

Editorial Foreword

Acts of Kinship. The intimate ties and personal choices of family life form a delicate node at which biography intersects culture and social structure, and some of the most influential modern scholarship has explored new ways for investigating this private realm. To do so historically and on a scale that permits generalization remains difficult nevertheless, and each of the articles in this group adopts a somewhat different approach to the problem. Caroline Brettell focuses on the classic connection between family and property (see Goody in *CSSH*, 15:1), using Portuguese notarial records to reveal the varied strategies and the shifting definitions of the family itself that nineteenth-century peasants employed as they sought to assure their security in old age while recognizing the special needs of others (especially unmarried daughters or nieces) and of particular properties (compare Hammel and Laslett, 16:1; Plakans, 17:1; Gibbon and Curtin, 20:3; Varley, 25:2; Breen, 26:2). The calculated flexibility of these arrangements argues powerfully against facile assumptions about peasant traditionalism, and Brettell's discussion benefits from its connection to an important body of theory. A methodological problem remains, however—one that often arises from microhistorical research. If, as Brettell confirms, whole cultures cannot be described by single patterns of inheritance and dowry, then how does analysis add up to more than the self-defeating assertion that each valley or each family is different? Her solution, which has broad implications, lies in comparison; but she compares not so much the contractual terms of inheritance as the transactions that led to them.

Lillian Li uses the tragedy of famine (much as Brettell uses the anticipation of old age) to reveal what might otherwise be hidden. In responding to the diaster of a flood, Chinese officials expressed (and sought to impose) a whole set of cultural values (contrast Duara, 29:1). Having shown how quickly culture came into play, Li then suggests that catastrophe gave added weight to other popular attitudes—toward family, age, and gender—and secret practices: A stark lacuna in the demographic data delineates the possibility of female infanticide (see Wilson, 30:4). Fertility rates are Albion Urdank's dependent variable, to which he applies a highly elaborated quantitative analysis of the complicated question of family size in the early years of industrialization. As he notes, historians have emphasized economic factors, especially the putting-out system and work outside the home, and their effect on age at marriage to explain regional variations in fertility. Now Urdank proposes that the emotional religion of evangelicals may also have been a factor. The Reverend Malthus would undoubtedly have admired the mathematics in this analysis, but one wonders what he would have made of Urdank's conclusions about a group of Gloucestershire Baptists.

Searching for the Middle Class. Marxism has provided the impetus for a great deal of the most systematic and serious historical comparison, much of it about bourgeois revolution (see Hoselitz, 6:2, and Ashcraft, 26:4, on Marxism; Zagorin, Hermassi, Skocpol, all in 18:2, on revolution). Although that examination often revealed that bourgeois and revolution were each disputed terms, and critical arguments sometimes simply faded into factionalism, the discussion has also played a part, as Germaine Hoston notes, in lively reassessments of Russian and more recently of French and German history. Not so well known in Europe and the United States, the arguments among Japanese Marxists as to whether the Meiji Restoration (see Wilson, 25:3) was a bourgeois revolution have special importance for anyone interested in historical comparison. They represent an extraordinarily determined attempt to extend a sometimes confusing vision of European history to the history of Japan. They provide a notable example of the influence of the Comintern, of the intellectual power of Marxism, and of the conceptual statement that can result from comparisons mechanically applied. And they are, as Hoston's examination shows, an important element in Japanese historiography (note Totten, 2:3; Smith, 26:4), one that offers a valuable perspective for assessing the problems of bourgeois revolution (issues addressed by Perlmutter and Halpern in their discussions of the middle class in Egypt, 10:1; 11:1; 12:1).

The Poetry of Everyday Life. Many have sought to study society from below and to tell the stories of ordinary people, but few have listened to those stories so well as Candace Slater. Padre Cicéro's followers recount events that fit the colorful images of Brazil found in novels and demonstrate the creative vitality of religion in modern South America (see Foley, 32:3; Levine, 32:4; Finkler, 25:2; Shapiro, 23:1; Sanford, 16:4). But Slater adds a surprise, for she finds in these tales of intervening spirits and apparitions not some rustic overlay but rather a direct and fresh response to the uncertainties of urban life, a form of accommodation to a new and difficult world (compare the regional associations of immigrants, Skeldon, 19:4; Jongkind, 16:4; Hazareesingh, 8:2; Freedman, 3:1). Lisa Lieberman also studies the stories people tell, in this case about their own lives in notes they wrote when they had decided that the story should end. She studies attitudes toward suicide during the age of romanticism, the newspaper, and the popular novel, using a painful topic to reveal the interpenetration of high and popular culture in nineteenth-century France (note Kselman, 30:2; Tannenbaum, 23:3; Sussman, 19:3). Perhaps there is also something significant in the fact that a century after Durkheim, suicide should be treated as a marker of romantic sensibility rather than the objective social indicator he conceived it to be.