown that the nuclear household has all along been the predominant form of family living arrangement in major Western European and North American countries in the past three hundred years. The conclusions of Laslett's book, it seems, dispel for good the previously held assumption that industrialization brought about a major transformation of family structure. "The myth of what William Goode termed 'the great family of Western nostalgia', namely, the co-residence of three generations in a single household, was laid to rest."[7] With other similar studies elsewhere, the thesis of "continuity" has become the received wisdom of the day, the staple of the field and the new stereotype, substituting for the old myth of "a great family of Western nostalgia".

Household and Family in Past Time includes a study by sociologist Edward Pryor, whose research on Rhode Island family structure echoes what Peter Laslett found in England since the sixteenth century. Pryor shows that there was no significant change in the basic family structural pattern during the entire period between 1875 and 1960. His findings indicate that in 1875, about 18 per cent of the households were extended in structure. By 1960, this rate had fallen only slightly to 15 per cent. This evidence, in

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[7] Tamara K. Hareven, "The History of the Family and the Complexity of Social Change", The American Historical Review, vol. 96, 1991, p 101

Pryor' view, demonstrates a "considerable stability" in family residential organization.[8] Taking his argument a step further, Pryor claims that between 1875 and 1960 there was no significant differences between the family living arrangement patterns among the American-born and those of the foreign-born. According to Pryor, "control for ethnicity" has failed.[9] In other words, ethnicity as an independent variable is not able to demonstrate any meaningful influence on the family structure among different ethnic groups. Although previous studies about ethnic families have documented the considerable importance of family solidarity and propinquity among many immigrant groups, Pryor concludes that "the structural adaptation of the ethnic family to the American residential pattern" is one noticeable exception.[10] As a result, the acclaimed strong filial bond of the ethnic families, in particular among Italian, Irish and French-Canadian families, did not translate into markedly different living arrangement patterns from those of American-born families in Rhode Island.

Impressive as these studies are, scholars' emphasis in the late 1960s and early 1970s on the continuity of nuclear household has serious limitations. In a recent survey of the field of family history and family sociology, Tamara K. Hareven has made a very insightful summary of these limitations.[11] First, almost universally, scholars of the "continuity" school have used the household as the unit of analysis, which tends to minimize the extent of family extension in a population. Second, "continuity" scholars obscure the internal dynamics and change within the nuclear household from a pre-

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8 Edward Pryor, "Rhode Island Family Structure", in Peter Laslett ed., *Household and Family in Past Time*, (Cambridge University Press, 1972), p 588-9

9 Ibid. p 581

10 Ibid.

11 Tamara K. Hareven, "The History of the Family", p 102-4

industrial society to a modern industrial nation. Take the American nuclear family for example, John Demos's study of colonial Plymouth, Massachusetts, reveals that nuclear families then were larger and often included non-relatives such as servants, apprentices, boarders and lodgers. "The average household size in Plymouth Colony seems to have been roughly six persons."[12] Furthermore, families in colonial Plymouth lived in smaller household units with little chance to differentiate between the various utilities of living space.[13] Today, roughly two hundred years later, in all these aspects: size, composition and space, there has been dramatic change in the American nuclear family. The average size is under 3 persons. In fact, ever since the 1790s, the proportion of small-family households containing 2-4 persons has increased continuously from one-third to more than two-thirds of all households.[14] In terms of composition, the contemporary nuclear family has also become much simpler and more private with more space for everyone.

Third, from the life course perspective, family residential organization changes several times during the course of the entire life of an individual. In a study of peasant households in Austria in 1763, Luts K. Berkner provides evidence that household structure changes several times over the course of the family lives, from the nuclear to the extended and back to the nuclear late at life.[15] Howard Chudacoff's study of newlyweds in late nineteenth-century Rhode Island also demonstrates that the majority of the

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[12] John Demos, "Demography and Psychology in the Historical Study of Family-life: a personal report", in Peter Laslett ed., *Household and Family in Past Time*, p 562

[13] Ibid. p 562-3

[14] Frances E. Kobrin, "The Fall in Household Size and the Rise of the Primary Individual in the United States", Demography, vol. 13, 1976, p 127-138

[15] Luts K. Berkner, "The Stem Family and the Development Cycle of the Peasant Household: An Eighteenth-century Austrian Example", The American Historical Review, vol. 77, 1972, p 398-418

newlyweds lived, a century ago, in some kind of expanded or extended situation. Chudacoff concludes that "the first year of marriage was not a time of privacy."[16] E. A. Hammel's study of the Zadruga, an ethnic group in Serbia, cautions that the family of Zadruga is not an unchanging organization but a process. "The separation of a process into snapshots of its behavior leads only to misinterpretation".[17] This is a stinging criticism of the "continuity" school of scholars whose snapshots of family structure have missed the adaptive and changing nature of the family.

On top of all this, specifically in reference to the evolution of the American family from the late-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, the period covered by Pryor's research on Rhode Island, the "continuity" thesis misses the importance of demographic change and its influence on family structure. In particular, there has been significant shift in age structure in the total population which has escaped the attention of the "continuity" scholars. Because of the gravity of this problem, some detailed discussion is warranted.

In comparison with the current statistics, we can confidently say that in the second half of the nineteenth century, the United States was still a country experiencing relatively high fertility and high mortality, particularly at the end of old age. Although American fertility was on a slow decline throughout the nineteenth century, on average the ever-

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[16] Howard Chudacoff, "Newlyweds and Family Extension: The First Stage of the Family Cycle in Providence, Rhode Island, 1864-1865 and 1879-1880", in Hareven and Vinovskis ed., *Family and Population in Nineteenth-century America*, (Princeton University Press, 1978), p 197-8

[17] E.A. Hammel, "The Zadruga as Process", in Laslett ed., *Household and Family in Past Time*, p 370

married women during the period of 1850-1875 had borne 5.5 children.[18] As late as 1917, the nation's total fertility rate was still around 3,333 per 1,000 women.[19] According to historical statistics, around 1880 in Massachusetts, the average life expectancy for males was 41.7 years and for females was 43.5. By 1900, the average life expectancy at birth for white United States males increased to 48.2 years and 51.1 years for white females.[20] It is therefore not surprising that as late as 1895, the Rhode Island State Census defined age sixty as the legal marker for dependency, a yardstick well beyond the average life expectancy at birth for white Americans.[21] If, however, one could survive to age sixty, there were still, on average, about fifteen years to live for white Americans of both sexes.[22]

With high fertility, high mortality at the end of old age and on average a shorter life expectancy at birth, the age structure of the total population in the U.S. could perhaps be best described as a sharply-pointed pyramid. The fact is that in the late nineteenth century, the percentage of the elderly in total population was far too inadequate to sustain widespread extended families, even if all elders wished to live in such families. In an example to highlight the small number of elderly in the general population, Daniel Smith shows that in 1900 "only 17.2% of the population under age sixty-five would live with a

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18 Daniel S. Smith, "Life Course, Norms, and the Family System of Older Americans in 1900", Journal of Family History, vol. 4, 1979, p 294

19 Marvin Sussman and Suzanne Steinmets ed., *Handbook of Marriage and the Family*, (Plenum Press, 1987), p 13

20 *Historical Statistics of the United States: colonial times to 1970*, part I, series B 116-125, p 56

21 Henry E. Tiepke, *Census of Rhode Island: 1895*, (E.L. Freeman & Sons, State Printers, 1898), p XI-XIV

22 Ibid.

person aged sixty-five and over", assuming that all the elderly aged sixty-five and over wanted family extension and got it.[23] To put it differently, "if every American in 1900 lived with a non-institutionalized person over sixty-four, then the mean household size for the country would be 30.1 persons."[24]

The youth of the population is particularly obvious among the foreign-born. In this aspect, Pryor's decision to focus on the period from 1875 to 1960 is particularly unfortunate for studying change in family living arrangements involving the foreign-born. Most of the foreign-born who came to the United States in their prime years during the first immigration waves of mid-nineteenth century were too young to form multi-generational households in 1875. On the other hand, those who came in their twenties and thirties during the second immigration wave around the turn of the century had begun to die off by 1960. To make matters worse, assuming that ethnic culture favored family extension, the institution of the new immigration laws in the 1920s by the United States government virtually cut off the supply of kin for possible family extension and support for the aged. For the foreign-born, therefore, the problem in 1875 was the insignificant number of older people to allow widespread multi-generational family formation. By 1960, the problem for the immigrant families was most likely a shortage of available relatives to share the households with. If Pryor had studied the same problem at different dates, for example between 1900 and 1950 as this research does, the results could have been quite different. Many of those who came in the mid-nineteenth century became grandparents around 1900. On the other hand, the number of foreign-born elderly increased dramatically over the first fifty years of the twentieth century and peaked around 1950.

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[23] Daniel S. Smith, "Life Course", p 295

[24] Ibid.

Broadly speaking, the first sixty years of the twentieth century witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of older Americans in proportion to total population, what scholars called the "beginning of the graying of America." If conditions and willingness for family extension had remained constant over the period from 1900 to 1960, we should have seen a dramatic increase in the extent of family extendedness among all households. For example, the actual proportion of the elderly over sixty-five in the total population in the city of Providence more than doubled in the first half of the twentieth century, from 4.2 per cent to 9.8 per cent.[25] If desires for family extension had remained constant over the fifty years, an increase of more than 100 per cent in family extension would have to have taken place simply because there were more elderly in the total population. If, however, the extent of household extension remained roughly stable over the period, it should, therefore, indicate an actual fall in total household extension. As Frances Kobrin puts it, "a sharp rise in non-nuclear families would have to have occurred in order to absorb the increases in eligibles caused by the shift in population structure."[26] Although the expected rise in family extension rate did take place, it never happened in proportion to the increase in the number of the elderly either in Rhode Island or in the United States as a whole. This was the key change that occurred in the first half of the twentieth century. The "continuity" school of scholars has failed to read this change in the family structure as a result of a neglect of the age structure in the population over the years.

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25 William Merriam, *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900*, Vol.I Population; *Census of Population: 1950*, Vol. II Characteristics of the Population, part 39, Rhode Island.

26 Frances E. Kobrin, "The Fall in Household Size", p 136

It is one thing to say that the majority of families in Western European and North American nations has always been predominantly nuclear in nature, it is quite another to assert that there has been "no change," but "continuity" and "stability", in family structural organization over a broad sweep of historical time. The "continuity" scholars are, therefore, correct with the former conclusion but are quite off the mark with the latter assertion. Given the demographic constraints in Rhode Island (I am referring specifically to the availability of the elderly for family extension), not only was Pryor's 18 per cent family extension figure not low in 1875, it could be construed as fairly high, especially for the foreign-born immigrants if we take into account of their "unnatural" age structure. On the other hand, the 15 per cent family extension rate for 1960 was fairly low in light of the significant demographic change underway, namely the significant aging of the population and the increase in the number of the elderly.

With the above discussion, I would argue that the seeming continuity in household extension rate, between 18 per cent in 1875 and 15 per cent in 1960 in Rhode Island shown by Pryor, obscures considerably a real, dramatic change within the family. Particularly, given the demographic constraints that the foreign-born immigrants faced, his conclusion of no difference between the American-born and the foreign-born in residential organization could therefore be premature. These problems and questions with the older interpretation justify a renewed effort in the study of family structure over time. Since the need for family extension arises primarily at the old age, this study focuses on the family structure of those over the age of sixty between 1900 and 1950. This is where this dissertation fits in the larger historiographical and sociological context of family study.

The Objective