
THE RISE AND FALL OF THE BOURGEOIS FAMILY,
AS TOLD BY LAWRENCE STONE AND CHRISTOPHER LASCH

Charles Tilly and Louise A. Tilly

University of Michigan

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Since the time of the two Fredericks -- Engels and Le Play -- the history of the family has served as a vehicle for social criticism. That is as it should be: the way we relate our current family lives to our understanding of the past defines who we are, and who we ought to be. The analysis may unfold as Art: as an effort to recreate the experiences of living in different sorts of families. It may proceed as Science: as an attempt to trace reliably what actually changed, and why. Or it may take the form of Politics: the drive to establish who was responsible for changes in the family, and whose interests those changes served. For Christopher Lasch, the history of the family is mainly Politics, with a dab of Art. Science -- or, as he thinks of it, pseudoscience -- is the enemy. Lawrence Stone writes his history chiefly as Art, although he is not averse to the trappings of Science when they serve his purpose.

In assigning a secondary role, or none at all, to the scrutiny of reliable evidence, Lasch and Stone are in tune with the latest trends of family history. For a decade or so, beginning in the 1960s, North American and European historians of the family turned hopefully to Science in the guises of demographic analysis, formal treatments of kinship, and quantitative descriptions of household economic activity. Disenchantment came fast, as they learned that the available social science helped pin down what actually changed and what remained the same, but failed to provide compelling explanations of the changes. In the last few years, historians of the family have been turning away from the straightforward demographic and materialist determinisms of the 1960s toward a kind of idealism, in which new bodies of thought or general shifts in outlook explain transformations of family life. Demography and economics still provide significant shares of the evidence that family life really changed, but the spread of new ideas becomes the presumed cause of changes.

Christopher Lasch and Lawrence Stone have played important parts in

the promotion of the new idealism. Despite many differences in aim, style and argument, Lasch and Stone agree on some crucial postulates:

1. that every society has a single dominant family life which expresses its dominant beliefs and is best exemplified by its ruling classes;
2. that changes in family life occur first in the ruling classes, then filter down from "top" to "bottom";
3. that changes in attitudes toward marriage, sex and family precede and cause the alterations in family life;
4. that descriptions and prescriptions of family life (as opposed, for example, to such family by-products as registers of births, marriages and deaths) constitute the best evidence of what actually went on;
5. that the bourgeois nuclear family, with its mild patriarchy, its sentimentality, and its desire for privacy, is the fullest expression of liberal-capitalist development.

All these premises break with the populist, Science-seeking family history which grew up in the early 1960s, and which dominated academic research on the subject for almost a decade. The books by Lasch and Stone belong to the important recent reaction against Science and against populism in social history as a whole.

From their common ground, Lasch and Stone head off in quite different directions: Lasch toward a dyspeptic denunciation of the self-appointed experts and prophets who are, he thinks, spoiling the satisfactions of the modern family, Stone toward a long, complex chronicle of three centuries of family history, from the Open Lineage of the Renaissance to the Restricted Patriarchal Nuclear Family of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to the Closed Domesticated Nuclear family which, in his view, emerged in the seventeenth century and, in altered form, is still with us today. Lasch, that is, takes the direct route to social criticism, while Stone goes at it indirectly, via an historical portrait in which the modern family -- "liberal rather than patriarchal in the distribution of power; bonded by affection between spouses rather than

economic interest; deeply concerned with and attached to children; and frank in its expression of sexuality," according to the dust-jacket copy -- adds historical inevitability to its other obvious attractions.

As critics, Lasch and Stone interpret the contemporary family in precisely opposite ways. To Stone, the modern family embodies "four key features . . . : intensified affective bonding of the nuclear core at the expense of neighbors and kin; a strong sense of individual autonomy and the right to personal freedom in the pursuit of happiness; a weakening of the association of sexual pleasure with sin and guilt; and a growing desire for physical privacy" (p. 8). He is writing, then, a history of liberation: the "rise of affective individualism" from 1500, through a period of zigzag change in the seventeenth century, to its establishment among the elite of eighteenth-century England, past the setbacks of Victorian patriarchy, to its conquest of English life as a whole.

To Lasch, in contrast, the reality of the contemporary family appears most clearly in "the schizophrenic family . . . which in many ways appears to represent an exaggerated version of the 'normal' family", where "'Momism' -- the psychological dominance of the mother in the modern middle-class family -- . . . arises not because the father is always 'absent' at his work . . . but because he is weak and acquiescent at home. The other members of the family defer to her . . . because arbitrary, unpredictable and contradictory actions are often intimidating and because a refusal to examine their meaning is the easiest way to keep a precarious peace" (p. 156). The family, Lasch says, has crumbled as a unit for affection and child-rearing. His evidence? The standard pop-magazine list: the divorce rate, youth rebellion, drug addiction, impotence.

Lasch's task, then, is to find out why "family life [has] become so painful, marriage so fragile, relations between parents and children so full of hostility and recrimination" (p. xvi).

Lasch's Haven in a Heartless World is a pell-mell polemic. Lasch delights in throwing up half a bridge over a swift-moving stream, then leaping nimbly to the opposite shore while his reader, plodding close behind, tumbles into the murky waters to sink or swim on his own. Not for Lasch the prudent virtues of completed arguments and systematic evidence. His introduction and table of contents declare that the book will couple a critical history of twentieth-century thought concerning the family with documentation of the "shattering impact" on the family of the social policy resulting from that thought. After appropriating the means of production, Lasch tells us, capitalism is now seizing the means of reproduction, the family. While the family used to heal the hurts inflicted by capitalism's cruel public life, now even that last refuge is disappearing. The eager agents of the invasion are the self-appointed prophets and technicians who assume the right to intervene in troubled families and to instruct them in the ways of creative argument, orgasm and child care.

That could be so. But what does Lasch offer in evidence? Neither information about actual trends in family life, nor documentation of the ways, in which experts interfere, nor yet any proof that today's specialists have a larger impact on workaday experience than the priests and witches they have displaced. In fact, not a single real family appears in the entire book. Instead, Lasch offers us an angry review of the last few decades' writings about the family. The book develops as a roughly chronological critique: the creation of an empirical sociology of the family in the twenties and thirties, the challenges to orthodoxy then posed by Carle Zimmerman and Willard Waller, analyses of culture and personality in the forties, psychiatric

formulations of the forties and fifties, the theories of Talcott Parsons and his collaborators, the fads and controversies of the sixties and seventies. As a first exposure to the cant, obscurantism and fragility of sociological writing on the family, Lasch's tendentious treatment is stimulating and informative. But it is nothing like a history of the family.

Still, the central argument is beguiling: in an extension of the process by which capitalists collectivized production and technical knowledge, specialists have gone a long way toward assuming control over private life as well. In the name of individual and collective health, "doctors, psychiatrists, teachers, child guidance experts, officers of the juvenile courts" and others have not only undermined the integrity of the family, but also botched their therapeutic efforts. "Fear of maternal abandonment," Lasch writes, "underlies the frantic search for psychic survival, which has replaced the traditional virtues of work, thrift, and achievement as the essence of the bourgeois ethic" (p. 165). The book contains no evidence that such a change has actually occurred -- only confirmation that many writers say so.

Has it? One part of Lasch's analysis is surely correct: the number and variety of specialists in mending supposedly defective individuals and families has grown dramatically in the last half-century, and Americans have turned increasingly to secular counselors for aid with their private sorrows. Governments have licensed the new professionals and installed them in public bureaucracies. The specialists have justified their existence by pumping out gloomy statistics and lugubrious prognoses. But are the sorrows themselves more prevalent, and the ministrations of the specialists more damaging, than they used to be? We doubt it. More likely the pains of families have changed in character -- fewer wives worn out, for instance, by the struggle for physical survival, more mothers bewildered by the choices open to their children -- while the family-savers have simply taken on the ineffectual

roles of the priests and witches who preceded them. Lasch's justified attacks on the nonsense American intellectuals write about family crises have little or nothing to do with the everyday experience of living in families.

Lasch boldly leaps the gap from his literary analysis to the realities of family life by assumption and assertion: that practitioners did what theorists preached, that families are, in fact, disintegrating as never before, that in one way or another the preaching and the practice caused the disintegration. The method of argument sadly betrays Lasch's initial declaration: ". . . the contemporary family is the product of human agency, not of abstract social 'forces' . . . Men make their own history, although they make it, to be sure, under conditions not of their choosing, and sometimes with results the opposite of the results intended" (pp. xiv, xv). The one thing we do not find in this book is men -- or women -- making their own history.

"Bourgeois domesticity did not simply evolve," Lasch argues in a characteristic passage. "It was imposed on society by the forces of organized virtue, led by feminists, temperance advocates, educational reformers, liberal ministers, penologists, doctors and bureaucrats" (p. 169). These nineteenth-century middle-class foreshadowed the sociologists, psychologists, social workers, therapists and other experts who, in the twentieth century, would transmute bourgeois domesticity into a madhouse for the self-indulgent. Somewhere in that nineteenth century, Lasch intimates, passed a fleeting chance for a wholesome family life, in which fathers had authority, mothers provided love, and children reached maturity by working through their oedipal crises within the household. The specialists botched that chance. In any case, the chance was not very likely, for "private property and the nuclear family, which in the nineteenth century provided new supports for political freedom and personal autonomy, contained within themselves elements fatal to their own existence" (p. 168).

The same sense of the inevitability of decline appears in Lasch's interpretation of feminism. It is, he argues, an outgrowth of women's education, made women dissatisfied with their overqualification for their typical employments, motherhood and housewifery: "Indeed, the educated housewife turned out to be the supreme example and victim of overtraining, and her growing resentment of her lowly status -- so sharply at odds not only with her expectations but with the status to which academic training entitled her -- helped to generate a full-scale revival of feminism at the end of the sixties" (p. 135). Yet feminism is an extension of the same impulse for "political freedom and personal autonomy" that Lasch regards as being one of the nineteenth century's few benefits. What's sauce for the bourgeois gender is apparently poison for the poor goose, his wife. The sex and class biases of Lasch's arguments are strong, the conservative implications ominous.

Lawrence Stone believes that the central question of modern history is the explanation of "massive shifts in world views and value systems, and how they expressed themselves in changes in the ways members of the family related to each other, in terms of legal arrangements, structure, custom, power, affect and sex" (p. 3). The quest puts him in the company of Max Weber, Joseph Burckhardt and R.H. Tawney, not to mention innumerable latter-day apologists of Modernization. After a thoughtful methodological introduction and a review of the overall demographic trends, Stone lays out the bulk of his book as portraits of three major family types, distinct in character but overlapping in time: the Open Lineage Family (1450-1630); the Restricted Patriarchal Nuclear Family (1550-1700); the Closed Domesticated Nuclear Family (1640-1800). Then come a long, separate section on sex and a forty-page conclusion.

Despite qualifications and protestations to the contrary, the book's binding theme is a success story: the rise of affective individualism. Stone's frequent comparisons with France, for example, are in terms of

French backwardness. He treats the Victorian period as a reversal of the main trend. And the use of the word "even" in phrases such as "even at this early date . . ." (452) or "even in those days of the companionate marriage" (336) reveals a scheme that has taken over from the evidence.

Not that Stone is stingy with evidence. Epitaphs, family portraits, popular verse, private letters, testaments, novels, autobiographies, proverbs, family ceremonies and demographic statistics sweep through his 800 pages like leaves through a storm-sewer. He combines aggregate demographic data (most often concerning the peerage or the gentry, but sometimes dealing with a well-studied village or with England as a whole) with selected examples from 33 diaries, 74 autobiographies, 31 collections of correspondence and 41 biographies of individuals or families. He builds from these sources a bold synthesis of changes in attitudes and values within "the English family" from 1500 to 1800. The stories are engaging, the details often telling, the illustrations rich, the overall impression one of being swept along by a rush-hour crowd; one must deliberately clamber up onto a fence to see what is going by.

On cooler examination, the evidence does not sustain the argument. The demographic analysis describes either the entire English population or a segment of the elite; it connects poorly with the demographic experience and family histories of the individuals whose lives form the bulk of the evidence. Stone's method for determining attitudes is to study the statements of the literate elite. Since a small number of families -- the Byrds, Josselins, D'Ewes, Verneys, Boswells, Pepys, Thrales, Blundells and a few others -- recur over and over, the absence of systematic information on their fertility, mortality, marriages and other vital matters is disconcerting.

Even within these limits, some peculiarities in Stone's use of evidence are obvious. Samuel Johnson's patroness Mrs. Thrale is "not at all typical,"

Stone tells us, for she lived a loveless marriage during the full flower of affective individualism and companionate marriage. Yet she is one of the book's most-cited cases. Boswell -- whose liaisons and infatuations are inventoried relentlessly -- had both an affectionate marriage and an athletic extramarital career, which makes him an exception to all Stone's trends. Yet he, too, appears again and again. Quite a comedown for an author who began his earlier, magisterial Crisis of an Aristocracy with the dictum that "Statistical measurement is the only means of extracting a coherent pattern from the chaos of personal behaviour and of discovering which is a typical specimen and which a sport. Failure to apply such controls has led to much wild and implausible generalization about social phenomena, based upon a handful of striking or well-documented examples." Exactly what happens in The Family, Sex and Marriage: a few self-selected families, who might possibly have served for a history of the aristocracy and the gentry, became the basis of generalizations about the other 95 percent of the population -- peasants, farmers, artisans and proletarians -- as well.

Here is how Stone dismisses roughly half the English population:

Among the mass of the very poor . . . the common behavior of many parents toward their children was often indifferent, cruel, erratic and unpredictable. It is not clear whether the reason was cultural, a result of deprivation of any property stake in society and displacement far from home and kin, or whether it was economic, in the sense that more humane feelings and a greater sense of sustained concern were luxuries which they could barely afford. The culture of poverty did not encourage foresight or providence, since the lives of those on the economic margin of existence were too much at the mercy of

sheer chance -- a bad harvest, unemployment or sickness -- to justify rational calculation for the future. They were therefore improvident in begetting children, with no thought of how they were to be nursed and fed, and improvident and careless in disposing of them once they had arrived; easy come, easy go (p. 470).

One can hear Parson Malthus clucking his tongue about the improvidence of the poor! This contemptuous equation of poverty with pathology has been common enough among bourgeois observers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But it flies in the face of the findings of such careful demographic historians as Keith Wrightson and David Levine; they show us poor people adjusting their marriages and childbearing to every shift in their welfare, and pooling their meager resources to keep the family enterprise going. Ultimately Stone's dismissal of the poor undermines his main argument; it exempts such a large part of the population as to raise doubts whether the "massive shifts in world views and value systems" penetrated beyond the comfortable world of the literate elite.

In asking that they take their social history seriously, we demand a lot of Stone and Lasch. Over the large populations and time spans they deal with, the evidence on behavior is fragmentary, the evidence on attitudes thin and elusive. Yet they have a practical choice. Enough careful research on the domestic, demographic and work experiences of ordinary people accumulated during the temporary popularity of social-scientific history to make possible a reasoned comparison of regions, classes and periods. With a large effort, it is feasible to examine what actually happened to families as they proletarianized, moved to cities, involved themselves in marketing, accumulated capital or came under the control of an expanding state. That

examination will surely diminish the roles of Value Systems and Experts, increase the importance of changing relations of production, contradict the notion that family changes generally spread from the literate elite, and reveal much more short-term coping by ordinary families than Lasch and Stone allow. If they find that massive task unattractive, our authors have only to label their work for what it is: a blend of social criticism with elite literary history. Historians of the family may properly label their work as Science, Art or Politics, or as a blend of the three. The fateful error is to take the lives and words of the dominant classes to describe the everyday experiences of the population as a whole.

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To Lasch, in contrast, the reality of the contemporary family appears most clearly in "the schizophrenic family . . . which in many ways appears to represent an exaggerated version of the 'normal' family", where "'Momism' -- the psychological dominance of the mother in the modern middle-class family -- . . . arises not because the father is always 'absent' at his work . . . but because he is weak and acquiescent at home. The other members of the family defer to her . . . because arbitrary, unpredictable and contradictory actions are often intimidating and because a refusal to examine their meaning is the easiest way to keep a precarious peace" (p. 156). The family, Lasch says, has crumbled as a unit for affection and child-rearing. His evidence? The standard pop-magazine list: the divorce rate, youth rebellion, drug addiction, impotence.

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Lawrence Stone believes that the central question of modern history is the explanation of "massive shifts in world views and value systems, and how they expressed themselves in changes in the ways members of the family related to each other, in terms of legal arrangements, structure, custom, power, affect and sex" (p. 3). The quest puts him in the company of Max Weber, Joseph Burkhardt and R.H. Tawney, not to mention innumerable latter-day apologists of Modernization. After a thoughtful methodological introduction and a review of the overall demographic trends, Stone lays out the bulk of his book as portraits of three major family types, distinct in character but overlapping in time: the Open Lineage Family (1450-1630); the Restricted Patriarchal Nuclear Family (1550-1700); the Closed Domesticated Nuclear Family (1640-1800). Then come a long, separate section on sex and a forty-page conclusion.

Despite qualifications and protestations to the contrary, the book's binding theme is a success story: the rise of affective individualism. Stone's frequent comparisons with France, for example, are in terms of

French backwardness. He treats the Victorian period as a reversal of the main trend. And the use of the word "even" in phrases such as "even at this early date . . ." (452) or "even in those days of the companionate marriage" (336) reveals a scheme that has taken over from the evidence.

Not that Stone is stingy with evidence. Epitaphs, family portraits, popular verse, private letters, testaments, novels, autobiographies, proverbs, family ceremonies and demographic statistics sweep through his 800 pages like leaves through a storm-sewer. He combines aggregate demographic data (most often concerning the peerage or the gentry, but sometimes dealing with a well-studied village or with England as a whole) with selected examples from 33 diaries, 74 autobiographies, 31 collections of correspondence and 41 biographies of individuals or families. He builds from these sources a bold synthesis of changes in attitudes and values within "the English family" from 1500 to 1800. The stories are engaging, the details often telling, the illustrations rich, the overall impression one of being swept along by a rush-hour crowd; one must deliberately clamber up onto a fence to see what is going by.

On cooler examination, the evidence does not sustain the argument. The demographic analysis describes either the entire English population or a segment of the elite; it connects poorly with the demographic experience and family histories of the individuals whose lives form the bulk of the evidence. Stone's method for determining attitudes is to study the statements of the literate elite. Since a small number of families -- the Byrds, Josselins, D'Ewes, Verneys, Boswells, Pepys, Thrales, Blundells and a few others -- recur over and over, the absence of systematic information on their fertility, mortality, marriages and other vital matters is disconcerting.

Even within these limits, some peculiarities in Stone's use of evidence are obvious. Samuel Johnson's patroness Mrs. Thrale is "not at all typical,"

Stone tells us, for she lived a loveless marriage during the full flower of affective individualism and companionate marriage. Yet she is one of the book's most-cited cases. Boswell -- whose liaisons and infections are inventoried relentlessly -- had both an affectionate marriage and an athletic extramarital career, which makes him an exception to all Stone's trends. Yet he, too, appears again and again. Quite a comedown for an author who began his earlier, magisterial Crisis of an Aristocracy with the dictum that "Statistical measurement is the only means of extracting a coherent pattern from the chaos of personal behaviour and of discovering which is a typical specimen and which a sport. Failure to apply such controls has led to much wild and implausible generalization about social phenomena, based upon a handful of striking or well-documented examples." Exactly what happens in The Family, Sex and Marriage: a few self-selected families, who might possibly have served for a history of the aristocracy and the gentry, became the basis of generalizations about the other 95 percent of the population -- peasants, farmers, artisans and proletarians -- as well.

Here is how Stone dismisses roughly half the English population:

Among the mass of the very poor . . . the common behavior of many parents toward their children was often indifferent, cruel, erratic and unpredictable. It is not clear whether the reason was cultural, a result of deprivation of any property stake in society and displacement far from home and kin, or whether it was economic, in the sense that more humane feelings and a greater sense of sustained concern were luxuries which they could rarely afford. The culture of poverty did not encourage foresight or providence, since the lives of those on the economic margin of existence were too much at the mercy of

sheer chance -- a bad harvest, unemployment or sickness -- to justify rational calculation for the future. They were therefore improvident in begetting children, with no thought of how they were to be nursed and fed, and improvident and careless in disposing of them once they had arrived; easy come, easy go (p. 470).

One can hear Parson Malthus clucking his tongue about the improvidence of the poor! This contemptuous equation of poverty with pathology has been common enough among bourgeois observers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But it flies in the face of the findings of such careful demographic historians as Keith Wrightson and David Levine; they show us poor people adjusting their marriages and childbearing to every shift in their welfare, and pooling their meager resources to keep the family enterprise going. Ultimately Stone's dismissal of the poor undermines his main argument; it exempts such a large part of the population as to raise doubts whether the "massive shifts in world views and value systems" penetrated beyond the comfortable world of the literate elite.

In asking that they take their social history seriously, we demand a lot of Stone and Lasch. Over the large populations and time spans they deal with, the evidence on behavior is fragmentary, the evidence on attitudes thin and elusive. Yet they have a practical choice. Enough careful research on the domestic, demographic and work experiences of ordinary people accumulated during the temporary popularity of social-scientific history to make possible a reasoned comparison of regions, classes and periods. With a large effort, it is feasible to examine what actually happened to families as they proletarianized, moved to cities, involved themselves in marketing, accumulated capital or came under the control of an expanding state. That

examination will surely diminish the roles of Value Systems and Experts, increase the importance of changing relations of production, contradict the notion that family changes generally spread from the literate elite, and reveal much more short-term coping by ordinary families than Lasch and Stone allow. If they find that massive task unattractive, our authors have only to label their work for what it is: a blend of social criticism with elite literary history. Historians of the family may properly label their work as Science, Art or Politics, or as a blend of the three. The fateful error is to take the lives and words of the dominant classes to describe the everyday experiences of the population as a whole.

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