

detached from the social, or that the one has been unduly prioritized over the other. This being so, it seems appropriate to conclude simply by reiterating that *Sexuality Repositioned* includes many excellent and highly-informative essays, and deserves for this reason—regardless of questions about its internal organization—to be widely read.

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*Reading History Sideways: The Fallacy and Enduring Impact of the Developmental Paradigm on Family Life*, Arland Thornton, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, pp 312

One should never judge a book by its cover. Having agreed to review the book on the strength of its unusual title, I was somewhat daunted when I discovered its sub-title, fully expecting to be faced with pages of jargon-laden and impenetrable prose. Fortunately for readers, the intriguing title is a better guide to the style of the book than the tortured sub-title.

This is a history of ideas rather than of events. It is impossible to do justice to the wide-ranging nature of this book in a short review, but the key points of Thornton's arguments can be fairly briefly stated. The 'developmental paradigm' of the sub-title assumes that all societies follow the same path of development, but at different speeds. A corollary of this assumption, according to Thornton, is the technique of 'reading history sideways'—drawing inferences about the distant and unknown past of a developed country by looking at the known present or recent past of a less developed country (the very terminology of 'developed' and 'less developed', Thornton contends, being permeated by the developmental paradigm). Thornton himself makes it clear that he does not endorse either the idea of the developmental paradigm or the technique of reading history sideways: his task is to trace their influence on scholarship past and present. He shows how they were combined to construct the myth of a great transformation in family life in North-west Europe prior to the eighteenth century—from a society organized around families to one based on the individual; from early to late marriage; from large households to the nuclear family; from authoritarian families to the affective family. That this was in many respects a myth was established by new research by demographic and economic historians in the second part of the twentieth century, as Thornton goes on to explain.

These arguments occupy the first part of the book. Thornton's suggestion that earlier generations of scholars engaged in the practice of 'reading history sideways' appears to be plausible, but his argument

would have been strengthened by the inclusion of more examples of the technique for the assistance of readers not familiar with the writings of eighteenth-century scholars such as Millar and Alexander. The footnotes offer little assistance to readers who wish to follow up the points made: except for the relatively rare direct quotations, no page references are provided, so the reader is faced with the prospect of wading through many lengthy tomes in order to verify Thornton's arguments.

Moreover, it becomes apparent relatively late in the book that his interpretation of the work of earlier scholars is not an uncontested one. On p 96 he notes the argument of Scott Smith that the myth of the great family transition was actually created in the early twentieth century, rather than, as Thornton contends, in the eighteenth century, and that eighteenth-century scholars were well aware of the practice of their own countries. Thornton agrees that such scholars were aware of *current* practice, but argues that Smith has missed the point that they 'based their descriptions of Northwest Europe in a yet earlier period on the non-Northwest European present' (p 97). Unfortunately the reader, not having any examples, is not in a position to judge how far eighteenth-century writers drew on such evidence.

These criticisms aside, it is clear that the technique of 'reading history sideways' is not merely a historical curiosity, but one that has implications for modern scholarship. Thornton shows how several influential modern works—including Ariés' *Centuries of Childhood*, Stone's *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England* and Popenoe's *Disturbing the Nest*—all relied on information from non-Western societies to draw inferences about past life in the West. Other examples could no doubt be added. In my own research I have noted how some scholars engage in what might be termed 'triangulation': rather than simply taking a sideways glance at another country they conflate information from one country in one century with evidence from another country in another century. Thus, for example, evidence of cohabiting unions in eighteenth-century France may be combined with data from mid-Victorian England to support an argument about the prevalence of cohabitation in eighteenth-century England. Thornton's study offers a salutary warning of the dangers of such a practice.

In an even more fundamental challenge to modern concepts of the family, Thornton also suggests that the practice of 'reading history sideways' may have influenced the very data upon which historians of the 'sentiments' school rely. He notes that the 'explosion in reports of sentiment' that forms the basis of Shorter's thesis in *The Making of the Modern Family* 'overlaps to a great extent the dramatic flowering of the research about changes in family life based on cross-cultural data'. (p 125). He speculates that the contrast made by eighteenth-century scholars between the affectionless family of less civilized times and

the modern affectionate family filtered down into the public consciousness and led to a greater emphasis on affection in diaries, letters, and observations of family life. This is an intriguing suggestion, and one that could have been developed further—Thornton himself notes that it is merely a ‘plausible hypothesis rather than a demonstrated fact’ and that further research is necessary (p 129). It could, for example, be argued that the very fact that eighteenth-century scholars felt the need to stress the affectionate nature of modern families suggests that there was not a simple one-way influence between the writings of such scholars and the demonstration of affection in everyday life.

This point leads on to a rather frustrating aspect of this often fascinating book: all too often interesting ideas are floated, but are not explored on the basis that they are outside the scope of the book. There are many ideas that would benefit from further explication or illustration. This tendency becomes more evident in the second half, which is even more ambitious and wide-ranging than the first.

In the second part, Thornton sets out to show the influence on actual family life of the ideas outlined in the first part: how the ‘developmental paradigm’ and ‘reading history sideways’ have combined to create the concept of ‘developmental idealism’, which he describes as ‘a set of propositions about society, family life, and the fundamental rights of human beings that have been an overwhelming force for family change during the last two centuries’ (p 7). The perspective is broadened from Northwest Europe to the world as he traces the influence of developmental idealism, which he suggests links ‘modern’ family forms to social and economic ‘progress’ (the terminology again showing the influence of the developmental paradigm). The four basic propositions that Thornton distils from the literature are (1) that modern society is good and attainable (2) that the modern family is good and attainable (3) that the modern family is a cause as well as an effect of a modern society and (4) individuals have the right to be free and equal, with social relationships being based on consent. The study is as broad as it sounds: in tracing the influence of these ideas Thornton ranges across several centuries and continents. His discussion of the way in which the ideas were diffused, for example, covers—among other factors—European colonization, international travel, Christianity, the United Nations and family planning organizations.

Thornton is not, however, contending that developmental idealism has been *the* source of change in family life across the globe, merely that it should be seen as *a* source of change. Nor is he arguing that developmental idealism has led to a standard sequence of change: ‘[a]lthough there have been examples of quick and simple acceptance, sophisticated evaluation, resistance and adaptation have been more frequent responses’ (p 157). Indeed, developmental idealism may have had as much of an impact on those countries responsible for

exporting the ideas, as Thornton argues that it ‘tips the ideational and normative balance in favour of the familial traits it locates at the modern end of the continuum’ (p 151). Just as Westerners emphasized the affectionate nature of their family relationships to distinguish themselves from ‘less civilized’ societies, so too they expressed disapproval of behaviour that was perceived as backward. Thornton provides an interesting account of the influence of developmental idealism in the United States—evident in attitudes towards Native Americans, in the decisions about which immigrants would be allowed to enter the country, and in the reaction to challenges to within, such as Mormon polygamy and group marriage within the Oneida community in New York. The English equivalent is perhaps Lord Penzance’s definition of marriage in *Hyde v Hyde and Woodmansee*, which should perhaps be seen as the product of fear—as a desperate rearguard action against perceived challenges to marriage—rather than as the expression of Victorian confidence and superiority.

Mention of *Hyde* leads us on to the meaning of ‘tradition’ within developmental idealism. Thornton notes that ‘traditional family elements are discredited and disempowered by association with the powerful label of underdevelopment’ (p 140)—an interpretation of ‘traditional’ rather at odds with our current understanding of the term. For the purposes of Thornton’s concept of developmental idealism, the ‘modern’ desirable family is what today’s more conservative judges and social commentators would praise as the ‘traditional’ family: the nuclear family, comprising two married adults and a small number of children. As Thornton notes, his ‘definition of the modern family in the developmental idealism framework refers to family patterns of Northwest Europe experienced in the 1700s, 1800s, and early 1900s’ (pp 140–1). He notes the increase in ‘[p]remarital sex, divorce, out-of-wedlock childbearing, single parenthood and openness about sexuality’ (p 140), but suggests that other societies have interpreted such practices as ‘negative and Western’ to enable them to ‘embrace the modern family fully while at the same time opposing certain family dimensions they defined as Western.’ (ibid). Whether it is possible to separate those aspects of family life perceived to be desirable from those perceived to be undesirable is not raised.

Moreover, there are certain problems with the family form that Thornton describes as modern and which we would describe as traditional. There is an ongoing debate as to the extent of pre-marital sexual activity, informal separation and out-of-wedlock childbearing in Northwest Europe in the 1700s, 1800s, and early 1900s. In addition, it is not clear how equality between adult partners fits into developmental idealism. Equality is at one point depicted as part of developmental idealism, but it hardly characterized the ‘modern’ family of the eighteenth, nineteenth or even early twentieth centuries. Household in North-western

Europe may have been nuclear, but family planning—identified here as both a means of transmitting developmental idealism and as a signifier of its influence—was a fairly late innovation. To take the family patterns of the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a model ignores the profound changes in family life that occurred over that period. The indeterminate nature of the family model at the heart of developmental idealism makes it a very protean tool for analysis.

Indeed, one basic problem with the concept of ‘developmental idealism’ is that it is so broad that it can encompass almost any form of perceived progress. It is not necessarily linked to a particular way of life, or a particular goal. This is apparent from the reference to a Marxist version of developmental idealism (p 203). If there are different versions of developmental idealism, can the argument in the second part of the book be reduced to the claim that calls for progress (in one direction or another) are linked to calls for family change (in one direction or another)?

After examining the impact of education, industrialization, urbanization, mass media and travel on family life Thornton concludes that ‘ideational pathways’ are more important than social change per se, ‘a conclusion consistent with the fact that increases in the mass media and education (two factors designed to spread ideas and information) are more closely related to family change than are industrialization and urbanization (two factors that are only indirectly related to the spread of ideas and information.’ (p 228). Again, more illustrations would have enabled the reader to form a better assessment of the argument. The examples of the impact of education are Taiwan, Nepal, and unspecified others, while Nepal and Brazil are cited as illustrations of the influence of the mass media on family life generally. There is in addition a longer list of countries in which a correlation between media exposure and the use of contraception has been found, but use of contraception is only one small aspect of family life. His most specific example relates to changes in clothing, which he argues ‘can be plausibly attributed only to the influence of ideational changes’ (p 228), charting the change in Chinese bridal dresses from red to pink to white (a change which has not, it should be noted, occurred outside the major cities). The topic is worth a thesis in itself, but at the very least it may be suggested that economic factors, such as the production of clothing for a Western market, play a part. Witness, for example, the ubiquity of cheap Western suits as the workaday wear of the Chinese peasant. Moreover, emulation of the modern/traditional family (depending on one’s view) does not include the wearing of Victorian crinolines, and a brief glance into the shops in any British High Street would illustrate the influence of ‘ethnic’ clothing, without any accompanying ideology.

It appears that Thornton recognizes that his arguments are not always deeply rooted in firm evidence, since he concludes with suggestions for further research, the first of which is 'the creation of the tools that will allow direct measurement of the extent of belief in the key elements of developmental thinking.' (p 241). With some understatement, he concedes that this will require 'extensive effort' (ibid).

That a book raises more questions than it answers is not necessarily a bad thing. *Reading History Sideways* is an ambitious work that stimulates, even if it does not always convince.

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Ruggles, S 2006, 'Review of Arland Thornton, Reading History Sideways: The Fallacy and Enduring Impact of the Developmental Paradigm on Family Life', Population and Development Review, vol. 32, pp. 174-176. Ruggles S. Review of Arland Thornton, Reading History Sideways: The Fallacy and Enduring Impact of the Developmental Paradigm on Family Life. Population and Development Review. 2006;32:174-176. Ruggles, Steven. /Â publisher = "Wiley-Blackwell", } ty - jour. T1 - Review of Arland Thornton, Reading History Sideways: The Fallacy and Enduring Impact of the Developmental Paradigm on Family Life. AU - Ruggles, Steven. PY - 2006. The Fallacy and Enduring Impact of the Developmental Paradigm on Family Life. Arland Thornton. Arland Thornton.Â In Reading History Sideways, leading family scholar Arland Thornton demonstrates how this approach, though long since discredited, has permeated Western ideas and values about the family. Further, its domination of social science for centuries caused the misinterpretation of Western trends in family structure, marriage, fertility, and parent-child relations.Â Calvin Goldscheider, Brown University. "Reading History Sideways is an intellectual feast. Arland Thornton systematically and meticulously reviews the conceptual frameworks that have been used to study family histories and the forces in history that have shaped family life and family values.